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**A TALE OF TWO CONGRESSES:  
The psychological study of psychical, occult, and religious phenomena, 1900-1909**

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**ABSTRACT:** In so far as researchers viewed psychical, occult, and religious phenomena as both objectively verifiable and resistant to extant scientific explanations, their study posed thorny issues for experimental psychologists. Controversies over the study of psychical and occult phenomena at the Fourth Congress of International Psychology (Paris, 1900) and religious phenomena at the Sixth (Geneva, 1909) raise the question of why the latter was accepted as a legitimate object of study, whereas the former was not. Comparison of the Congresses suggests that those interested in the study of religion were willing to forego the quest for objective evidence and focus on experience, whereas those most invested in psychical research were not. The shift in focus did not overcome many of the methodological difficulties. Sub-specialization formalized distinctions between psychical, religious, and pathological phenomena; obscured similarities; and undercut the nascent comparative study of unusual experiences that had emerged at the early Congresses.

The study of phenomena construed as psychical, occult, or religious posed a thorny issue for psychological researchers at the turn of the twentieth century and continues to do so today. In so far as people conceived of psychical, occult, and religious phenomena as “extraordinary,” they asserted paradoxical claims that made them very difficult for psychologists to study. Thus, as Lamont (2012) has argued, those who make such claims typically presume that the phenomena are objectively verifiable and, at the same time, resistant to scientific explanation. These two claims (then and now) limit comparison, balkanize lines of research, and undercut efforts to see how far science can help us understand events, whether objectively verifiable or not, that people view as “extraordinary.”<sup>1</sup>

The International Congresses of Psychology held before the First World War offer a promising site for investigating the difficulties surrounding the study of phenomena that people viewed as extraordinary. Two congresses were particularly noteworthy in this regard: the Fourth Congress held in Paris in 1900, where controversy erupted over the study of psychic phenomena, and the Sixth Congress in Geneva in 1909, where the study of religious phenomena was hotly debated. The controversy at the Fourth Congress, which led to the marginalization of research on psychical and occult phenomena, has been widely discussed as an example of boundary-work, which, generally speaking, seeks to demarcate a boundary between science and non-science (Gieryn, 1983), in this case between experimental psychology and inquiries that researchers viewed as pseudoscientific (e.g., Brower, 2010; Coon, 1992; Carroy, Ohayon, & Plas, 2006; Monroe, 2008). Although controversy erupted at the Sixth Congress over the study of religious phenomena, psychologists interested in studying religion managed to establish the psychology of religion as a legitimate, albeit somewhat marginal, subfield within psychology just as the study of psychical and occult phenomena was defined as outside the bounds of legitimate science. Historians have not connected these two events, because they focused – ostensibly – on two very different things: the one “psychical” and the other “religious.”

In this paper, I argue that those most passionately interested in psychical research insisted on maintaining “extraordinary *phenomena*,” for which they sought objective evidence, as their object of study, whereas those interested in studying religion were willing to shift their focus to “extraordinary *experiences*” and derive their evidence from subjective reports. In constituting their object of study as “religious experience,”

psychologists of religion construed it as a subjective “fact” amenable to psychological study, and located the phenomena they viewed as extraordinary, such as God or the Transcendent, in the realm of metaphysics and, thus, outside the realm of psychology. Despite this division of academic labor between psychology and metaphysics, most researchers nonetheless presumed some sort of connection between the experiences they studied and the “extraordinary.” The connection was presupposed in the very term “religious experience,” which marked such experiences as special and set them apart from unusual experiences in general and pathological ones in particular (Taves, 2009b). Thus, although psychologists shifted their focus from an increasingly controversial topic (*psychic phenomena*) to a relatively safe one (*religious experience*), comparison of the controversies at the Fourth and Sixth Congresses reveals not only that the underlying methodological problems remained much the same, but also that the tendency to reify distinctions between psychical, religious, and pathological phenomena largely eclipsed the comparative psychological study of unusual experiences that had been emerging at the early Congresses.

The present analysis breaks with previous research in three main ways. First, I add to the literature on boundary-work in the emergence of experimental psychology by looking not only at the exclusion of research on psychical and occult phenomena but also at the inclusion of the study of religious phenomena, asking why the latter was accepted when the former was not.<sup>2</sup> Second, I add to our understanding of the network of researchers who shared interests in French experimental psychology and psychical research by demonstrating the extent to which those associated with the network used the early Congresses as a site for the comparative study of unusual experiences, which the

ensuing boundary work undercut and then largely obscured.<sup>3</sup> Third, in construing French experimental psychology, which focused on disruptions of the self, as the study of unusual experiences, I highlight the common ground on which French psychologists, psychical researchers, and psychologists of religion were able to agree and, thus, to collaborate, despite their numerous differences.

### **Boundary-Work**

International Congresses, initially held primarily in Europe, played an important role in the emergence of a range of new academic disciplines at the turn-of-the-last century, including experimental psychology (Rozenzweig, et al. 2000). The First Congress of Psychology took place in conjunction with the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1889 and five more were held prior to the First World War in London (1892), Munich (1896), Paris (1900), Rome (1905), and Geneva (1909). Due to the emergent character of the discipline in this period, psychology was not clearly defined; most participants were formally trained in fields other than psychology, such as philosophy, psychiatry, and medicine; and the Congresses offered a prime site for airing differences regarding the definition and boundaries of the field. Although registration at the Congresses grew from about 200 at the First Congress to over 500 at the Sixth, a large proportion came from the host country and, thus, approaches favored in the host country tended to predominate (Rozenzweig, et al. 2000). Because French psychologists and British psychical researchers had been collaborating since the mid-1880s (Hamilton, 2009, pp. 179-186; Monroe, 2008, pp. 199-203), the lines of research of most interest to them were well represented at the Congresses in Paris, London, and Geneva.

The connections between French psychology and the British based network of psychical researchers were quite evident at the Fourth Congress. The three prominent French psychologists responsible for organizing it -- Théodule Ribot, Charles Richet, and Pierre Janet -- were all corresponding members of the SPR. The Congress president, Théodule Ribot, was professor of experimental and comparative psychology at the College de France, the first academic chair in psychology in France; the vice-president was Charles Richet, professor of physiology on the faculty of medicine at the University of Paris; and the general secretary, responsible for most of the planning, was Pierre Janet, director of the psychology laboratory at the Salpêtrière Hospital and soon to be Ribot's successor at the College de France. Of the three, Charles Richet, a future president of the SPR, played the most active role in linking experimental psychology and psychical research. As chief organizer of the First Congress in Paris, he helped Frederick Myers, a leading British psychical researcher, and Cambridge philosopher Henry Sidgwick, one of the founders of the SPR and its first president, organize the Second Congress in London in 1892. Theodore Flournoy, the Swiss psychologist who organized the Sixth Congress in Geneva, was also a corresponding member of the SPR.

### **The Two Controversies: An Overview**

The Fourth Congress – the second meeting in Paris – brought issues related to the collaboration between psychologists and psychical researchers to a head. On Wednesday, the third day of the Congress, five of the six papers in the general session were related to psychical research. Three were case studies of spiritualist mediums (*IV<sup>e</sup> Congrès*, p. 101). Frederic Myers explicitly called on researchers to compare the case of Mrs. Thompson, a British medium, whom he believed genuinely contacted spirits, with two

other cases presented at the Congress –Flournoy’s case study of the medium H el ene Smith and the American neurologist Morton Prince’s case study of the multiple personalities of “Sally Beauchamp” (*IV<sup>e</sup> Congr es*, pp. 120-21). In comparing these cases, Myers, like many of his fellow psychical researchers, was centrally interested in determining whether the mind or spirit survived bodily death. In contrast, Prince wanted to understand and heal the divisions of self that his patient found distressing and Flournoy wanted to see if such divisions could account for mediumistic abilities that people desired and cultivated.

Longstanding anxieties over the prominent role that psychical researchers, such as Myers, had been playing in the Congresses (Hamilton, 2009, pp. 179-93; Monroe, 2008, pp. 200-201) were exacerbated by the presence of leading representatives of French spiritist and occult movements, including L eon Denis and Gabriel Delanne, both heirs of the French spiritist Allen Kardec, and Gerard Encausse, a French physician and the leader of the new “occult” wing of spiritism that emerged in the 1890s. That morning, papers by Denis, Delanne, and Encausse dominated the first session of Section V, devoted to hypnosis, suggestion, and related phenomena (*IV<sup>e</sup> Congr es*, pp. 610-14 [Delanne], 614-18 [Denis], 619-20 [Encausse]).

