This chapter surveys the wealth of literature on altered states of consciousness which in many cases lead to the sensation of ineffable revelation of superhuman truth. Altered states of consciousness often occur in people exposed to sensory deprivation. As a result, seers, shamans, and other mediators between gods and mortals practise prolonged isolation in caves and other closed spaces in their quest of ecstatic illumination. The tunnel sensation is characteristic of near-death experiences, which appear to have influenced assorted mystical ideas and practices. The assessment of the cross-cultural nature of altered states of consciousness makes apparent that out-of-body sensations and ecstatic insights of the Greek visionaries and sages were not imported from abroad. They developed within the Greek culture, deriving from the universals of human consciousness.

The Chemistry of Consciousness
Robert C. Fuller

Every experience has a neurochemical foundation. Even the slightest alteration in the brain's accustomed neurochemistry therefore has the potential to elicit unusual experiences that might have strikingly spiritual qualities. This chapter draws upon recent studies in neuroscience to help understand the link between the “chemistry of consciousness”
and episodes of religious innovation throughout American history. From Native American peyotism to the role of psychedelics in the 1960s counterculture movement, there have been clear and identifiable neurochemical substrates to Americans' quest for religious ecstasy.

Spirituality in the Flesh
Robert C. Fuller

Published in print: 2008 Published Online: September 2008
Item type: book

This book examines the biological underpinnings of religion. We can only experience, the book argues, what our bodies allow us to experience. As a consequence, religious thought and feeling are heavily influenced by our sensory organs, emotional programs, sexual sensibilities, and the neural structure of our brains. Studying “spirituality in the flesh” opens up new and exciting agendas for understanding the nature and value of human religiosity. This exploration of embodied spirituality establishes middle ground between the explanations of religion typically made by either scientists or humanists. The book takes most scientific interpreters to task for failing to understand the inherently cultural aspects of embodied experience, even as he chides most religion scholars for ignoring new knowledge about the biological substrates of human thought and behavior. Each chapter takes up a different facet of embodied experience and shows the ways it helps us understand just how and why humans reconstruct their worlds in religious ways. Emotional programs such as fear or wonder, altered consciousness, sexuality, pain, and spatial orientation to the environment provide critical categories that are used to interpret selected episodes in American religious history. Topics as diverse as apocalypticism, nature religion, Native American peyotism, and the sexual experimentalism found in 19th-century communal societies illustrate how the study of spirituality in the flesh enriches our appreciation of religion.

Judeo-Christian Experience of the Holy
Phillip Wiebe

in God and Other Spirits: Intimations of Transcendence in Christian Experience

Published in print: 2004 Published Online: April 2005
Item type: chapter
An overview of phenomena in Judaeo-Christian history deemed to involve holy beings is undertaken with a view to uncovering the methodological, epistemological, and ontological questions these phenomena present. The phenomena that are examined, which date from biblical times but are still reported today, include dreams, encounters with angels, and the experience of radiant light or radiance. Special attention is given to alleged special acts in the history of Christian faith, especially the Resurrection of Jesus, the evidence for which includes supposed appearances of him and, more controversially, the Shroud of Turin. The question whether these appearances might be little more than altered states of consciousness is also examined.

Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind

Yulia Ustinova

Published in print: 2009 Published Online: January 2009
Item type: book

In ancient Greece, a common method of search for divine wisdom was to descend into caves or underground chambers. Entering caves persistently appears as a major requirement for prophecy-giving, both in established cults and in the activities of individual seers. Underground sojourns recur in the activities of several early Greek sages and philosophers. Mystery initiations comprise rites located in caves or dark chambers. The sages, seers, and initiates shared a quest for hidden truth, which they attained as revelation or vision. Exploring the reasons for the predilection for caves in the search for ultimate truth, this book juxtaposes ancient testimonies with the results of modern neuroscience. This approach, new in Classical Studies, enables an examination of the consciousness of people who were engaged in the vision quest. It is argued that cave environment creates conditions which force the human mind to deviate from its normal waking state and to enter altered states of consciousness, in many cases leading to the sensation of ineffable revelation of ultimate reality. Altered states of consciousness often occur in people exposed to sensory deprivation. As a result, various mediators between gods and mortals practice prolonged isolation in caves and other closed spaces in their quest of ecstatic illumination. The book demonstrates that multiple cave experiences of the Greeks are culturally patterned responses to the states determined by the neurology of the human brain.
The Flowering of Metaphysical Religion

