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## **"OH MY GOD!" Exploring Ecstatic Experience Through the Evocative Technology of Gospel Choir**

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### **Preface**

*"The most direct means for attaching ourselves to God in this material world is through music and song."*

- Attributed to Rabbi Nachman of Breslov

*"Scientists will never understand the nature of the universe until they learn how to dance."*

- Sharon Alexander (2005)

What's a nice Jewish girl doing writing and teaching about gospel singing!? Originally from Los Angeles, California, I am a product of a Conservative Jewish education and have spent almost 40 years at the forefront of the Jewish Renewal movement as a community organizer, teacher, vocalist, and visionary.

As a semi-professional vocalist, I have sung with choirs most of my life, and in a couple of klezmer bands as well. I have been a collector of spiritual choral music for almost 60 years, most of it Jewish. My spiritual perspective has been profoundly influenced by the teachings of the late Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, whose Mystery School I attended for a year in 1987-1988, as well as of the late Rabbis David Zeller and Shlomo Carlebach, who were both masters of soul ministry through their deeply moving music.

My professional path has been that of a somatic psychotherapist and spiritual midwife. I use body-psychotherapy, massage, and vocal, breath and energy work to encourage fellow travelers to free up expression of their life energy in order to ascend towards experiences of the divine.

Singing IS my spiritual path; my way to open to the divine. Over the years I have learned that the voice is a sacred reflector and transformer of energy; more so when combined with other voices; and even more so when combined with rhythmic movement. While living in Boulder, in the 1980s, I had the opportunity to learn the power of the voice as a sacred tool of expression from workshops offered through Naropa University, with such luminaries as Susan Osborne, Ysaye Barnwell, and Jonathan Goldman.

I came to explore gospel singing out of my fascination for the biophysics and spirituality of ecstatic altered state experience. I chose gospel choir as the focus of my research because this musical form is the most ecstatic choral modality I have ever experienced. Since 2003, as a result of studying the techniques used in gospel choir performance, I have been presenting ecstatic choir workshops in the US, England, Israel, Holland, Germany, and Switzerland. In 2004, I received ordination from Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi as a *Ba'alat Shirei Hama'a'lot B'chesed Elyon* (literally, “*Mistress of songs of ascent to the realm of divine grace*”), a Conductor of Ecstatic Chorales. I did most of this research while living in Basel, Switzerland, where I raised my daughter, who has integrated this material as her own.

My own ecstatic altered-state experiences began in the 1970s through meditation and psychedelic drugs, and my encounter with kundalini energy. My personal body experiences with somatic therapies and the Chinese energy exercise form of Qigong in the 1980s have informed my view of the emotional and energetic body. I wrote a Master’s Thesis on the *Concepts of Energy in the Healing Arts* through Lesley University almost 40 years ago (Alexander, 1981). My advisor in this process was James Oschman, PhD, a well-respected biophysicist and pioneering author and lecturer in the field of Energy Medicine. Ever since completing that research project, I have had the feeling that not enough study has gone into the process by which humans “elevate” spiritually to an ecstatic state. Particularly, I have seen nothing on the biophysics of that experience.

It seemed to me that the ability to achieve “ecstasy” is built-in to all human beings, rather than being an esoteric condition available to people only after years of intensive meditation. In fact, we receive a taste of this possibility with the physiological processes of orgasm.

While living in Israel in 1993, I was introduced to the Mount Zion Fellowship, a Pentecostal Church in East Jerusalem, whose pastor was an American evangelist by the name of Ruth Heflin. There I witnessed congregants “being slain in the spirit,” “speaking in tongues,” shaking and jumping up and down uncontrollably as they praised the Lord. Here was true ecstasy evoked through song. As luck would have it, Rev. Heflin had written a small book called *Glory* (1990/2000); a recipe for singing one’s way, via the *Shir Hama'a'lot* (the songs of ascension), up the Temple ‘stairway’ to the realm of the presence of the divine. I realized that she was writing about the energetic structure of the prayer service. She identified three steps to this ascension: Praise, Worship and Glory.

After I got over my initial reluctance to enter into these “Christian” concepts, I realized to my delight that she was taking me through the elements of a far older service form – the traditional Jewish prayer service. Until that moment, I had never realized that the Jewish service had actually been designed to take me (and the rest of the congregation) into an altered state and, indeed, into a direct ecstatic experience of the divine.

With the discovery of Rev. Heflin’s book, all my energy, music, and spiritual interests suddenly came together, and I realized that I had been given important tools which could enable song to bring people to an ecstatic altered state; that is, the sense of being in God’s presence. I looked for the best example of ecstatic song and found it in gospel. That is how I was eventually led to examine gospel’s secrets – its West African “shamanic” roots and its easily taught yet extremely effective techniques.