Though Myers was delighted by the attention given to mediums and psychical research more generally, Flournoy reported to his friend William James that others were “very much scandalized.” (Van Eeden, 1900, pp. 447-48; LeClair, 1966, p. 103). After several more papers of a similar sort in the second session of Section V (*IV<sup>e</sup> Congr es*, pp. 626-29, 630-38), Oskar Vogt, the German psychiatrist who was slated to chair Section V’s final session on Saturday, had had enough. He prepared an impromptu set of

remarks “Contre le Spiritisme” (Against the Spiritists), which generated a heated debate over whether “unscientific spiritists” should be allowed to participate in the Congresses at all (*IV<sup>e</sup> Congrès*, pp. 656-59 [remarks], 660-63 [discussion]).

Jules Ochorowicz’s proposal to establish an institute in Paris for the scientific study of mediums, which he presented at the Wednesday general session, also generated intense controversy and revealed the tensions among the collaborators (*IV<sup>e</sup> Congrès*, pp. 137-41; Lachappelle, 2011, p. 77). As Flournoy reported to James, the presentation in the afternoon was followed by a grand reception that evening, in which “the Institut received sumptuously all the members of the Congress in its own quarters, a superb apartment put at their disposal by some opulent Russian prince” (LeClair, 1966, p. 103). The next day, however, the “glamorous ... soap bubble ... burst” amidst controversies over the name of the institute and the scope of its investigations (p. 103). The question at the heart of the debate was whether mediums and the “spirito-occulto-supranormal” phenomena associated with them – to quote Flournoy -- could be studied scientifically. To have credibility, the Institut had to have “leaders of indisputable scientific reputation such as Janet,” yet, according to Flournoy, “Janet consented to devote himself to it only with the very fixed idea that it would not be concerned with occultism, spiritism, etc.” (pp. 103-104). The contradictions came to a head over the name of the institute, with some arguing for “Institut PSYCHIQUE,” in order to interest “the general public and add... money to the treasury of the Institut,” and others “demanding the name Institute PSYCHOLOGIQUE, in order to stress a concern with psychological studies in general, to the exclusion of the occult field” (p. 104). Although Flournoy thought that the vision embodied so many contradictory impulses that it “could live only on misapprehension”



(p. 103), a compromise was reached within a year. The Institut général psychologique (IGP) was founded in March 1901 and included psychical phenomena as one of its four research foci (Lachapelle, 2011, p. 77).

With the death of Henry Sidgwick in 1900 and Frederic Myers in 1901, the ranks of the British psychical researchers were significantly depleted and there was little evidence of psychical research at the Fifth Congress in Rome in 1905. While many psychical researchers had hoped that the IGP would advance their cause, they were bitterly disappointed by the compromise and the new Institut's initial lack of attention to psychical phenomena. The tables turned, so to speak, in 1905, when the IGP launched its most ambitious project – a series of forty-three séances over the course of two years investigating the claims of the famous Italian medium Eusapia Palladino. Jules Courtier published a report on the highly publicized investigations, which were conducted by eminent physicians and psychologists, in the IGP's *Bulletin* in 1908. The report, which neither endorsed nor explained the phenomena, called for further experiments with subjects willing to operate under controlled conditions (Lachapelle, 2011, pp. 77-84).

In the light of the recent reports on the Paladino investigations (Courtier, 1908; Morselli, 1908), Theodore Flournoy, as president and chair of the organizing committee for the Sixth Congress in Geneva, invited five scholars known for their impartiality to speak to the question of the physical phenomena of mediumship. Four of the invitees turned the committee down on the grounds that phenomena that could not be reproduced should not be submitted to the judgment of the Congress, while Professor Alrutz of Sweden agreed to speak, not on physical mediumship, but on experiments he had conducted on a quasi-related topic. The session on mediumship was so controversial that

Flournoy felt compelled to justify its inclusion. He opened the session with the acknowledgement that some might view the topic as “a dangerous intrusion of occultism and spiritualism,” still, he said, the organizers felt that the physical phenomena that “reputable observers” had reported in relation to Paladino were such that “it [did] not seem possible that scientific psychology [was] no longer interested” (*VI<sup>me</sup> Congrès*, p. 827).<sup>4</sup>

While interest in mediums indeed seemed to have waned, the psychology of religion moved to center stage at the Sixth Congress. In his role as president, Flournoy initiated a new format in which invited papers on ten themes were circulated in advance, then presented briefly at the meeting, and discussed by participants (*VI<sup>me</sup> Congrès*, pp. 8-9). The first full day was devoted to three topics: the psychology of religious phenomena (“Psychologie des Phénomènes religieux”), the subconscious, and the lackluster session on physical mediumship (pp. 10-11). James Leuba, a young French-speaking Swiss émigré, newly appointed to the faculty of Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, and the Danish philosopher Harald Høffding presented the invited papers on the psychology of religion, addressing its relation to general psychology, on the one hand, and metaphysics, on the other (*VI<sup>me</sup> Congrès*, pp. 106-137). Max Dessoir, Pierre Janet, and Morton Prince presented the invited papers on the subconscious. The discussion of the subconscious was substantial (*VI<sup>me</sup> Congrès*, pp. 77-105), but much less heated than the “imbroglio” – as Joseph Marechal (1912, p. 3) characterized it -- over the psychological study of religion. In six impromptu sessions attendees argued over whether those who had not had a religious experience could study it, whether introspection had a place in the study of

religion, and whether science could say anything, one way or the other, regarding the existence of God (*VI<sup>me</sup> Congrès*, pp. 137-182).

### The Fourth Congress: Analysis of the Dispute

If we probe the debates at the Fourth Congress more deeply, we can identify disparate definitions of experimental psychology ranging from the laboratory based psychologists, who defined it very narrowly, at one end of the spectrum, to occultists, who deliberately blurred distinctions between experimental psychology, psychical research, mysticism, magic, and the occult, at the other (see Table 1). Most of the parties to the controversies at the Fourth Congress, however, were invested in research on disruptions of the self, whether they occurred seemingly spontaneously, as in the case of mediums, or were evoked experimentally by means of hypnosis or suggestion. While the disputants viewed the self as divisible, they disagreed over the causes of the disruptions and in their assessment of their significance and value.

TABLE 1: INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF PSYCHOLOGY, PARIS 1900

PARTIES TO THE DEBATES

RESEARCH AGENDA	OCCULTISTS SPIRITISTS	PSYCHICAL RESEARCHERS	FRENCH PSYCHOLOGISTS	GERMAN PSYCHOLOGISTS
SELF-DESCRIPTION	Occult science	Experimental psych Psychical research	Experimental Psychology	Experimental Psychology
RESEARCH LOCATION	In the wild	In the wild	Clinic based	Laboratory based
SUBJECTS	Themselves	Mediums & other unusual people	Patients	Human subjects
METHODS	Self-investigation using trance and dissociation of self	Questionnaires Case studies (comparing spectrum from abnormal to supranormal)	Case studies (comparing pathological and normal)	Controlled experiment
GOALS	Contact spirits & explore other planes of existence	-Find evidence of life after death -Understand self & higher cognitive process	Understand disorders of the self	Understand lower level cog & behavioral processes

The psychologists and psychical researchers who focused on such disruptions fell along a spectrum with respect to their views of dissociation, depending on whether they considered dissociation as pathological, as a capacity differentially distributed in the normal population, and/or as a potentially supranormal capacity that might provide evidence of telepathy or survival of bodily death. Of the figures considered here: Janet viewed dissociation as strictly pathological; Flournoy viewed it as mental capacity that was unevenly distributed in the normal population (Flournoy, 1911); and James, Henry and Eleanor Sidgwick, and Richet all followed Myers in viewing it as a possible source of evidence for otherwise unverifiable claims (Myers, 1900b; Gauld, 1968). James and Henry Sidgwick, however, remained skeptical with respect to the evidence for survival of bodily death, while Myers, Eleanor Sidgwick, and possibly Richet found the evidence convincing (James, 1986, pp. 361-375; Pierrson, 1940).