Robert C. Fuller

in Spiritual, but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America

Published in print: 2001 Published Online: November 2003
Item type: chapter

Publisher: Oxford University Press DOI: 10.1093/0195146808.003.0003

Metaphysical spirituality has found a receptive audience among middle-class Americans. The New Thought movement combined mesmerist psychology and the “power of positive thinking” to show Americans how they might learn to become inwardly connected with powerful spiritual forces. Theosophy built upon this tradition and added a new vocabulary, partially drawn from Asian religions, for describing the higher spiritual worlds to which we are said to be inwardly connected. Avid interest in such topics as mysticism, altered states of consciousness, angels, and near-death experiences have all been avenues through which Americans have pursued spiritual discovery outside of our established churches. The phenomenal popularity of James Redfield's bestseller The Celestine Prophecy illustrates how fully metaphysical spirituality has penetrated the American religious vernacular.

Spirit Possessions and Avenging Ghosts

Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Margaret Lock, Mamphela Ramphele, and Pamela Reynolds

in Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery

Published in print: 2001 Published Online: May 2012
california/9780520223295.003.0005
Item type: chapter

Publisher: University of California Press DOI: 10.1525/

This chapter deals with two interrelated issues related to supernatural activity. It first describes and places in perspective the appearance of certain narratives that illustrate two different categories of supernatural experiences, namely ghost stories and narratives of spirit possession. Next, it tries to understand the role some aspects of traditional spirit religion and ritual play in the context of postterror Sri Lanka. This chapter also puts in context how certain aspects in the construction of the self vary between “normal” and altered states of consciousness, and how such variations are directly connected to the victims' perceptions of revenge and justice.
One area of American medicine in which spirituality is widely considered a vital aspect of healing is in substance abuse rehabilitation. While mainstream spiritual healing practices are found in the methods used by members of Alcoholics Anonymous, a variety of other spiritual practices are also used in substance abuse rehabilitation. This chapter assesses the role of community drumming and shamanic programs in healing addiction. The putative effectiveness of these practices in treating substance abuse is proposed to derive from the psychobiological dynamics of the altered states of consciousness (ASC) and other psychophysiological changes they produce. The psychobiological and psychophysiological processes underlying shamanic practices are described to illustrate their potential contributions to the resolution of addiction. Cross-cultural evidence supports the contention that shamanism is a cross-cultural phenomenon with universal features based in human psychobiology.

Absorption and openness to experience: An everyday tale of traits, states, and consciousness change with music

Ruth Herbert

In what ways may individual differences in personality, age, and training shape subjective experiences with and of music? And how far is it possible to determine whether particular personality characteristics may predict the capacity for certain subtle shifts of consciousness such as episodes of spontaneous, effortless involvement? This chapter examines the construct of openness (the fifth and most variably defined ‘Big Five’ dimension) and the associated subconstruct of absorption, both of which have attracted increasing attention from researchers in the last five years. Drawing on a subset of findings from a mixed-methods study of 10–18 year olds’ involvement in music in daily life, the chapter
outlines what trait and state models can and cannot reveal about the phenomenology of musical consciousness.

**Dual consciousness and unconsciousness: The structure and spirituality of polymetric tabla compositions**  
Vivek Virani

in *Music and Consciousness 2: Worlds, Practices, Modalities*  
Published in print: 2019 Published Online: July 2019  
Item type: chapter

This chapter considers the question of the extent to which composers can manipulate the conscious and unconscious experience of performers and listeners. It addresses a subset of solo tabla compositions by Suresh Talwalkar called mūrchana racana, meaning ‘compositions that make one bewildered, insensible, or unconscious’. These compositions are so named due to Talwalkar’s belief that their musical structure, based on a complex polymetre, can facilitate altered states of consciousness (ASC). The chapter analyses these rhythmic structures and their possible effects on consciousness, distinguishing between the experiences of listeners and performers. It also discusses how narratives and experiences of ‘mūrchana consciousness’ draw upon pre-existing cultural and philosophical beliefs underlying the North Indian classical music performance context. It concludes that musical structure, performance setting, and metaphysical beliefs all play essential roles in shaping unique experiences of musically altered consciousness.

