

How should we interpret spiritual experiences?

Religious practices and religions involving spiritual experiences are growing in popularity around the globe. Academics too are turning their study to the practices of these religions. The interest is in understanding shamanism, trance and spirit possession from different standpoints, including, vitally, from the point of view of those taking part and from different academic disciplines.

Cultural anthropologist, Dr Bettina Schmidt, of Bangor University's School of Theology & Religious Studies is an expert in this area and has organised a Conference on Spirit Possession at the University on 16 & 17 May, which is attracting international interest.

"Spirit possession is a key practice which is common to many religions worldwide; it's a common human experience, and yet it is not fully understood and can be the cause of prejudice against certain religions. This Conference will bring experts in different religious traditions, from Indian religions and Islam to indigenous American and African religions together to present their ideas and share their new ways of studying this fascinating experience," says Dr Schmidt.

"In the past, various academic disciplines have proposed theories about such religious practices from their own viewpoint, but none have reached a satisfactory explanation of the individual experience of a believer," she adds.

Since the advent of psycho-analysis, Western culture has taken an increasingly 'medicalised' view of spiritual experiences. Other theories have looked at the function of possession- explaining the prevalence of women in these types of religious practice as providing an outlet for oppressed women - neither view provides a complete answer.

Dr Schmidt's particular interests are in women and spirit possession in Caribbean religions and how some of these Caribbean religions have migrated with populations to urban New York.

Source: Bangor University

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