Apart from Richet, who was an active psychical researcher, and Binet, who had no connection to the SPR, the other leading French psychologists, such as Janet, were primarily interested in comparing their clinical cases with those of the SPR (Janet, 1930; Lachapelle, 2011, pp. 59-72). They introduced practices, such as automatic writing, borrowed from spiritualist mediums, which they then induced in their patients as a means of communicating with secondary personalities. Flournoy actively sought out and studied mediums, but did so primarily in order to understand the splitting of the self in the normal population.

Most psychical researchers, while motivated in some cases by religious concerns, generally lacked overt ties to spiritist, spiritualist, or occult groups and had a long history of exposing fraudulent mediums. Though the SPR as a whole was committed to

proceeding “along strictly scientific and unbiased lines,” some members hoped that its investigations “would establish the reality of life after death” and, thus provide “a scientific basis upon which,” as Myers put it, “a world-philosophy or world-religion [might] be based” (1900a, p. 110). In Myers view, which he elaborated in his Presidential Address: “Our duty is not the founding of a new sect, nor even the establishment of a new science, but is rather the expansion of Science herself until she can satisfy those questions which the human heart will rightly ask, but to which Religion alone has thus far attempted an answer” (Myers, 1900a, p. 125). Some, but not all, SPR members, thus, viewed psychology as “the link between the science of exact observation and speculative and mystical thought” (van Eeden, 1900, pp. 446-447)

The spiritist and occultists took things a step farther. Not only were they convinced that dissociation was the gateway to other realms, they actively embraced research on trance, hypnosis, and dissociation as the basis for constructing esoteric disciplines and exploring other planes of existence. Moreover, in pursuit of what they called “occult science,” they deliberately blurred the boundaries between magic, mysticism, psychical research, and experimental psychology of the French variety (Monroe, 2008, pp. 199-225; Owen, 2007, pp. 44-45). Denis and Delanne were heirs of the French spiritist Allan Kardec and the leading figures associated with two spiritist movements that emerged in the 1880s (Hess, pp. 1991, 15-19; Monroe, 2008, pp. 236-232). Gérard Encausse, another active participant and presenter, represented the newer occult wing of French spiritism that emerged in the 1890s. Encausse, a physician and head of the hypnosis laboratory at the Hôpital de la Charité in Paris, was initially involved with Madame Blavatsky’s theosophical movement, but soon broke with it to

found new groups that made Paris the international center of occultism (Monroe, 2008, pp. 233-250). Fin-de-siècle occultism, as Alex Owen and John Warne Monroe have both argued, was self-consciously *au courant* and actively embraced the new psychology.

Criticism of the alliance between psychical research and French psychology was especially strong among the laboratory-based researchers and most forcefully articulated by the leading German experimentalist, Wilhelm Wundt (Gauld, 1992, pp. 421-22, 537-543). That Oskar Vogt, a German researcher known for his physiologically based theory of hypnotism, was moved to launch the protest against the spiritists can be understood against this backdrop. “[H]ardly have we succeeded in getting recognition for the reality of suggestion and hypnotism,” he complained, when “the *spiritistes* invade our section and compromise it with anti-scientific communications” (*IV<sup>e</sup> Congrès*, p. 656).

The primary point of contention, thus, was not over studying mediums per se as over the reasons for studying them, whether “psychologically,” as a means of understanding the self, or “psychically,” as a potential source of evidence for spirits or occult capacities. Those interested in studying mediums psychologically found their position increasingly difficult to maintain after 1900. Caught between German researchers, who viewed their clinically-based approach as insufficiently scientific, and occultists and spiritist, who deliberately blurred the boundaries that psychologists wanted to maintain, it was easier to abandon the subject than to main the distinctions they felt were crucial. James and Flournoy, neither of whom wanted to make the pursuit of extraordinary facts their primary focus, played a key role in shifting the focus from the psychological study of mediums to the psychological study of religious experience in the period between the two Congresses.

## The Sixth Congress: Analysis of the Dispute

If we turn to the dispute over the psychology of religion at the Sixth Congress, we find a number of continuities: psychical researchers and psychologists of religion shared an interest in the self and subconscious; psychologists of religion were still using questionnaires and case studies, though adding more personal narratives; and their chief interlocutors were still clinically oriented psychologists (see Table 2). Most telling, leading psychologists of religion, such as Flournoy, Leuba, and Jules Pacheu, professor of religious criticism (*critique religieuse*) at the Institut Catholique in Paris, were open to wide-ranging comparisons between clinical cases, mediums, mystics, converts.

TABLE 2: INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF PSYCHOLOGY, GENEVA 1909  
PARTIES TO THE DEBATES

RESEARCH AGENDA	PHILOSOPHERS THEOLOGIANS	PSYCHOLOGISTS OF RELIGION	CLINICIANS PHYSICIANS	EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGISTS
SELF-DESCRIPTION	Philosophy Theology	Psychology of religion	Psychodynamic Psychology	Experimental Psychology
RESEARCH LOCATION	In the wild	In the wild	Clinic based	Laboratory based
SUBJECTS	Religious people including themselves	Religious people and sometimes others	Patients (some of them religious)	Human subjects
METHODS	Self-investigation Introspection Comparison – b/w religions	Questionnaires Personal narratives Case studies Comparison --b/w religions --b/w case studies	Case studies (comparing pathological and normal)	Controlled experiment
GOALS	Know & connect with divine - transcendent	Explain human religiosity in psychological terms	Explain human psychopathology	Understand lower level cog & behavioral processes

The most significant difference between psychical researchers and psychologists of religion was their subject matter, which had shifted from psychical phenomena to religious experience and above all, at least in the European context, to mysticism. The

touchy question was no longer spirits, but the high god, the deity, the transcendent. The social location of self-investigators had changed as well. Whereas previously, a handful of leading occultists and spiritists took up the occulto-mystical cause, in 1909 academic philosophers and theologians with an interest in psychology took up the religio-mystical cause. The central question still had to do with psychology and mysticism, but the focus had shifted from spirits and astral planes to ecstatic trance and its relationship to the transcendent. As in 1900, we find a range of views on the relationship between dissociation and ‘the More’, but both the scope of the ‘More’ and what psychological methods could presume to reveal about it had dramatically narrowed.

Höfdding’s paper, in which he argued that the psychology of religion could be understood as an aspect of general psychology, set off a debate that paralleled the debate over the Institut psychologique. Religionists contended that there were features that set the psychology of religion apart from the rest of psychology. The experience in question was such, some argued, that only those who had experienced it personally were in a position to study it. Michelangelo Billia, a professor of philosophy at the University of Turin, launched this portion of the debate, declaring “Religion is quite a different thing to those who are acquainted with it than to those who do not know it” (*VI<sup>me</sup> Congrès*, pp. 137-39). In his report, Billia (1910, pp. 135-139) noted with pleasure that his concern was taken up by other able defenders. He expressed astonishment at Dr. Bernard Leroy’s declaration that “one need not be religious to speak scientifically about religion, any more than he need be mad in order to discuss mental pathology” (Billia, 1910, pp. 137-138). Billia and the others sympathetic to his point of view can be located in the left column of Table 2. Leroy, who was trained as a physician and saw patients at the Salpêtrière, had



published papers on the psychology of hallucinations in the years immediately preceding the Congress, including a long essay in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* (*Review of the History of Religions*) in which he interpreted the intellectual visions attributed to Christian mystics from a psychological perspective (Berríos, 1996, p. 286, n. 129). Though Billia mocked Leroy's argument, those who identified with the sciences, including psychologists of religion, such as Leuba, Pacheu, and Flournoy, shared Leroy's view and are located in the middle sections of Table 2.

Others took up the related question of the role of introspection in the study of religious experience. Two professors from the University of Lyon, Raphaël Dubois, a physiologist, and Alexis Bertrand, a philosopher, disagreed over what the methods of science and the methods of theologians, metaphysicians, and introspectionists could demonstrate. Dubois argued for a sharp distinction between science and religion, insisting that the methods of the metaphysicians were insufficient to arrive at scientific knowledge of psychological phenomena. Bertrand responded by asking how we know what causes the perturbations of the psyche. "Some of us," he said, "say God; others say ... the inferior psyche, the unconscious, the subliminal, the name is not important. Between us and the others," he asked, "who decides, who judges?" (*VI<sup>me</sup> Congrès*, pp. 144, 148-150, 151, quote p. 149). We can locate Dubois on the right side of Table 2 and Bertrand on the left.