It was a small step to begin to explore gospel music as a path to ecstatic altered state experience.. I had always been attracted to the energy of gospel music; how it makes you smile to hear it. People can’t help clapping along. It seems to me that through its soulful melodies and its rhythmic beat, gospel has the power to raise the spirit, open the heart, and nourish the soul; and that it is able to thus help people find joy, comfort, healing, and a sense of God’s personal love.

I realized that African Americans had found a way to merge three religious traditions: successfully combining the Jewish worship elements of “*praise*” and “*glorification*,” along with the Christian

elements of profound relationship with the Beloved, and with their own African-rooted passionate, participative, danced spirit-possession religion. The resulting song service uses a set of simple but masterful musical techniques to create a powerful ecstatic experience. There is something magical about the involvement of the body in a propelling 12/8 syncopated rhythm, the use of call and response, repetition, and the pentatonic scale.

From 2003, I began to attend gospel workshops as often as possible, and to use my observations to write about the theories and techniques of gospel choir. I attended gospel workshops wherever I could find them (throughout the U.S., and in Basel, Switzerland), I sang with gospel choirs (such as the One World Inspirational Choir, GoGospel, and the Swiss Gospel Choir), and attended international gospel conferences (such as the 2008 Stockholm Gospel Festival), where well-known gospel figures were featured. I interviewed a number of gospel choir conductors, including Troy Bell, Michael Crews, Joshua Nelson, Aleah Long, Clarence Eggleton, Cynthia Nunn, Walt Whitman, Walter Owens, Malcolm Williams, and Cindee Peters. I also incorporated information I had collected from a workshop with Sweet Honey in the Rock singer Ysaye Barnwell (1989a,b) that I had attended back in the 1980s at Naropa College.

I began to write about the theories and techniques of gospel choir. I was able to incorporate material from Barnwell's workshop on the energy-building power of call and response, the pentatonic scale and the rules for joining in the choir. I began to learn other elements – such as the clap on the offbeat – from leading my own workshops in the gospel style. I have now developed a list of two dozen gospel singing techniques from my own research. The body of material has unfurled itself almost effortlessly, almost as if fed to me: from discussion of what the definition of ecstasy is, to the rules for joining in the choir; from the use of simple heartfelt language to the sophisticated use of affirmation; from the understanding of 'praise' as "the willful sincere appreciation of God" to the exploration of the realm of 'glory' as God's "gravity".

When I began to learn about the specific techniques used in gospel singing, I realized that gospel music carries profound spiritually transformational secrets, similar in depth to those brought back to the west from the Far East through yoga and meditation. These are secrets about the power of the voice as a sacred reflector and transformer of energy; about the power of heart-directed choral song to build community and unity; and about the power of polyrhythm to induce ecstatic trance.

In early 2008, while attending an academic conference on the subject of "Ecstase," sponsored by the Hannover Medical School, I was fortunate to meet Professor Stanley Krippner, a highly respected figure in the field of consciousness and transpersonal research, who encouraged me to pursue the idea of turning my passion into a doctoral dissertation. Once I decided to make this into a dissertation, I began a literature search in earnest to expand my research. I also used online search tools, including You Tube examples, to back up the theoretical material I had already collected.

Including about 1300 sources, I have explored shamanism, African polyrhythmic music, resonant entrainment, "consciousness fields," the "holy hush", the power of "one accord", the tools of intention and of affirmation, hypnosis, dissociation, possession, the nature of the formation of the "self," and so much more. I have now developed an entire chapter of my dissertation devoted to the biophysics of ecstatic experience, thanks largely to the renewed contact and help of my original mentor and dear friend, biophysicist James Oschman (2000/2001).

I have been told that some of the sources I have used in my research may be considered "controversial" and therefore inappropriate for an academic dissertation. Here is my response to those criticisms. Historically, some of our greatest scientific discoveries have been made by men

who began their careers within proscribed scientific or mathematical confines but ended their careers as veritable mystics; some even outright shunned by colleagues. Examples include:

- Pythagoras, who began with a career in astronomy and mathematics, but who eventually founded a secret philosophical society to explore the mysteries of numbers;
- the geometer Archimedes, who became fascinated with the spiral;
- Johannes Kepler, who began as a mathematician and astronomer but eventually also moved to philosophy and mysticism;
- Isaac Newton who was both a scientist and inventor as well as mystically-inclined;
- physicist Emanuel Swedenborg, who had a mystical experience that changed the course of his career;
- Michael Faraday whose interests moved from chemistry to electromagnetism to philosophy;
- physician Ignaz Semmelweis, now famous for having told skeptical doctors that they needed to wash their hands between patient visits to disinfect them;
- venerated neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (actually known as the father of neurology), who lost his reputation when he used hypnosis to examine hysteria;
- Svante Arrhenius, whose doctoral dissertation was laughed off by colleagues, but who went on to win the Nobel prize in chemistry with his theory;
- Nobel prize-winning physiologist Albert Szent-Györgyi who, in his later years, turned to the exploration of energy medicine.

