

Experiments with Experience: Experimenting with Religions and Spiritual Practice as Experimentation

SNF Projekt, Laufzeit 2019-2023

Prof. Dr. Jens Schlieter

This research project will investigate descriptions of “experimentation” with different religious practices/traditions, and self-conceptions of spiritual practice as “experimental,” in Western and Indian sources of the 19th, 20th, and 21st century. The project harbours two closely cooperating subprojects. The first, entitled *Religious Practice as Experimentation: Autobiographical Sources in India and the West*, will collect and contextualize autobiographical descriptions of “experimenting” with religion/s. The second subproject, *Experimental Systems, Spiritual Practices, and Religious Experience*, will take a theoretical and systematic interest in the practices of spiritual experimentation as described by their protagonists. Both subprojects will combine narratological analysis with metaphor theory in order to interpret autobiographical narratives, and to analyze relevant cognitive metaphors used to describe the process of experimentation with experience. In addition, the first subproject will contextualize the narratives in their religious, historical, and biographical settings. In particular, it will show how this specific discourse emerged in 19th century Europe, how it gained traction in Western Spiritualism and in the reception of Indian Yoga and Buddhism, and, finally, how “spiritual seekers” of the 20th and 21st centuries regarded themselves as “experimentalists.” The inclusion of modern Neo-Hinduist and Neo-Buddhist sources is of special importance, as it is, for reasons to be analyzed, in these widely read works that religious practices are prominently conceptualized as “experimental.”