The usual response that psychologists of religion gave to the question of who judges was "not us!" Among the conference participants, Flournoy and Pacheu had both weighed in on this question in print, Flournoy (1903, cited in Leuba, 1912, p. 245) having stated: "Psychology neither rejects nor affirms the transcendental existence of the

religious objects; it simply ignores that problem as being outside of its field. ... Religious Psychology can be established and can progress only by resolutely avoiding and referring to philosophy the insidious questions in which she stands in danger of becoming entangled.” This separation of psychology and metaphysics allowed psychologists of religion, such as Pacheu and most likely Flournoy, to believe as a matter of personal faith that the subconscious was a possible gateway to the transcendent and that psychology had no means of speaking to such claims.

This move, which relegated questions regarding the nature and existence of God to the realm of metaphysics, marked – I am arguing – the key difference between the more passionate psychical researchers, such as Myers, and most psychologists of religion and, thus, the main reason why psychical research was defined out of psychology and the psychology of religion allowed in. Thus, although the division of labor did serve to protect religious beliefs from psychology, it also represented a concession to science that psychical researchers, such as Myers, were unwilling to make. Whereas Myers hoped that the new psychology would provide the missing link between science and mystical thought by providing evidence for extraordinary *phenomena*, such as telepathy and post-mortem survival, the psychologists’ focus on religious *experience* tacitly conceded that objective knowledge of God would have to be found elsewhere. Still, there is a sense in which they took back what they conceded, since, by referring to their object of study as *religious* experience, they tacitly established a connection between the experience and its religious referent, which rendered religious experience special and set it apart from other unusual experiences.

In his lecture, Leuba (*VI<sup>me</sup> Congrès*, pp. 118-137) took aim at just this sensitive point, arguing that Höffding, with whom he otherwise largely agreed, had not distinguished sufficiently between psychology and metaphysics. Leuba's aim was not to protect deities from scientific methods, but to differentiate the gods of religion from the transcendent claims of metaphysicians. Those who claimed that psychologists should remain neutral with respect to the existence of the gods of religion on the grounds that the "transcendent" lies outside the scope of psychology, he argued, were confusing two very different conceptions of God. Based on his questionnaire data, Leuba argued that it was the gods of religion, the gods with whom people interacted, that mattered to them. An abstract transcendent deity that people did not experience in any way was, he claimed, of no relevance to believers (*VI<sup>me</sup> Congrès*, pp. 135-136; Leuba, 1912, pp. 31, 212). Contrary to most other psychologists of religion, the bottom line for Leuba was that "*the gods of religion are inductions from experience*, and therefore [like all experience] the proper objects of science" (1912, viii, emphasis his).<sup>5</sup>

Finally, there were intimations of more complex issues both in the discussions at the Congress and in its aftermath. Even if, as Leuba argued, people's inner experience of the gods of religion belonged to science as fully as non-religious experiences, that didn't make the problem of studying them any easier. Mark de Munnynck, a Dominican priest and professor of psychology and cosmology at the University of Fribourg, returned to the issue of introspection. Even after leaving aside theology and metaphysics, de Munnynck noted, "phenomena which are observable from the outside are absolutely 'ambiguous' [such that the] same expressions may correspond to radically different mentalities." He drew "particular attention to the importance of intellectual convictions, which may give

very banal actions a very particular significance” (*VI<sup>me</sup> Congrès*, p. 156; *Catholic*, 1917, p. 121).

The chief problem, as the disputants recognized to varying degrees, was the difficulty inherent in studying seemingly similar expressions to which both subjects and researchers attached a range of different meanings. While in the short run the problems could be avoided by turning to more controlled laboratory methods, the primary strategy for dealing with the problem was simply to define the “expressions” [Fr. *manifestations*] – no matter how similar experientially – in terms of the meanings ascribed to them, thus, constituting them as different objects of study. Different objects of study could then be assigned to different sub-disciplines in psychology, i.e., to the psychology of religion or clinical psychology, or defined out of psychology altogether.

### **Constituting Discrete Objects of Study**

Much of this boundary-work took place during the decade between the two congresses through the gradual refinement and redefinition of terms. An insistence on clear distinctions between psychical and psychological research effectively eliminated psychical researchers, occultists, and their popular allies from the academic arena. A similar insistence on the distinction between religion, on the one hand, and magic, superstitious, and the occult, on the other, relegated a wide range of unusual experiences to the new disciplines of anthropology and folklore. Finally, a much narrower definition of mysticism, which in the nineties had encompassed virtually any unusual experience with *spirito-occulto-supernormal* overtones, allowed scholars to locate it at the experiential heart of religion.

**Defining psychology.** During the eighties and nineties, few, especially among the general public, distinguished between “psychical research” and “research in psychology” (Nicolas, 2002, pp. 145-153; Parot, 1994, pp. 420-421; Plas, 2000). In referring to the “new experimental psychology,” Treitel (2004, pp. 47-48) cites the British chemist William Crookes, who commented on “the close links between psychical research and new trends in psychology with approval” in his presidential address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1898 and encouraged “the association members to support the new ‘Experimental Psychology.’” Crookes, however, was among the twenty whom Myers, Richet, and Schrenck-Notzig identified as passionately interested in psychical research (see Appendix), so while he was happy to promote psychical research under the rubric of “experimental psychology,” others protested. Thus, already in the inaugural issue of *l’Année psychologique* (*The Psychological Annual*), which appeared in 1904, Alfred Binet (cited in Parot, 1994, p. 421n6) complained that many viewed “the word ‘psychique’ as a synonym for ‘psychologie’” to the detriment of psychology. By 1900, the distinction was more widely recognized, as the dispute over the naming of the Institut revealed. “Psychique” was the more popular term, which appealed to the general public precisely because of its occult overtones; “psychologique” had emerged as the more recognizably scientific term.

**Defining religion.** For those interested in studying the psychology of religious phenomena, the perceived threat of the “occult” was shaped as much by concerns about “true religion” as “true science.” With the institutionalization of the scientific study of religion at the turn of the last century, scholars of religion, whether anthropologists, psychologists, philosophers, or theologians, quietly elided the occult and carefully

distinguished between magic, religion, and science. Though leading figures, including British anthropologists, such as E. B. Tylor, James Frazier, and R. R. Marett, and French sociologists, such as Henri Hebert and Marcel Mauss, made these distinctions in slightly different ways, the noteworthy fact is that they all felt compelled to make them (Styers, 2004, pp. 73-94; Otto & Stausberg, 2013, pp. 68-123). Although belief in spirits was not necessarily associated with magic, it was typically associated, like magic, with the primitive end of an evolutionary continuum.

The extent to which theorists of religion recognized the competing claims of spiritualists and occultists in their own day varied. Although Tylor viewed contemporary spiritualist claims as survivals from an earlier stage of development, he recognized that interest in these matters was not limited to the uneducated classes and even attended a spiritualist séance on one occasion. We get no such acknowledgement from Frazer, although he published the second edition of *The Golden Bough* in 1900, at a point when interest in psychical research and the occult were at their height. William James, who happened to share a *pensione* in Rome with the Frazers in December 1900, conveyed his astonishment at learning that Frazier, whom he characterized as “the greatest authority now in England [after Tylor] on the religious ideas & superstitions of primitive peoples, ... knows nothing of psychical research and thinks that trances etc of savage soothsayers, oracles[,] and the like are all *feigned!*” (James, 1992-2004, 9:393). If the new occultism of the 1890s presented a challenge to the neat evolutionary progression from magic to religion to science advanced by Frazier, it was not one that he bothered to acknowledge (Owen, 2004, pp. 7-8).

In so far as there was academic resistance to drawing a sharp distinction between religion and magic or to associating belief in spirits solely with the primitive, it came from scholars associated with the SPR, such as Andrew Lang and William James. Lang, an active member of the SPR, defected from the evolutionary consensus emerging among the anthropologists in the 1890s, arguing that the investigation of psychical phenomena in the modern era might shed light on the emergence of beliefs in spirits in earlier times. As a result, “he was henceforth largely ignored by his one-time friends and allies” (Ackerman, 1987, pp. 151-153). James also broke with the consensus, noting that the distinction between religion and magic was a matter of definition and that “our knowledge of all these early stages of thought and feeling is in any case so conjectural and imperfect that farther discussion would not be worth while” (James, 1902/1985, pp. 33-34).

