

Notes on planning the 2021 INSS Conference and subsequent feedback

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<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/yjss20/current>

Cultivating a joined-up field of spirituality studies through theory and practice

The British Association for the Study of Spirituality (BASS) was planning to host its Sixth International Conference, *Spirituality in Research, Professional Practice and Education*, in the beautiful city of York, UK, in June 2020; it was to include a celebration of the tenth anniversary of the publication of the *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* (*JSS*). Sadly, the Covid-19 pandemic cut across those plans, like so many others around the globe, and the conference was rescheduled to take place in June this year. However, in December 2020, BASS formally changed its name to become the International Network for the Study of Spirituality (INSS) and, by January 2021, the continuing disruption of the pandemic and restrictions on travel meant that a face-to-face conference would remain impossible. The sixth BASS conference therefore became not only the first to be hosted by INSS but the first of the whole series to be held online (on 7/8 June 2021).

These changes required most members of the INSS Executive to embark on a steep learning curve as they came to terms with the simultaneous development of a new website, the use of online communication technologies, and programming an event to accommodate participation from across the world's time-zones. BASS/INSS conferences, as the website notes,

are interdisciplinary and inter-professional, bringing together a broad range of researchers, scholars and practitioners from around the world who have interests in the theory and practice of spirituality. They are specifically designed to provide opportunities for hospitable conversations and the creation of syntheses across the international, academic and professional boundaries that often pose a challenge to the development of a 'joined-up' field of spirituality studies.

(<https://spiritualitystudiesnetwork.org/conferences>)

Planning an online conference that would, as far as possible, preserve the hospitable and participatory ethos of past highly acclaimed face-to-face events was a daunting task. In addition to timetabling introductory sessions to the work of INSS, four keynote lectures, spaces for discussion and 'social time' – including a celebration of the (now 11th) anniversary of *JSS*,¹ there were more than sixty presentations to be given over two days in six parallel sessions taking place in four different virtual 'rooms'. Attempting to arrange presentations in themed groups of three, only to find that what looked like perfect combinations were unviable when time-zones were factored in, one planning group member likened the task to playing four-dimensional chess.

The day before the conference, with the programme finally published and 120 participants registered, the INSS Executive Committee staged a private 'dress rehearsal'. It did not go well! In the face of various technical glitches and rising tensions, hope had to be placed in the old theatrical maxim that 'a disastrous final rehearsal precedes an amazing premiere' (Robinson 2020, online²). Robinson points out that, when this maxim holds true, it

¹ A recording of the *JSS* session is available at: <https://spiritualitystudiesnetwork.org/page-1075340> [Accessed 13/08/2021]

² <https://broadwaydirect.com/13-theater-superstitions-halloween/> [Accessed 13/08/2021]

is most likely to be ‘the result of a prepared production, committed artists, and a large-dose of adrenaline, not a *deus ex machina*’. He is probably right. When the metaphorical curtain went up, many ‘committed artists’ in the field of spirituality studies came on stage to give stimulating presentations of their work. The Executive Committee’s WhatsApp group (ably assisted by the ‘3Js support team’), operating ‘backstage’ to try to ensure that everything ran smoothly, was undoubtedly adrenaline-fuelled. And the very positive feedback from participants suggests that the first INSS conference did indeed premiere successfully!

Participants’ responses on evaluation forms to the question of how useful the conference had been to them reiterated the importance that INSS and *JSS* place on the need to take a global view of spirituality, both internationally and conceptually; and to remain open to new and emerging understandings. For example:

- I have learned many things. I have realized that in any part of the world we have similar questions, problems, and goals when we do research on spirituality.
- It has increased my awareness of the interdisciplinary nature of spirituality.
- It was interesting to observe the differences in the understanding of what the term 'spirituality' means to various groups/individuals.
- It has exposed me to a variety of ideas I was not completely familiar with and that broadening is useful.
- It really helped me see beyond a church or institutional worldview. The diversity of views was great.
- My knowledge, and deeper awareness, of spirituality has been greatly exercised ... [the discussions] opened up such realms of possibilities for me.

Significantly, some responses drew attention to a problem with which BASS/INSS and this journal have struggled from their inception: an apparent difference between ‘doing’ spirituality and studying it. In response to a question about the usefulness of the conference ‘in understanding and developing your knowledge’, one participant noted that there had been ‘A lot about spirituality, of course given that it is about studying spirituality, but [nothing] that was really the thing itself.’ Another wrote that, although the conference ‘slightly moved my understanding forward I do not really feel that it is our knowledge that needs developing’. S/he added ‘The question you ask shows how intellectual and academic the bias of this group is. What is needed are more practical examples to change the world’.

No-one who has been involved in the development of BASS/INSS and *JSS* is likely to deny the need either for more practical examples of spirituality or for a change in humanity’s collective way of being in the world. However, both the Association/Network and the journal are founded on the premise that practice and theory are inextricably entwined. They recognise that, as Ammerman indicates, the *term* ‘spirituality’ is both emergent and contested; and that unpacking its cultural meanings and implications can lead to greater understanding of ‘self’, ‘other’ and how these concepts and associated practices are related in transpersonal and/or transcendental contexts. Ammerman’s research (2013, 272) found that one particular – and practical - idea underpins many different concepts of spirituality: it is ‘about living a virtuous life, one characterized by helping others, transcending one’s own selfish interests to seek what is right’. In his opening speech at the launch of BASS, the then Chair, John Swinton, suggested that reaching agreement on what spirituality ‘is’ is less important than understanding what it ‘does’. He points out that such understanding can be developed by considering what spirituality looks like as it is carried out within a particular area of practice, and then studying whether its presence makes any difference (Swinton 2020).

Practical examples of spirituality are vitally important in their own right. But knowledge derived from studies - whether in a personal, professional or global setting - in which appropriate methodological approaches have been applied and ‘findings’, whatever their nature, have been fully explored and presented, contributes to a constantly expanding

intellectual and academic understanding of spirituality which is equally vital. This is especially evident when data derived from academic studies are used to inform and influence the kinds of policy decisions that have the power to ‘change the world’, locally, institutionally or globally.

In my own view, just as it is possible to undertake any task mindfully, including study (*i.e.* in full awareness of where one is and what one is doing without becoming overly-reactive or distracted by what is going on externally or internally), it is possible to study spirituality spiritually (Hunt 2021, 244-251). BASS conferences have deliberately contained elements designed to enhance this process. While these may have become diluted in the online environment of this year’s conference, both INSS and JSS continue to acknowledge the importance of working at the interface between theory and practice - and of remaining open to new understandings and insights that are generated in doing so.

[...]

Your views on any of the topics discussed in this issue of JSS, and/or on other relevant matters, are warmly invited. By ‘doing’ spirituality, studying it, and sharing what we find, perhaps we can cultivate a ‘joined-up’ field of spirituality studies with the potential to change the world ...

References

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- Swinton, John (2020) ‘BASS ten years on: A personal reflection’, *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 10(1), 6-14.

Cheryl Hunt
University of Exeter, UK