These men, all distinguished in their scientific fields, dared to take a step beyond the confining box of acceptability, to explore the scientific and spiritual unknown. I have been blessed to have personally met several such contemporary scientists and am not ashamed to include their controversial theories and findings in my dissertation: including (but not limited to) cell biologist and biophysicist James Oschman, mechanical engineer Konstantin Meyl, neuroscientist and pharmacologist Candace Pert, kinesiologist and consciousness researcher Valerie Hunt, and biologist Rupert Sheldrake, who have all advanced theories outside of the “norm,” based on a lifetime of professional and personal experience.

I hope that the material contained in these pages will be interesting and helpful to musicologists, theologians, anthropologists, psychologists, physicists, choral conductors, choral music composers, singers, and indeed to anyone on a personal spiritual path.

### **Introduction and Design of Study**

There is, at the present time, a great fascination with the ecstatic experience. What is ecstasy? Ecstasy is rapturous delight, exaltation, bliss, a sense of being taken or moved out of one's self or one's normal state of consciousness, and entering a state of intensified or heightened emotion, so powerful as to produce a trancelike dissociation from all but the single overpowering feeling. For thirty-five years, since becoming a somatic psychotherapist, I have been curious about the nature of consciousness, and particularly the ecstatic “*altered*” state experience, that remarkable “*psychophysical*” (Winkelman, 1997) transformation often described as indescribable.

All ecstatic experience is “aroused,” “induced,” or “ignited”. Arousal refers to heightened physiological activity in the nervous or endocrine system. And the physiological process of this arousal or ignition is fundamentally similar for everyone. One is said to “ascend” to ecstasy. Experiencers may describe a “spiritual conversion.”

While some people may be inclined to dismiss the experience of ecstasy as a form of hysteria – or worse, psychosis – most adults have experienced at least a taste of ecstasy if they have had a particularly powerful sexual orgasm. Back in 1980, when I first became curious about the biophysics of orgasm and other ecstatic experiences, I could not find much research literature on the subject.

But times have changed and, upon returning to the subject 25 years later, I have been able to find many more recent writings from diverse disciplines in which the subject has been addressed.

I have chosen the musical modality of gospel choir as my entry point for exploring the evocation of ecstatic experience. Gospel choir arguably offers one of the most effective musical technologies in existence for achieving communal ecstatic altered-state experience, a subject I examined in 2005 in a workshop I first taught at a Jewish Renewal conference (Alexander, 2005). This is a fact that seems to have been largely overlooked during the heyday of Westerners' fascination with such Oriental techniques of spiritual transformation as meditation, yoga, and tai chi. Gospel choir is also a socially cohesive group experience, offering the opportunity to transcend the individual self to merge into a larger communal ecstatic experience.

In my dissertation, "OH MY GOD!" Ecstatic Experience Explored Through the Evocative Technology of Gospel Choir, I have begun by introducing understandings of ecstatic altered-state experience as an arousal of the sensory-motor nervous system which somehow alters perception, perhaps by changing vantage point. I have explained shamanic trance as a technology for accessing the spirit world and to discuss both initiation and induction. I have also introduced music as the language of emotional and physiological arousal; including the role of the voice and of bodily motion. I have briefly traced the history of gospel choir's rise as an African American ecstatic musical path, and have offered a short literature review of this genre.

The techniques used in African music and in gospel in particular have been well-described in the literature. Most of these techniques are traceable back to African group excitatory ritual practice, sometimes known as "danced religion." These are practices originally associated with spirit possession ritual. There are also elements of West African danced spirit-possession religion in the origins of the inductive, propulsive, interactive technology of gospel music. I particularly note aspects relating to body-rhythm and melody: polyrhythms, repetition, the offbeat clap, and swing, the role of melody, the charismatic vocal techniques of the soloists, the power of the personalized emotional heartsong – with its use of everyday language and simple action verbs, the major pentatonic scale, the simple catchy language and melody, the style of harmonization, and the aural transmission.