James also pointed out the fluid boundaries between the scientific and the occult, observing that despite scientists’ confidence that they could distinguish between real and imaginary facts, the line between them kept shifting. He noted (James, 1902/1985, pp. 394n-395n) that scientists’ belated recognition of “the facts of hypnotism” had allowed them to acknowledge the existence of “mind-curers” and “miraculous healings,” which they now attributed to the “effects of ‘suggestion,’” adding -- no doubt tongue in cheek -- that “no one can foresee just how far this legitimation of occultist phenomena under newly found scientist titles may proceed – even ‘prophecy,’ even ‘levitation,’ might creep into the pale.” Even the rigid distinction between scientific and religious facts, he speculated, might not be “as eternal as it at first seems.” If that were the case, he continued, “the rigorously impersonal view of science might one day appear as having

been a temporarily useful excentricity rather than the definitively triumphant position which the sectarian scientist at present so confidently announces it to be.”

Given the absence of occultists from early congresses devoted to the history of religion, the excision of the occult and other esoteric traditions from the study of religion may have reflected a tacit agreement between scholars of religion, on the one hand, and self-identified occultists, on the other. Each disparaged the other and deemed that which concerned the other unworthy of serious study (Hanegraaff, 2012, pp. 253-256). The religionists largely ignored the occult movements of their day and relegated magic to the margins. The occultists, for their part, seemingly conceded the study of religion to those interested in exoteric religion and concentrated their energies on what they believed mattered most, the synthesis of esotericism and psychology.

Because psychologists who wanted to study extraordinary claims scientifically risked being dismissed by their colleagues, they advanced their case gingerly. Both Leuba and James can be interpreted as carrying much that they had learned from the study of psychic phenomena forward into the study of religion, while at the same time deflecting criticism by downplaying the continuity between their work on religion and the study of mediums. Thus, Leuba defined religion in terms of the “visible relations – rites, ceremonies, and other institutions – [that people] maintained with one or more superhuman, psychic powers (*puissances psychiques et surhumaines*), ordinarily, but not necessarily, personal and invisible” and the subjective “states of consciousness” that accompanied such relations (*VI<sup>me</sup> Congrès*, p. 120; Leuba 1912, pp. 52-53). By focusing on the people’s relations with “superhuman, psychic powers” his definition tacitly



incorporated spiritualists' and occultists' relations with discarnate spirits and esoteric powers within the academic study of religion.

James's *Varieties* carried forward the work of the SPR and the French experimental psychology into the psychology of religion by adopting Myers's understanding of the subconscious and organizing the *Varieties* much as Frederic Myers organized *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903). Both were comprised of phenomena governed by subconscious processes (i.e., "automatisms"), arranged to make an overarching claim and, as James suggested to Myers, to produce the greatest rhetorical effect. Their overarching claims differed, however. Whereas Myers organized his examples to argue for post-mortem survival, James organized his to argue for the role of higher powers in the transformation of the self (Taves, 2009a, pp. 424-429).

When Leuba (1904, p. 337) criticized James for making a case for belief in spiritual agents through indirection, James largely accepted Leuba's critique, protesting only that he was not "a 'spiritist' out and out" and that "the only spirit I contend for is 'God'" (James, 1992-2004, 10:395). In shifting the focus from spirits to God, James stripped Myers's concerns of their occult overtones and repositioned them within the scientific study of religion. Stripping out the occult overtones, however, required more than a shift in subject matter; it also required a narrower definition of mysticism, which in turn allowed James locate mysticism at the center of religious experience.

***Redefining mysticism.*** Familiar as it seems today, the idea that all religious traditions could be approached through the lens of religious experience, understood as a transformation of the self, was a new idea at the turn of the century. The idea that

mystical experience represented the highest and more rarified form of transformation and a potential inner core of all religious traditions was an equally new concept premised on a radical redefinition of the concept of mysticism. During the nineteenth century, the term was used much more expansively to encompass much that was widely disparaged by scholarly elites. At the turn of the century, occultists and their literary followers actively embraced an expansive definition and aggressively promoted the blurred distinctions between categories that alarmed many at the Fourth Congress. By deliberately blending magic, mysticism, esotericism, and psychological research, occultists embraced the psychological research on trance, hypnosis, and dissociation and used it as the basis for constructing esoteric disciplines and exploring occult realms. Literary figures drawn to esoteric forms of Catholicism, such as Joris-Karl Huysmans and Joséphin Péladan, picked up these occult themes and infused them into their widely read novels (Monroe, 2008, pp. 234-235; Owen, 2004, pp. 44-45). In 1890, when James criticized the contemptuous disregard with which scientists treated the “mass of phenomena generally called *mystical*,” he presupposed the broader definition, including “divinations, inspirations, demoniacal possessions, apparitions, trances, ecstasies, miraculous healings and productions of disease, and occult powers” under the heading of mysticism (James, 1983, p. 248, emphasis his).

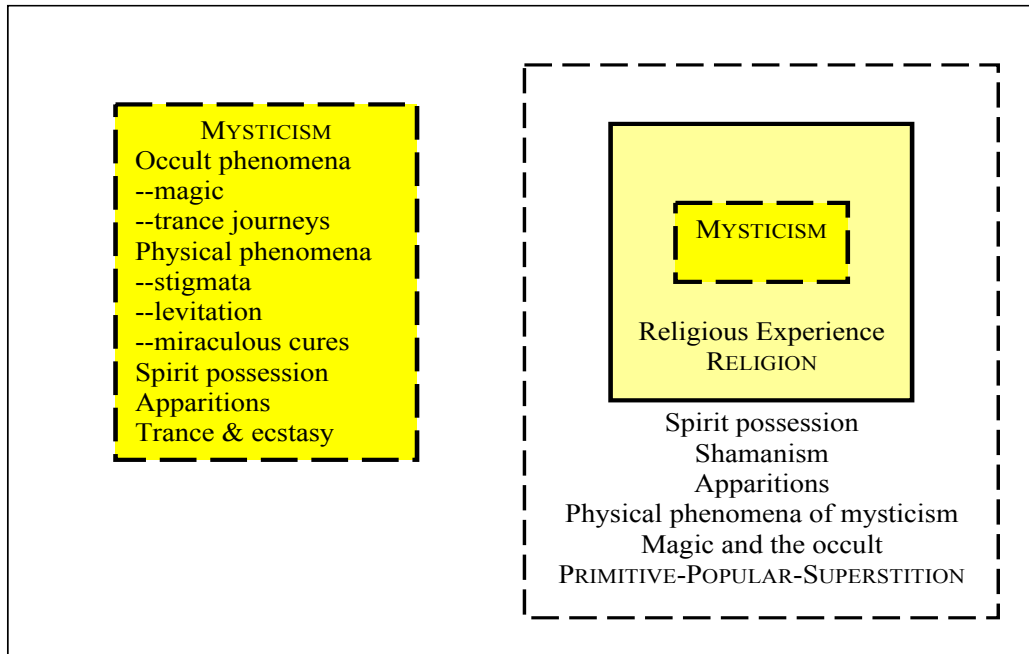
By 1900, the definitional currents were shifting. In his Bampton Lectures on Christian mysticism, Ralph Inge, a Protestant theologian, explicitly distanced mysticism from “the debased supernaturalism which usurps the name of Mysticism in Roman Catholic countries,” the “Fetishism” of Catholic novelists in “the so-called neo-mystical school of modern France,” and the “dabblers in occultism” enamored with psychological

research (Inge, 1899, p. ix). James made a similar move in the *Varieties*. Noting that, although “for some writers a ‘mystic’ is any person who believes in thought-transference, or spirit-return,” he proposed to “keep it useful by restricting it,” defining it for the purpose of his lectures in terms of his famous “four marks” and arguing that “personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness” (James, 1902/1985, pp. 301-302). In *Mysticism* (1911, pp. ix-x), Evelyn Underhill downplayed her earlier involvement in the occult Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and drew heavily on Henri Delacroix’s and Friedrich von Hügel’s psychological studies of Christian mystics. In her preface, she characterized “mysticism” as “one of the most abused terms in the English language,” noting that it has been “claimed as an excuse for every kind of occultism, for dilute transcendentalism, vapid symbolism, religious or aesthetic sentimentality, and bad metaphysics” (p. x). Like Inge and James, she advanced a narrower definition: “the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order; whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood” (p. x). Their efforts at redefinition narrowed the scope of mysticism, shearing it of its occult and popular overtones and, in the case of James’s *Varieties* and Underhill’s *Mysticism*, locating it within the context of religion-in-general (Schmidt, 2003; Owen, 2004, 47-49).