**Flying**  
Lynne Pearce

in *Drivetime: Literary Excursions in Automotive Consciousness*  
Published in print: 2016 Published Online: May 2017  
Item type: chapter

This chapter explores the heightened states of consciousness associated with driving. Following an introductory subsection which addresses the way in which driving has long been seen to promote daydreaming with reference to the work of recent automotive psychologists, the discussion draws upon the work of philosophers Ernst Bloch and Gaston Bachelard (both of whom have written on daydreaming and reverie) in order to map out ‘six types of automotive reverie’: euphoria, anxiety,
enlightenment, delusion, utopia and death-drive. These different expressions of automotive reverie – some positive and cognitively enlightening, others destructive and linked to madness – are then explored with reference to a wide range of literary texts from across the twentieth century. Particular attention is paid to the way in which literary texts from the early twentieth century exploited the association between speed and insanity as a literary device – often as a means of passing negative comment on modernity – as well as the recognised spiritual and transcendent potential of the driving-event in texts from the 1910s to the 1990s.

Summoning the Spirits
Susan Starr Sered

in Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women

Possession trance is a pivotal component in the majority of women's religions. In nine out of the twelve women's religions cited in this book, possession trance occurs either frequently or occasionally in the context of ritual. Both male-dominated and female-dominated religions utilize techniques of dancing, swaying, spinning, drumming, meditation, and singing to induce trance. Erika Bourguignon, however, comments on one interesting gender difference. Trance—an altered state of consciousness induced by a number of well-recognized techniques and not involving possession—is reported more often for men. Possession—the belief that supernatural beings can enter human beings, that humans can temporarily become gods, spirits, demons, or ancestors—is reported more often for women. Put differently, what is more common among women is not a dissociative state known as trance, but a cultural interpretation known as spirit possession. Spirit possession, if it occurs, is rare during the rituals. In the Feminist Spirituality Movement, techniques such as meditation, dance, and chanting are used to induce altered states of consciousness, and rituals that dramatize the goddess-nature of mortal women are common.
Chapter 5 describes the inauguration of the Tengeri Shaman Association’s center in downtown Ulan-Ude. Tengeri considers contemporary social problems to be the karmic debt of violence from the Soviet period and sees Buddhism as a foreign colonizing power. By reaching back to the court of Chinghis Khan, when shamanism was a state religion, the shamans at Tengeri seek to recover the true, universal religion of all humanity, restore positive relationships with ancestor spirits and in the process, seek to solve social problems faced by contemporary Buryats. Their rituals produce a shamanic chronotope within which the past (as ancestor spirits) is co-present. Shamans thereby are able to produce an ongoing and malleable relationship with the past, that enables them to reconfigure the temporal double-bind faced by indigenous populations. They are able to restore “traditional” practices while rejecting the linear timeline that evaluates these practices through their distance from the modern.

Chapter 6 narrates a shamanic initiation and describes the family history that is produced in the process of diagnosing the initiate’s shamanic calling. In Yuri’s initiation we see the stakes of embracing one historical genre over another. For Yuri, whose father is Buryat and his mother Russian, whether or not he accepts a shamanic genealogical genre of the past is a matter of life or death for him and his family. This chapter illustrates the kind of relationships to the past that shamanic practices can build, and shows how engaging with historical genres can transform conceptions of self for post-Soviet subjects. The shamanic genre critiques the kind of self, the New Soviet Person, that Soviet modernism sought to cultivate. Through the process of diagnosing a calling and initiation, the
aspiring shaman remakes themselves into porous subject, subjected to the will of their ancestors.