Most studies of gospel music techniques have not focused directly on their role in arousing ecstatic experience, nor on why those techniques are so effective in creating such experiences in the congregation. As I explored the gospel style, I wondered if it were possible to isolate and identify the arousing techniques of gospel music performance; to learn whether the sources of those techniques were generic enough to be easily taught in non-Christian spiritual settings, with the goal of evoking ecstatic experience? So I set out to study the elements of the gospel style, mainly through observations made during the many gospel workshops and performances I attended between 2003 and 2010. My study and analysis of the gospel form has involved ten years of personal experience of singing in gospel choirs (including weekend GoGospel workshops in Switzerland in 2009 and 2010, and the Stockholm Gospel Festival in the summer of 2010), as well as my own conducting of gospel-style choirs, the interviewing of gospel conductors (including Cynthia Nunn, Troy Bell, Malcolm Owens, and others who all visited Switzerland from the United States), and the viewing of numerous private videos of gospel performances that are available online at such sites as YouTube. Indeed, throughout my research, the internet has proven to be a valuable tool in locating both written and video sources online.

In the course of my participation in gospel workshops, I have observed the importance of dialog in the genre: the soloist's call and the choir's response; the use of gaps and spaces in sung lines; the bass anchor line holding the piece rhythmically together, freeing the higher voices and particularly the soloist to soar. And finally, I have examined the attention given to creating and building excitement in the congregation: the use of repetition, the spontaneity and improvisation that are

encouraged in soloists and instrumental accompanists, the expectational drive, and other tricks of tension and resolution designed to drive the congregation wild.

If one asks a gospel singer about techniques, one might very well receive the reaction I got from one vocalist I met on tour in Amsterdam in 2009, who said – “Techniques? We ain’t got no techniques. That’s just how we sing. It’s normal!” But once I began to list for her the techniques I had by then collected, she discovered with surprise that indeed there DOES seem to be an identifiable set of techniques to the gospel style. One therefore sees that there may be value in examining this form from the “outsider” perspective of the ethnomusicologist.

In fact, I have identified approximately two dozen specific techniques for inducing ecstatic experience; techniques remarkable in their simplicity and designed to raise the congregation’s energy, to build its cohesiveness, and to open the group to an altered-state experience. These gospel techniques can be conveyed simply to choir conductors, to singers, as well as to would-be gospel composers, so that they might more easily achieve their objectives of creating a communal ecstatic experience through music.

I have come to recognize that the techniques used by gospel choirs are easy to teach and make ideal tools for raising the congregation’s energy, for building its cohesiveness, and even for inducing the group into an altered-state experience. I have concluded that these evocative techniques must be universally available to groups who wish to have a congregational ecstatic, transcendent experience; and that the combinations of these techniques are in use in ecstatic religious rituals of many traditions, from voodoo to Sufi and other spiritual traditions. I have thus applied these techniques in subsequent “*jospel*” (Jewish gospel) workshops that I have given in the Jewish community since 2005 - such as at the biannual *Aleph Jewish Renewal Kallah* (2010) - and have received a great deal of enthusiastic response from participants.

The term “*arousal*” refers to heightened physiological activity in the nervous or endocrine system. The ecstatic gospel choir experience must be “*aroused*,” and the physiological process of this arousal or ignition is fundamentally similar for everyone. Thus it is safe to say that the ecstatic experience is a normal physiological process and a learnable skill. Ecstasy also appears to be a contagious phenomenon, “*acquired*” from others via resonant entrainment. Gospel techniques can be recognized as tools of arousal; that is, of, amplification, synchronization, and entrainment. These arousal techniques are, I suggest, tools used for the altering of both reception and emanation of frequencies.

But the arousal techniques are not the only important ecstatic element at work in gospel performance. It is the intentional component of performance that is of paramount importance. I have come to the conclusion that gospel music can be defined in a two-word positive exclamation, or affirmation: “Yes, God!” In other words, gospel is an affirmation of God’s power and divine love. Affirmation is an experience of a situation as if the desired outcome has already taken place. Affirmation organizes intention in the congregation. It is, as musicologist Eileen Southern (1991/ 1997) has noted, a means “to pull the congregation together in commitment and spiritual communion” (p. 605).