These narrowed definitions, which explicitly rejected the late-nineteenth century blending of occultism, mysticism, and popular Catholicism, established a hierarchy of experiential phenomena with “authentic” mysticism at the apex and relegated spirit mediumship to the margins, along with other ostensibly “primitive” or “pseudo-mystical” phenomena (see Figure 1). Psychologists of religion, versed in the French psychological

tradition, in turn shifted their focus to case studies of mystics and made the psychology of mysticism central to the psychology of religion.

Figure 1: The Narrowing of the Definition of Mysticism\*



\*This figure was originally presented in an earlier version this paper given at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Division 26, San Diego, CA, August 2010; it subsequently appeared in slightly modified form in "2010 Presidential Address: 'Religion' in the Humanities and the Humanities in the University," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79/2 (2011):302.

### Congresses and Comparative Study of Unusual Experiences

Although the controversies of 1900 and 1909 highlight the boundary work that forged a narrowed understanding of experimental psychology, the early Congresses can also be viewed as a site where comparative research on unusual experiences, understood variously as pathological, psychical, and/or religious, flourished for a time. Viewed from this perspective, the psychology of religion no longer seems to emerge *de novo* out of an American interest in conversion, but out of an interest in unusual experiences grounded in the French experimental psychology of the subconscious.

The friendship between James and Flournoy, which began at the first Congress in Paris in 1889 and flourished until James's death in 1910, provides the most concrete illustration of the interconnections between the French psychology of the subconscious, psychical research, and the psychology of religion. Their intertwined intellectual journey, which led both from experimental psychology in the early 1890s to abnormal psychology and psychical research in the 1890s to the psychology of religion at the turn of the century, provides an alternative narrative for the emergence of the psychology of religion (Taves 2009a, pp. 423-424). To understand how the Congresses became a key site for the comparative study of unusual experiences and how the psychology of religion emerged from that comparative work, we need to situate these developments within the larger network of researchers interested in such experiences and take a closer look at their shared conception of experimental psychology.

### **An International Network**

Historians, such as Gauld (1992, p. 401, n24), Taylor (1996, p. xii; 2005, pp. 15-17) and Treitel (2004, pp. 43-48), have characterized the wider network of researchers who linked experimental psychology and psychical research in various ways, but have not noted their high level of involvement in the Congresses nor the key role that the Congresses played in their collaborative work.<sup>6</sup> If we narrow the number of individuals on Gauld and Taylor's lists by privileging those officially affiliated with the British or American SPR and active in the International Congresses of Psychology, we can create a tiered list of researchers who not only linked experimental psychology and psychical research, but also participated actively in the Congresses (see Appendix). This more selective list highlights two key features of the international network. First, the

researchers were closely linked to academic psychology (Ribot, Janet, Beaunis, James, Flournoy) as well as medicine and psychotherapeutics (Richet, Prince, Bernheim, Féré, Liébeault, Liégeois). Second, the experimental psychology in question was French with Richet, Ribot, Janet, and Beaunis providing the primary links between French experimental psychology and psychical research. Of the leading figures in French psychology only Binet's name never appeared on the SPR's lists of corresponding members.

Although Richet was clearly the crucial link between the French psychologists and the British psychical researchers (Parot, 1994, p. 436), his emphasis on physiology situated him somewhat on the margins of French psychology and led Myers to believe that William James was best positioned to effect the full integration of psychical research and psychology (James, 1992-2004, 6:516; 7:133-35). To make that happen, Myers wanted James to devote his energies full time to psychical research. While James maintained an active interest in psychical research until his death in 1910, he resisted Myers efforts to enlist him more fully, chiding him for being such "a despot for P.R.!" but adding that he would "of course [keep his] weather eye ... open upon the occult world" (James, 1992-2004, 7: 139-40).

Although the paradoxes inherent in the scientific quest for extraordinary facts made full integration unlikely under any circumstances, the collaboration between psychical researchers and psychologists, however partial and mixed in its motives, launched a wide-ranging investigation of unusual experiences that has since been obscured. By turning to their shared conception of experimental psychology, we can recover something of the vision that fueled their efforts.

## **French Experimental Psychology and the Study of Unusual Experiences**

Until recently, histories of psychology have associated experimentation solely with the largely German-based laboratory tradition and glossed over the more expansive understanding of experimentation in use at the turn-of-the-century. Thus, historians typically associated the German laboratory tradition with the rise of academic psychology in the universities and the French clinically based tradition with the rise of psychoanalysis, noting the influence of Jean-Martin Charcot's work at the Salpêtrière on both Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet. Recent work by historians of psychology in France (Carroy, Ohayon, & Plas, 2006; Nicolas, 2002; and Plas, 2000) makes it clear that the clinical tradition also gave rise to French psychology in the universities and to an understanding of experimental psychology that differed markedly from that of the German laboratory tradition (Danziger, 1985; 1990, 49-67).

Experimental psychology in France had its origins in a revolt against the "eclectic psychology" associated with Victor Cousin that dominated the French academy through most of the nineteenth century (Goldstein, 1994; LeBlanc, 2001). Eclectic psychology, which was institutionalized in the universities and the lycée system, "designated the unity of the self as the most important criterion in the construction of a psychological science" (Goldstein, 1994, p. 193). The unity of self was challenged by research on sleep-related phenomena, such as dreams, somnambulism, hypnosis (formerly known as animal magnetism), and hysteria, which suggested that the self was divisible rather than unified. Two renegade Cousinians – Hyppolyte Taine and Théodule Ribot – led the revolt armed with the case of "Félida," the first documented French case of multiple personality

(Goldstein, 1994, pp. 200-201). As Pierre Janet reminded an audience at the Harvard Medical School in 1906:

She [Félida] is a very remarkable personage who has played a rather important part in the history of ideas. Do not forget that this humble person was the educator of Taine and Ribot. Her history was the great argument of which the positivist psychologists made use at the time of the heroic struggles against the spiritualist dogmatism of Cousin's school. But for Félida, it is not certain that there would be a professorship of psychology at the College de France, and that I should be here, speaking to you of the mental state of hystericals (Janet, 1907, p. 78, quoted in Goldstein, 1994, pp. 201-202).

The study of unusual cases – specifically cases in which a unified sense of self was disrupted – was, thus, central to the emergence of academic psychology in France and fundamentally determined the meaning of “experimental psychology” in that context.

Janet's *L'automatisme psychologique* (*The psychological automatism*, 1889) exemplifies the French understanding of experimental psychology during this period (Danziger, 1985, pp. 135-136). Grounded in the experimental use of hypnotism and suggestion, it synthesized Janet's research over the previous five years on four “hysterical” subjects: Lucie, Leonie, Rose and Marie (Janet, 1889; Crabtree, 2003). Using hypnosis, Janet induced partial automatisms in Lucie and Léonie, which allowed him to generate evidence of two simultaneous streams of consciousness (*moi*). One expressed itself normally, the other through a hand that wrote “automatically,” i.e. without the other's knowledge (Janet, 1886).



*L'automatisme psychologique* was not simply a product of the new French psychology, however. Read alongside the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, Janet's earlier articles reveal the presence of an on-going intellectual conversation between Janet and the British psychical researchers, particularly Edmund Gurney and Frederick Myers (Crabtree, 2003; Taves, 2003, pp. 306-310; for general discussions, see: Crabtree, 1993, pp. 266-350; Gauld, 1992, pp. 363-402; Luckhurst, 2002, pp. 92-106; Méheust, 1999, pp. 36-67; Plas, 2000, pp. 99-109). Myers visited Janet to conduct tests on Léonie and gave a paper on her at a meeting of the Société de Psychologie Physiologique in Paris in 1886. Myers and Richet may have met for the first time at the meeting, though they had been corresponding since the early eighties (Myers, 1886-87, p. 131). Janet clearly benefited intellectually from the interactions as well, devoting a considerable portion of *L'automatisme psychologique* to a comparison of the partial automatism he had induced in his patients with phenomena that occurred seemingly spontaneously in the mediums studied by the psychical researchers, and offering the splitting of consciousness as an explanation of both (Janet, 1889, deuxième partie, pp. 101-152).

### **New Methods: Surveys and Comparative Case Studies**

In an effort to find empirical evidence of telepathy and post-mortem survival, the SPR made two innovative methodological moves: they conducted a census of hallucinations in the general population and extended the case study method from clinical cases, such as those Janet treated at the Salpêtrière, to spiritualist mediums. Although neither James nor Flournoy were fully convinced by the evidence for telepathy or post-mortem survival, these methods, both of which focused on the general population, did

convince them that neither hallucinations nor dissociation were inherently pathological. It was this conviction – borne out by evidence then and now – that laid the foundation for a broadly comparative study of unusual experiences.

