

# Book Review

## Reviewer/s

Prof. Garth J. Mason

## Affiliation/s

Department of Religious Studies and Arabic, UNISA, Pretoria

## ORCID link

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5713-3424>

## Correspondence to

Prof. Garth J. Mason

## E-mail

[masongj@unisa.ac.za](mailto:masongj@unisa.ac.za)

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Northover, R.A. (2025) *Trance and transfiguration in rock art and literature*. Pretoria: UNISA Press. 104 pages. ISBN 9781041011255.

Academic courses on psychedelic drugs and religion are very popular among Ivy League universities, notably Brown University, Berkeley, Duke, and Harvard University. Current research articles and books abound on the topic (cf. e.g., Johnson, 2022; Richards, 2016; Cherniak *et al.*, 2022). The prevalence of the field speaks to its acceptance by mainstream academia. Medical research is also recognizing the benefits of psychedelic drugs in the treatment of depression and addiction (Kuypers, 2020).

Research into psychedelia and consciousness is by no means new. Alan Watts wrote his essay, *Psychedelics and religious experience* in 1968 (Watts, 1968). Timothy Leary's writings on religious freedom and psychedelic drugs are famous and borne out by his experiences. In 1966, he was found guilty of transporting marijuana across the US. Interior design and décor in the 1960s and 1970s were deeply influenced by psychedelia. The 1960s' pursuit of the expansion of consciousness, societal rebellion, and freedom has given way to contemporary concerns around mental health, and so it is no surprise that the resurgence of the interest in psychedelic drugs and religion has a mental health focus.

The roots of the relation between the mind, nature, and representation go back to the beginnings of human experience and culture. Studying the earliest rock art in caves is an attempt to understand the earliest shamans in ways that are not decipherable via ideas. Indeed, figures on an ancient cave wall may speak to an experience far more immediate than our notions of representation can assay. The earliest depictions of nature are strange to us: Large figures – some therianthrope in form – seem to inhabit a distant, unreachable world. Its surrealism suggests a psychedelic influence (Metzner, 1998). Epicurus (341-270 BCE) and Lucretius (99-55 BCE) were aware that the perceived world is dependent on the mind. Change the mind's atomic chemistry and another world emerges. Shamans believed that their altered states were portals to other spiritual worlds.

Alan Northover's book *Trance and transfiguration in rock art and literature* adds breadth to the psychedelia studies within religious studies. The foci of mental health and religious experience origins are given a fresh perspective. Northover writes within the discipline of art and literature, but he engages with topics of fertile interest to religious

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studies scholars, namely shamanism, and the early origins of religious consciousness, incorporating the fascinating dimension of literature.

This is a shortform book co-published by UNISA and Routledge. The focus of the book is an adaptation of Northover's inaugural lecture. The other chapters from different scholars – Dan Wylie, Francis Thackeray, David Whitely, and Wayne Stables – orbit it, providing criticism and elaboration. Northover writes of Aldous Huxley's intent to link the numinous to the luminous via the imagination, specifically art in medieval cathedrals: 'It should be kept in mind, though, that Huxley is not writing about art in general, but about visionary art inspired by visionary, not mystical, experience' (Northover, 2025, p. 68).

Northover's emphasis is an excellent one. It is crucial to attempt to understand the layers of worlds believed in by ancient cultures, guided by shamans' trances, from rock art in the Drakensberg to Newgrange in Ireland. By contrast Northover focuses on transfiguration, not transcendence, but rather the emergence of a luminous world akin to but other than the practical world. He is able to bring about communion between spiritual visionary art and literature across time and space, from Coleridge to ancient pre-linguistic peoples. These diverse art works are linked via the immediacy of creative vision fueled by chemicals and breathing exercises. Through imaginative inspiration, the rich experience of spiritual expression has always been an indelible component of what it is to be human.

With these ideas in mind, I read Wylie's chapter, *Sceptical reflections on hallucinogens and other worlds* and found a disappointing puritanism. Unfortunately, the intimate correspondence between psychedelia and human spirituality through the ages runs into a dry riverbed in Wylie's chapter. I must confess to feelings of deep sadness after reading such misplaced phrases as 'glassy-eyed zombies' and visitors to Amsterdam 'on a holiday from morality' (Northover, 2025, p. 64). The admonitory tone of these moralistic phrases is entirely inappropriate in a book devoted to appreciating the artistic products of psychedelic experiences.

The book's other contributors go some way towards rescuing the critical readings of Northover's lecture/chapter. Stables, a scholar of literary theory, tracks the self in the process of transfiguration posing the question: 'What is the self before it is transfigured, transcended or lost? In this way too trance states share much in common with the alternative realities we call literature' (Northover, 2025, pp. 40-41). Thackeray's essay takes a close look at a possible cannabis influence in Shakespeare's writings. In his foreword, Whitely introduces the groundbreaking research of David Lewis-Williams in the field of San rock paintings. Lewis-Williams' research provides the crucial backdrop to the entire book, not least with his assertion (that Whitely reminds us of) that 'the origin of art itself is tied to altered states of consciousness' (Northover, 2025, p. xiii). The book ends with views of new forms of literature in blog writings on trance and psychedelia.

*Trance and transfiguration in rock art and literature* provides a mosaic of ideas and entry points to the growing interest in research into psychedelic drugs, both in the Humanities and Medical Science. The overlaps between Northover's book and religious studies are refreshing and intriguing. The return of experience as a focus of research is welcomed and psychedelia is a fascinating entry point, already opened by religious studies in universities in the US. Northover writes in his conclusion, following Bataille's thoughts on transgression,

Transgression is always temporary, although repeatable on special occasions, such as festivals and holidays. The return to the world of work is inevitable and, therefore, the truly subversive or revolutionary potential of transgression is doubtful. Nonetheless, as transgressive experiences, altered states of conscious, whether induced by psychedelics or other means, offer the possibility of re-enchantment or re-animation in a disenchanted modern world and the imaginative creation of alternative, fictional worlds, perhaps, even, a world without selves, a world transfigured (Northover, 2025, p. 68).

Northover's interest in Bataille is indeed a fascinating portal into a re-evaluation of religious experience. I suggest that *Trance and transfiguration in rock art and literature* could prompt a wave of Southern African religious studies research, both in terms of spiritual consciousness and religious art.

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