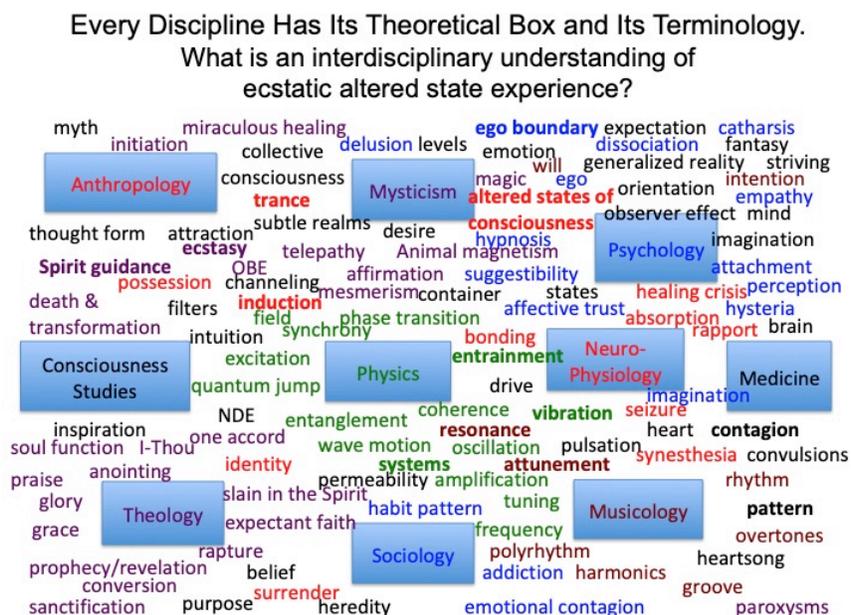
An analysis of the ecstatic structure of the Judeo-Christian worship service, provided largely through the research of Pentecostal minister Ruth Heflin (2000), and her examination of the pathway of the service from “*praise*” to “*worship*” to “*glory*” is instructive. It seems that Jewish, Christian, and African traditions have all found that setting the group intention at the heart level, through congregational psalms of praise – that is, expressing “*sincere appreciation*” of God, expressed with emotional fervor – has the power to entrain the whole congregation into a single group field or, as I might put it, a “*group nervous system*.” In the Pentecostal and Gospel church traditions this group state is known as “*one accord*.”

“*One accord*” literally means “one heart.” I have proposed here that this concept be examined not only allegorically but, indeed, literally as a bioenergetic process. The heart is the strongest pulsatory source in the body, creating the most powerful electromagnetic field. The congregation begins to resonate together and becomes a collective, a more coherent organization; or, as Pentecostal minister Heflin called it, a “*holy choir*.” In previous examinations of the gospel musical style, this biophysical process is alluded to but never explored directly. In my research, I have attempted to directly address these processes. I argue that the structure of the Judeo-Christian service is intentionally designed to create a communal ecstatic experience, and explain how the use of affirmation, faith, intention, sensitivity, surrender, and group mind are meant to take the congregation to this experience, this new “*state*” or “*system*” of consciousness.

I have next turned to the American Studies PhD dissertation of Glenn Hinson (1989), later released as a book entitled *Fire in My Bones* (Hinson, 2000), to review in detail (with his permission) his fabulously descriptive analysis of the structure and “emotional trajectory” of the black gospel service, and to introduce the reader to the clearly ecstatic nature of that service. The Pentecostal element of “*possession by the Holy Spirit*,” has clearly offered a place for the spirit possession experience of the African Religion. I suggest that what makes gospel music so effective in rousing congregations to ecstasy is that it combines the Christian religious relationship with Jesus, who is perceived as a personal and loving savior, with a group of powerful ecstasy-inducing techniques originating in African spirit possession religion.

As religious studies scholar Ann Taves has argued in her book, *Fits, Trances and Visions* (1999), the choice of terminology “carries with it (limiting and distorting) presuppositions and associations [and] obscures the subjective experience of the native actor” (p. 8-9). Indeed, such difference in vocabulary has constrained the ability of experts in different fields to transcend “assumptions and paradigms,” and has resulted in a “lack of shared understanding about the nature of mysticism” (per sociologist and researcher of the Pentecostal movement Margaret Poloma, (2003, p. 25). How much could be gained were physicists to examine the phenomenon of “*trance induction*”; or were theologians to educate themselves in such concepts as “*synesthesia*”?

In the chart below, I have listed many of the terms used by various disciplines (for example, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, consciousness studies, neurophysiology,



theology, medicine, music, mysticism, and physics) which reflect their diverse perspectives but at the same time point out our limited ability to describe what I believe are intimately interrelated phenomena. Different disciplines are sometimes describing the same phenomena.

Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, science is able to take key concepts from physics and explain how they apply to biological systems. This new field of “*biophysics*” provides tools that allow a fresh and interdisciplinary approach to the understanding of biological interactions. Using terms from physics such as “*excitation*,” “*amplification*,” “*frequency*,” “*synchronization*,” “*resonance*,” “*entrainment*,” and “*phase transition*,” we can apply them to the human body-mind, allowing me to develop the perspective of the excitable, synchronizable, and ultimately entrainable human.