The Census of Hallucinations was a massive survey of unusual experiences in the general population intended to supplement the more limited survey conducted in conjunction with *Phantasms of the Living* (Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886). Although the aim of the census was to see if the veridicality of “crisis-apparitions” (alleged appearances at the time of death) could be established statistically, it was at the same time the first major attempt to investigate the incidence of spontaneous hallucinations in the general population. The Census was approved as one of three main areas of collective investigation at the First Congress and was taken up again at the second in 1892 and the third in 1896. The census surveyed over 17,000 people in several countries, but failed to convince psychologists of the veridicality of crisis-apparitions, primarily due to the quality of the evidence, which was comprised largely of self-reports recounted at some time after the events (McCorristine, 2010, pp. 192-216).

Although McCorristine (2010, p. 215) credits the SPR’s decline to the failure of the Report, James thought “that monographic studies of psychic personages would be far more effective in gaining official recognition for this department of science than the great statistical enterprises which the S.P.R. is carrying on” (LeClair, 1966, p. 90). The challenge was to find good mediums who were willing to be studied. Leonora Piper, whom James discovered in Boston in 1885, set the gold standard in this regard. Not only did Mrs. Piper have unusual abilities, she was also a woman of unquestionable integrity who was willing to offer her services as a research subject to the SPR for over two

decades. During the eighties and nineties, Myers, the Sidgwicks, Richet, and Flournoy were all on the lookout for good mediums to study (James, 1992-2004, 9:113, 584; 6:609-610; LeClair, 1966, p. 69). After several lackluster discoveries, Flournoy eventually found H el ene Smith, the subject of his address at the Paris Congress and his monograph *From India to the Planet Mars* (Flournoy, 1899).

Flournoy’s study of H el ene Smith, which applied the case study method used by clinicians to a medium (Goldsmith, 1979, pp. 236-237), was exactly what James had recommended. Although James told Flournoy that he was sure “that Myers and ... Hodgson will be as much delighted with it as [he was]” (LeClair, 1966, p. 90), Myers’ delight was most likely tempered by Flournoy’s failure to find any evidence of supernormal phenomena. Thus, as Myers indicated in his review, the book was, “for the most part, critically *destructive* in its treatment of the quasi-supernormal phenomena with which it deals.” Nonetheless, Myers was delighted to see the “mass of conceptions a competent psychologist now takes for granted in this realm, which the official science of twenty years ago would scarcely stomach our hinting at!” (Myers, 1900b, p. 396, emphasis his). Flournoy’s monograph, which made the phenomena associated with mediums more ordinary from a scientific point of view, highlights the paradoxes inherent in the quest for scientific acceptance of extraordinary phenomena.

A number of other important case studies were in the works by 1900. As his presentation at the Congress indicates, Prince’s study of Miss Beauchamp was in progress and his book-length study appeared in 1905. Short reports on Mrs. Piper routinely appeared in the *Proceedings of the SPR* and Eleanor Sidgwick published a book-length study in the *Proceedings* in 1915 (Gauld, 1968, pp. 334-338). Janet’s study

of Madeleine Lebouc (Pauline Lair Lamotte), a devout Franciscan tertiary who was hospitalized at the Salpêtrière from 1896 to 1904 for “hysterical” contractures of her feet, was also under way in 1900. Janet presented his first paper on Lebouc at the Third Congress in 1896 and published an article in the *Bulletin de l’Institut psychologique* (Bulletin of the Psychological Institute) in 1901, but his two-volume study did not appear until 1926-28 (Janet, 1897, 1901, 1926-28; Maître, 1993).

The religious aspects of the case studies did not go unnoticed. Prince’s *Dissociation of a Personality* (1905) compared certain of Beauchamp’s experiences to accounts of religious conversion, demonic possession, mediumship, and visionary experiences. Chapter XXI (“The Psychology of Sudden Conversion”) compared an experience of Beauchamp’s to one James described in the *Varieties*. Chapter XXII (“Sally Plays Medium”) analyzed an episode in which a subconscious personality (Sally) referred to herself as a spirit and spoke to a conscious personality (named B IV) by means of automatic writing. In Chapter XXXI (“A Hallucination from the Subconscious”), a personality believed that Dr. Prince was someone else. In each of these instances, at least one personality experienced the incident as an actual experience of conversion, mediumistic possession, or vision. Other parts of the personality, when questioned by Prince, were able to fill in details unavailable to the personality who had the experience and to give an account of the experience in psychological terms. The fragmentation of Beauchamp’s personality, thus, furnished Prince with an experimental means of examining experiences that appeared similar to those narrated by religious persons. At a number of points, Prince speculated that the mechanisms at work in Beauchamp’s case might well account for the experiences of religious figures known to history.

Prince was not the only one making such comparisons. Though many American psychologists of religion focused on conversion (Nicholson, 1994; Taves, 1999, pp. 261-271), the Europeans and the Americans in conversation with them focused their attention on the psychology of mysticism. Studies of Christian mystics by Pacheu (1901, 1911), Leuba (1902, 1905), Delacroix (1908), and von Hügel (1908) offered psychological analyzes of historical figures. Delacroix (1908, pp. xvii-xviii) noted with regret that he was unable to confirm his studies by means of contemporary observations. Theodore Flournoy (1915, pp. 1-2, 14-15) viewed his study of Cecile V e, a Protestant woman whom he characterized as a “modern mystic,” as addressing this need for contemporary observation. Assured by Flournoy that it would stand as a significant contribution to the psychology of religion, the study appeared with V e’s permission in 1915.

This emergent comparative psychological study of unusual experiences was by no means fully realized. Researchers pursued a comparative study of unusual experiences in so far as they perceived a common denominator – a point of analogy – between the disparate experiences in the splitting of the self (dissociation) and resulting “automatisms” (automatic writing, alternations of “personalities”). They compared the cases, however, for different reasons, i.e. to treat psychopathology, acquire evidence of extraordinary phenomena, and understand religious experience. They were not particularly interested in their subjects’ interpretation of their experiences or in the relationship between their own interpretations and those of their subjects. That people framed or appraised phenomenologically similar experiences in dramatically different ways was recognized, but the question of how and why they did so was not a focus of their research.

## Conclusion

Researchers' interest in and methods of approaching phenomena that they or others claimed were "extraordinary" set up a tension that not only fueled disputes over evidence in psychology at the turn of the twentieth century, but also led to the exclusion of psychical research and the inclusion of the psychology of religion within the discipline of psychology. In so far as psychical researchers sought to make a scientific case for "extraordinary phenomena," that is, phenomena that were objectively verifiable and resisted psychological explanations, they embarked on an endlessly paradoxical quest. If, on the one hand, the phenomena could not be replicated or verified, psychologists viewed them as beyond the realm of scientific study. If they could be replicated and then explained psychologically, they were no longer – at least in psychological terms – extraordinary. Myers acknowledged this trade-off, when he celebrated the expanded "mass of conceptions" that Flournoy was willing to consider in his study of Héléne Smith, despite his "critically *destructive* ... treatment of the quasi-supernormal phenomena" associated with her mediumship (Myers, 1900b, p. 396).

Although the more passionate psychical researchers continued the quest for scientific evidence of extraordinary phenomena (telepathy and post-mortem survival) that might, in van Eeden's words, constitute a link between "the science of exact observation and speculative and mystical thought," psychologists of religion largely abandoned this effort. Following the path James charted in the *Varieties*, they were content to focus their efforts on "religious experience," derive their evidence from subjective reports, and defer consideration of the objective reality of God to the metaphysicians. Although this shift established the psychology of religion as a subfield focused on the study of "religious

experience,” it did not resolve their underlying methodological problems, as both Leuba and DeMunnynk noted.

The key issues were twofold: First, researchers interested in religion tended to conflate their beliefs in “extraordinary phenomena,” which they defined in very narrow terms and turned over to the metaphysicians, with those of the people they were studying. In doing so, they dramatically narrowed what counted as “religious experience” and overlooked a wide range of extraordinary claims made by ordinary people. As Leuba, pointed out, “the gods of religion,” with whom people actually claimed to interact, were not abstract transcendent deities, but “inductions from experience, and therefore [like all experience] the proper objects of science” (1912, viii). Second, they tended to reify experiences as religious, psychic, or pathological without acknowledging that, as DeMunnynk stressed, “the same expressions may correspond to radically different mentalities” (*VI<sup>me</sup> Congrès*, p. 156). Or, as I would express it, that people – both researchers and subjects -- could and did ascribe very different meanings to experiences that were very similar in terms of their underlying phenomenology.