In fact, I would argue that overall, physics actually offers the most useful vocabulary for examining consciousness and ecstatic experience. We are indeed, as suggested by Eben Alexander (2012), a neurosurgeon and survivor of a meningitis-induced coma, at the convergence of science and spirituality. For instance, where sociology might use the term “*emotional contagion*,” physics might refer to the phenomenon in terms of “*oscillatory entrainment*.” Where music might use the words “*attunement*” or “*groove*,” physics might use “*resonance*.” The field of psychology offers many opportunities for reframing concepts using the helpful terminology of physics: for example, “*attention*,” “*habit*,” “*ego*,” “*complexes*,” “*dissociation*,” “*suggestibility*,” “*induction*,” “*trance*,” “*bonding*,” and “*rapport*.”

To support my hypothesis, I have guided the reader the definitions and scientific rules of “*oscillation*,” “*resonance*,” “*synchrony*,” “*amplification*,” “*entrainment*,” and “*coherence*” as they relate to the “*vibratory*” human being. These apply to such elements as group synchronization, attachment bonding, coherent oscillatory systems of consciousness, rapport, group mind, resonant contagion, and more. On the physical level, the heart is the strongest source of entrainment in the physical body; and water plays a dominant role in resonant communication.

In gospel choir, the body is used as the vehicle to experience the divine through the senses. The primary objective of gospel style music is the creation of a communal ecstatic experience. Gospel choir seeks to build a cohesive choral sound “*mosaic*,” inducing a coherent group field, known in Pentecostal Christianity as “*one accord*”; literally “*one heart*.” We can begin to explore what happens when energy is added to an oscillatory system, how the system is synchronized, and how a larger resonant field can be created.

The nature of consciousness, altered consciousness, and ecstatic experience is addressed across a wide spectrum of disciplines. And these disciplines – including musicology, anthropology, theology, psychology, sociology, philosophy, neurophysiology, consciousness studies, and biophysics – have quite different vocabularies for describing what may be similar or even identical phenomena. For example, as religious studies scholar Ann Taves (1999) has noted,

Psychiatrists most commonly refer to dissociation (or more distantly hysteria); anthropologists to trance, spirit possession, and altered states of consciousness; and religionists to visions, inspiration, mysticism, and ecstasy. (p. 7)

One is said to “*ascend*” to ecstasy. Sufi master Pir Vilayat Khan called it a “*shift...from our ordinary vantage point to that of the divine*” (Pattee, 1988, p. 18). From such descriptions of “*ecstasy*,” it can easily be acknowledged that ecstasy may be explored as a biophysical phenomenon. When examined from the standpoint of biophysics, the activities of “*praise*” and of “*affirmation*” can be now be understood as additional evocative techniques to ecstasy. The state of “*one accord*” might now be recognized as an example of “*entanglement*” and system organization. Gospel techniques can be recognized as particularly effective techniques for raising communal energy and for achieving ecstatic altered state experience.

I have identified a number of transcendent “*miraculous*” effects most commonly attributed to ecstatic Gospel, Holiness, Sanctified, Charismatic, Evangelical, and all other Pentecostal church services: they include one accord, the induced group worship field previously mentioned; as well as supersensory perception and ecstatic synesthesia – the experiences of glory, grace, and the descent of the Holy Spirit; ecstatic motor behavior; trance and possession by the Holy Spirit; and conversion-associated effects of glossolalia, healing miracles, and prophecy.

Reports of ecstatic shifts in consciousness point to a transcendent alteration of perception; that is, a heightened sensory experience, an awareness in which perception is at a level of acuity not normally accessible. In the case of the Pentecostal, Holiness, and Gospel churches, these reports include the ecstatic experience of “*glory*,” the personal gift of “*grace*,” and the communal experience of the “*descent of the Holy Spirit*.” In Gospel churches, other seemingly miraculous “*synesthetic*” experiences (where sensory modalities become mixed) have also been documented – for instance, of blind pianists becoming excited enough to jump off the stage and run through the aisles of the church.

To examine this transcendent alteration of perception, I have explored how physics describes the process of perception, and what factors would account for altered perception. Reports of synesthesia seem to call into question some of the usual theories about how sensory perception actually works. Under conditions of high emotional arousal, for example, it may be possible to sense things that are ordinarily below the threshold of awareness, or even have organs that should perceive in one mode begin to perceive in another altogether. In the case of the blind pianist, for instance, it turns out that the skin seems to be a particularly good receptor of “visual” stimulation. Although we are not usually aware of seeing with our skin, under extreme emotional excitement, our brains may begin to process such information.