Researchers involved in the comparative study of the unusual experiences of persons characterized as hysterics, mediums, and mystics recognized these similarities, which they understood in terms of the splitting or dissociation of the self. Although they disagreed as to whether this splitting was a sign of pathology, an ability unevenly distributed in the general population, or a means of accessing extraordinary knowledge, they agreed that splitting of the self gave rise to unusual experiences. This comparative enterprise was undercut by an increasingly narrow focus on clinical, psychical and

religious cases in isolation from one another, fostered both by disciplinary specializations and the exclusion of the psychical and occult as objects of study.

Researchers interested in unusual experiences could build on these early efforts, while overcoming some of their limitations by (1) using generic, non-discipline specific terms, such as unusual experiences, to open up an interdisciplinary space, (2) focusing on the appraisal processes (conscious and unconscious) associated with such experiences, and (3) seeking to understand under what conditions people mark their unusual experiences as extraordinary.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Asprem (2014) notes the irony highlighted here and discusses the various more or less “enchanted” frameworks developed in response to it (pp. 78-79, 314-315, 540-542).

<sup>2</sup> On the history of psychology, psychical research, and the occult see, most recently, Treitel 2004, Monroe 2008, Wolfram 2009, Lachapelle 2011. See Wulff (1997) for an overview of the early history of the psychology of religion in the Anglo-American, French, and German contexts and Belzen (2001, 2008) for the Netherlands.

<sup>3</sup> On role of psychical researchers in the Congresses of Psychology, see Rosenzweig et al. (2000), Hamilton (2009), Sommer (in preparation), and Alvarado (in preparation).

<sup>4</sup> Palladino’s “tricks” were ostensibly “laid bare” in front page articles in the New York Times (5 Dec 1909, 12 May 1910) in the months following the Congress (Sommers 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Pacheu expressed surprise at Leuba’s extended discussion of the relationship between the psychology of religion and metaphysics, noting that they were not at “a congress of religion, nor theology, nor metaphysics, or philosophy.” Moreover, in limiting himself to Protestant theologians, he said, Leuba constructed a pseudo-opposition between religion and science that was unnecessary from a Thomistic perspective (*VI<sup>me</sup> Congrès*, pp. 152, 172).

<sup>6</sup> Gauld referred to the “Franglo-American school,” Taylor to the “French-Swiss-English-and-American psycho-therapeutic alliance,” and Treitel simply to the “new experimental psychology.”

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## APPENDIX

**Researchers Linking Psychological Research and Experimental Psychology**

<b>Tier</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>SPR</b>	<b>ICP</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Field</b>
<b>First</b>	Charles Richet	P	P <sub>1</sub> L M P <sub>2</sub> R G	Professor	Physiology
	Frederick Myers	P	P <sub>1</sub> L P <sub>2</sub> /	Professor	Classics
	William James	P	P <sub>1</sub> P <sub>2</sub> R/	Professor	Psychology/Philosophy
<b>Second</b>	Henry Sidgwick	P	P <sub>1</sub> L M P <sub>2</sub> /	Professor	Moral Philosophy
	Eleanor Sidgwick	P	P <sub>1</sub> L M	Principal	Newnham College
	F. v. Schrenck-Notzig	CM	P <sub>1</sub> L M P <sub>2</sub> R G	Physician	Neurology
	Pierre Janet	CM	P <sub>1</sub> L M P <sub>2</sub> R G	Professor	Psychology
	Theodore Flournoy	CM	P <sub>1</sub> M P <sub>2</sub> R* G	Professor	Psychology
	Xavier Dariex	CM	M P <sub>2</sub>	Editor	<i>Sciences psychiques</i>
	<b>Third</b>	Théodule Ribot	CM	P <sub>1</sub> L M P <sub>2</sub> R G	Professor
Henry Beaunis	CM	P <sub>1</sub> L M P <sub>2</sub> G	Director	Psychology Laboratory	
Hyppolite Bernheim	CM	P <sub>1</sub> L P <sub>2</sub>	Professor	Medicine (Nancy)	
Cesar Lombroso	CM	P <sub>1</sub> L R	Professor	Psychiatry	
Charles Féré	CM	P <sub>1</sub> P <sub>2</sub>	Physician	Medicine (Salpêtrière)	
Auguste Liébeault	CM	P <sub>1</sub> M	Faculty	Medicine (Nancy)	
Jules Liégeois	CM	P <sub>1</sub> L	Professor	Law (Nancy)	
Max Dessoir	CM	G	Professor	Philosophy/Psychology	
Morton Prince	M	P <sub>2</sub> G	Professor	Medicine	

**KEY:**

SPR=Society for Psychological Research. Role: P = President, CM = Corresponding Member, M=Member

ICP = International Congress of Psychology. Attendance: P<sub>1</sub>=Paris (1889), L=London (1892), M=Munich (1896), P<sub>2</sub>=Paris (1900), R=Rome (1905), G=Geneva (1909).

/ = death

\* = scheduled to present, but unable to attend

Sources: Lists of Members and Associates, *Proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research*, 1884-87, 1889, 1895, 1901, 1904, 1910; Lists of Members, International Congresses I-VI.

Tier One: Myers, James, and Richet were actively engaged in research that linked psychical research and psychology, maintained a high profile in relation to both psychology and psychical research, and served a term as president of the SPR, James in 1894-95, Myers in 1900, and Richet in 1905. Although the Sidgwicks belong in the inner circle of psychical researchers and were active in the Congresses, they are included in the Second Tier because Henry was more of a promoter of psychical research, serving as president for eight of its first eleven years, than a researcher in his own right and Eleanor, who served as president from 1907-08, was far less well known in the psychological world than either her husband or Myers.

Tier Two: These names, except for Flournoy, appear on a list of “persons both earnest & intelligently interested in psychical research” compiled by Myers, Richet, and Schrenck-Notzig in 1891 (James, 1992-2004, 7:133-35) and were actively involved with the International Congresses of Psychology, most of them in leadership roles. Myers’s list included, in addition to the Sidgwicks and himself, naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace, chemist William Crookes, physicist Oliver Lodge, Walter Leaf, and Frank Podmore in England; James and Hodgson in the U.S.; Alexander Aksakof in Russia; Richet, Janet, and Xavier Dariex, in France; and psychologists Schrenck-Notzig and Max Dessoir in Germany. Out of this list, Crookes, Wallace, Lodge, Leaf, Podmore, Hodgson, and Aksakof did not attend the Congresses. In addition to leadership roles mentioned in the text, Schrenck-Notzig was the general secretary of the third (Munich, 1896). James was elected honorary president of the seventh projected for the U.S. in 1913. Dariex was the

editor of *Annales des sciences psychiques*, established in 1891 as a French counterpart to the *Proceedings of the SPR*. Dessoir gave an invited paper at the sixth congress.

Tier Three: Persons who linked experimental psychology and psychical research participated actively in the International Congresses and, while not as “earnestly & intelligently interested in psychical research” as those on Myers’s list, were still interested enough to allow their names to be listed as “corresponding members” of the SPR. Of the names listed in the third-tier, Ribot, Bernheim, and Henry Beaunis figured prominently in the history of psychology in France. Cesar Lombroso, like Flournoy, joined this circle during the nineties and might also have been on Myers’s list had they compiled it ten years later.

Note on SPR membership: William James, along with two other prominent Americans -- the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall and H. P. Bowditch, James’s colleague at Harvard Medical School – joined the SPR’s “List of Members and Associates” in 1884 and are listed continuously through 1910. The French, including Richet, the physicians Bernheim and Liébeault from Nancy, and Dr. Féré from the Salpêtrière, added their names in 1885. They were joined by Beaunis, Janet, Liégeois from Nancy, Ribot and Taine in 1886. The German psychologist Eduard von Hartmann was added in 1887, along with Dessoir and Schrenck-Notzig in 1889. By 1895, Dariex, Aksakof, and Lombroso had joined and by 1901, Flournoy had joined as well. Other names come and go from the list, but these names generally remained until the person’s death.