I have given special attention to the examination of ecstatic motor behavior in the excitable body, based upon my previous extensive studies of body-centered therapies. Anthropologists have noted a particular family of spontaneous involuntary movements associated with rhythmic ecstatic experience. These ecstatic movements are a result of overexcitation of the body and in some cases possibly excessive synchronization of brain functions. Such excitation symptoms might be variously labeled medically as tetany, cyanosis, or hyperventilation. Some ecstatic movement may also be considered a discharge activity, like that evoked as “orgasm” in sexual activity.

These “automatic” ecstatic movements vary from the jerky to the undulatory in manner, may involve shaking, dancing, running, bowing, twisting, writhing, or even epileptic-type, convulsive seizure activity. In African religion, these movements may be considered representative of “*spirit possession*.” In Black American Gospel churches, these experiences are associated with “*baptism of the Holy Ghost*.” Some of these movements can be attributed to cultural expectation, but others seem to occur spontaneously, of their own volition. And, like other “hysterical” symptoms, some of these reactions also seem to be contagious, with the reaction being initiated by one person and then picked up and mimicked by others.

Ecstatic experience is by definition an “*altered-state*” of consciousness (or, as psychiatrist Norman Zinberg, 1977, preferred to call it, “alternate state of consciousness”). Shamans are considered to be “*masters of ecstasy*.” They achieve this state by a process of entering into trance to make contact with the spirit world. I have examined the shamanic experience of “*trance*,” as well as the widely-researched associated altered states of “*hypnosis*” and “*possession*.”

The role of trance appears to be important in group ecstatic experience, and is under-researched, particularly in religious settings. As ethnomusicologist, Judith Becker (2009), noted during her research of the ecstatic experience of the Pentecostal church:

Trancing is a psychological event and a physiological event. But no religious community, as far as I know, presents a physiological counterpart to their religious explanation of trance; the physiology of trancing remains a mystery. In spite of striking similarities in the behavior of trancers far distant geographically, ...we understand little of what is happening within the bodies of trancers. Trancing seemed to me to be a phenomenon that cried out for an empirical approach. (p. 45)

I have thus taken the opportunity to explore trance and trance "induction."

Possession by the Holy Spirit is an important transcendental aspect of Gospel and Pentecostal churches. In spirit-possession religions, trance is described as a separation of the spirit from the physical body. So I have found it important to explore the development, maintenance and dissociation of the sense of self as attached to the body. This sense of embodied self is known as the "ego," a term developed by Freud in his psychoanalysis practice. "Possession" may be recognized as a temporary loss of this self-identification. Spirit possession is invoked in the practice of African ecstatic religion via trance. The Pentecostal concept of "*descent of the Holy Spirit*" may also be viewed as a form of possession experience. So I have found it necessary to examine the research on the strange but common phenomena of trance, hypnosis, rapport, and bonding, understanding these as synchronization and entrainment phenomena, with the power to reorganize consciousness, even to the point of accepting multiple personalities.

There are several quite specific ecstatic phenomena that are known to occur in Pentecostal churches as congregants experience being directly touched by God, including glossolalia, cathartic "conversion," being "slain in the Spirit", "miraculous" healing, and prophetic revelation - as resulting from trance, suggestion, and from temporary ego dissociation. It is unclear whether these phenomena may be related to a shift to identification with a different, perhaps higher, system or organization of consciousness.

"*Spiritual conversion*," (or "being born again,") has been described as a sudden, direct experience of being touched by God; a bursting open or breaking apart, as if a bolt of energy had been applied; a feeling of being reborn, fresh, new, washed clean. There is a physical component to spiritual conversion. It is an experience of being taken over by the Spirit; which typically involves physical "automatisms" such as "wild shaking, [uncontrolled] laughter, rolling" (Poloma, 2003).

The conversion experience can actually be compared to the shamanic "*initiation*" experience. "*Conversion*," sometimes known as "*catharsis*," may be discussed as a sort of "*phase shift*," as consciousness researcher Valerie Hunt termed it (1989/1996), or a "*disruption and reorganization*" of consciousness, as consciousness researcher Charlie Tart (1976; as cited in Walsh, 2007) envisioned it. Hypnosis expert Dick Sutphen (n.d.) called it "*reprogramming*." In any case, surrender to this new state of consciousness seems to shift the frame of awareness and bring with it unusual healing and revelation miracles, as well as unusual perceptive and kinesthetic powers.

## **In Summary**

I have summarized my research into the techniques of gospel choir and their ecstatic effects on the congregation with the following concluding observations. Using the vocabulary of physics – the roles of resonance, synchronization, entrainment/contagion – I have suggested a number of original hypotheses related to altered consciousness. I have particularly addressed the concepts of trance, induction, rapport and the malleability of ego boundaries, the role of the heart and of the fluid of the body, destabilization and restabilization of the self, and the surrender of self to a larger or stronger

system. I have suggested that ecstasy, as a contagious phenomenon, is a resonant entrainment phenomenon. I have suggested that the ecstatic state conversion involves surrender to (i.e., merging with) a higher system of organization, and that such a merging is also a frequency entrainment phenomenon. It is in this merged state, outside of normal consciousness, that mystical, prophetic, and even miraculous experiences are known to be possible. Lastly, I have suggested that the findings in my research might be a good springboard for re-examining the ground-breaking research of Masters and Houston (1996/2000) of 50 years ago on psychedelic altered-state experience.

I have included a number of important appendices to my research. Group ecstatic experience is an entrained experience. This is its power, but also its danger. I have thus added several articles (Appendices of warning: A, B, & C) addressing the dangers of group entrainment and group ecstatic experience, with thanks to hypnotherapy expert Dick Sutphen (n.d.) and others who would alert readers to the potential of using synchronization techniques in the service of mind-entrainment or “*brainwashing*” or other “*boundary abuse*.” David Lukoff (1998) and others have discussed the delicate line between ecstasy and delusion, with guidance for those in “*spiritual emergencies*.” I have offered a condensed list of gospel choir techniques. I have also included a brief discussion of the history, sociology, and politics of communal ecstatic experience, with thanks to political historian Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Dancing in the streets: A history of collective joy* (2006).

I have, in addition, offered many descriptive quotes of ecstatic experience. There are also two articles, the first on the health benefits of singing; the second a Newsweek Magazine article from 2005 about the search for spirituality in contemporary America. I have explained pre-Gospel African American musical styles; and outlined comparisons between several different paths of ecstatic experience. Other sections examine the sociology of African American music, sacred geometry and sacred physics as they might pertain to the understanding of ecstasy. There are also theories relating to acquired savant syndrome and the energetic structure of the body and the charge-discharge nature of the orgasm.

I have concluded with a list of suggested reading resources for the curious, a sample discography, a list of available downloads, and an accompanying USB drive of recorded examples of gospel performance and teachings, which I have personally collected.

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Sharon Alexander  
Basel, Switzerland

## Appendices

- A. WARNING: Brainwashing and Other Manipulations of Consciousness **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
- B. WARNING: Charismatic Teaching and the Risks of Boundary-Abuse
- C. WARNING: Ecstasy and Delusional Psychosis
- D. Summary List of the Techniques of Gospel Choir
- E. The History, Sociology, and Politics of Communal Ecstatic Experience
- F. Personal Reports of Ecstatic Experience
- G. Health Benefits of Singing
- H. In Search of the Spiritual
- I. Pre-Gospel African-American Musical Styles
- J. Comparisons between Shamanic Ecstatic Experience, African Spirit Possession, and Pentecostal “Baptism of the Holy Spirit”
- K. The Sociology of African American Music:
- L. “Sacred Geometry” to “Sacred Physics”: —Platonic Solids, Spirals, Spin Vortices, and Toruses
- M. Re-examining Acquired Savant Syndrome
- N. Body Character as Scalar—or Standing—Wave Formation
- O. The Charge-Discharge Process of Orgasm
- P. Resources you may enjoy
- Q. Discography of Recommended Gospel & Jospel Choir Songs
- R. Audio Downloads of Examples of Gospel Church and Gospel Choir Techniques Originally Found in Videos Posted on YouTube
- S. Audio Compilation on Attached USB Drive:

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Sharon Alexander received her BA degree at the University of California, Riverside in 1973, with a double major in Psychology and Environmental Sciences and a minor in Music. She earned her Master's Degree at Lesley University, Cambridge, MA in 1981 with an independent study in Body Focused Therapies; with a thesis on the topic of *Concepts of Energy in the Healing Arts*. She has worked as a Massage Therapist and Body Psychotherapist and has always been a performing artist, community organizer, teacher, networker, and environmental and political activist. She acted in and directed musical theater and children's theater, both during and after college. While living in Boulder, she founded a Jewish Renewal spiritual community and was also the vocalist for two *klezmer* (Jewish celebration) bands.



In 2003, she renewed her passion for gospel choir singing, and has been teaching about the ecstatic structure of the Judeo-Christian service and leading gospel-style choirs around the world since 2003. In 2004, she received ordination from Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi as a Leader of Ecstatic Chorales, granted the honorific title of *Ba'alat Shirei Hama'alot B'chesed Elyon* (Mistress of songs of ascent to the realm of divine grace). She did her doctoral studies at the University of Bern, Switzerland in the field of Ethnomusicology, and is graduating in 2020 with a dissertation entitled: *OH MY GOD! Exploring ecstatic experience through the evocative technology of gospel choir*.

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