

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

PROFESSOR SIR ALISTER HARDY, FRS

The Templeton Prize

Your Grace [the Duke of Norfolk], my Lords, Mr and Mrs John Templeton, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am overwhelmed by the great honour that the judges of the Templeton Prize have bestowed upon me by electing me to be this year's winner; I hope that they can imagine something of the great pleasure it gives me as well as my deep sense of gratitude. I am now 89 and I cannot but regard the award as the culmination of a long career; it also gives me particular satisfaction to feel that the means are available for the continuation of the work after I am gone.

I must emphasise that, whilst I originally founded the Religious Experience Research Unit, the work has been as much that of Edward Robinson who succeeded me as Director when I retired at the age of 80, and of our other colleagues at the Unit.

Many may ask how it is that a professor of zoology should in his retirement take up the study of religious experience. The purpose of this address is to answer that question, and perhaps surprise you even more when I tell you that it has not only been a lifetime's interest but a conviction that it is actually a part of what I believe is a true study of life as a whole.

I should start by saying what I have often said before: that science itself, as we know it, cannot deal with the real essence of religion any more than it can touch our appreciation of art, our joy in the beauties of nature or the poetry of human love. We can, however, use the methods of science to make a systematic natural history study of human experience.

I came to know what I have always regarded as God when quite a boy; it was not the result of church services, of school chapel or of scripture lessons, but for quite other reasons, as I shall explain. First, however, let me say that I have no wish in any way to denigrate the glories of our beautiful old churches with their sense of what Rudolf Otto called the numinous – the feeling of the Holy which may be so powerful in the little side chapels devoted to private prayer. My objection to the modern church is its medieval theology, so different from that of the early Christians. I came to feel the experience of God through the beauty and joys of nature.

From very early days I was a keen naturalist and, when out on country walks by myself looking for beetles and butterflies, I would sometimes feel a presence which seemed partly outside myself and curiously partly within myself. My God was never 'an old gentleman' out there, but nevertheless was like a person I could talk to and in a loving prayer could thank him for the glories of nature that he let me experience. If I may make an admission – and to do so is only honest – I should say that sometimes (when I was sure that no one was looking!) I would go down on my knees to express this gratitude. At the same time I had become an ardent Darwinian.

At 18 I came up to Oxford in 1914, after the outbreak of war. I trained in the Officer Training Corps and left for my commission at Christmas. I was just as convinced of the reality of evolution as I was of man's spiritual experience. On leaving for the war I made a solemn vow: that if I came through I would devote my life to trying to bring about a reconciliation of these two great truths. I did survive and I like to feel that the award of the Templeton Prize today rounds off a lifetime attempt to make this reconciliation.

I must not take up time in giving a sketch of my career, except to say that I was well advised to build up my scientific reputation as a platform from which to speak, before beginning the actual study of such experiences. As a matter of fact, just before sailing on a two-year voyage to the Antarctic on the old *Discovery* in 1925, I did make a beginning with the collection of material by getting the best London press cutting agency to make me a collection of up to 2,000 letters, articles and so on, from the daily newspapers – articles concerning faith, prayer and spiritual experience but not including theological arguments, records of sermons or clerical appointments. After returning, I repeated this operation every ten years, until I could begin my real work on the collection of personal experiences myself. It provided an interesting sociological background, showing something of the changes in public opinion on the nature of religion. This, however, was only an introduction.

Science and the Essence of Religion

Now to begin my discussion. To my mind, the two greatest books on the relation of man to the cosmos since the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* have been by two Americans at the turn of the century: Edwin Starbuck in his *Psychology of Religion* (1899) and William James's great Gifford Lectures published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). There can be no doubt that James's great work is the more important of the two, but it is well to record that it was Starbuck who was the real pioneer. Starbuck, Professor of Psychology at Stamford University, had been a pupil of William James at Harvard. After he had gone to Stamford, he tried to interest James in his proposed study of religious experience by the questionnaire technique. James writes a very interesting and amusing foreword to Starbuck's book, in which he says that he did everything he could to discourage Starbuck from what he was proposing to do; he felt that he would not get any useful results and that it would be a waste of time. James, however, became completely converted by Starbuck's book and gladly consented to write the foreword that I have just mentioned. James then got Starbuck's permission to use a great many of the examples of experience that he had collected to form part of his own argument. James in his own preface says "My thanks for help in writing these lectures are due to Edwin Starbuck who made over to me his large collection of manuscript material." Whilst James's book is undoubtedly the greater of the two, we must never forget that it was Starbuck who was the real pioneer in the beginning of such studies.

One might have expected that there would have been a keenly debated argument in the intellectual world over these two books, but, alas, it was not so. This was partly because the psychology of Sigmund Freud had appeared, and then the terrible tragedy of the first World War deflected people's thoughts away from such studies. The only people who really followed Starbuck and James were the social anthropologists who went out to live with the primitive tribes and were able to discuss with them their spiritual experiences. I should here draw the distinction between the modern anthropologists and those who used to be called the 'armchair anthropologists', who made great collections of stories about the more primitive people. First among these was Sir James Frazer who produced the huge, many-

volumed book *The Golden Bough*. It is said that, when he was asked if he had ever been out to visit any of the people he was writing about, he replied: "God forbid!"

Two of these real studies of primitive people were outstanding. First we have the book on *Nuer Religion* by Professor E. E. Evans Pritchard (Oxford University Press, 1956) and secondly Dr Geoffrey Lienhardt's *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford, 1961). These are two adjacent tribes in the southern Sudan. Evans Pritchard has told me that he was so impressed by the religious feelings of the Nuer tribe that from being an agnostic he became a Christian, in fact a Roman Catholic. We know far more of the religious feelings of these primitive peoples than we do of those of our contemporary fellows in the western world.

I would now like to give two quotations from the work of the great French social anthropologist Emile Durkheim. In his book *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (English translation by J. W. Swain, 1951), he writes:

The believer, who has communicated with his god, is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is stronger. He feels within himself more force, either to endure the trials of existence, or to conquer them. It is as though he were raised above the miseries of the world, because he is raised above his condition as a mere man; he believes that he is saved from evil, under whatever form he may conceive this evil. The first article in every creed is the belief in salvation by faith.

Many who have not read Durkheim with sufficient care have thought that his study of religion is simply linking it with the materialistic interpretation of the evolution of man as a social animal. Nothing could be further from the truth, as is clearly shown by Durkheim's statement later in his book:

... it is necessary to avoid seeing in this theory of religion a simple restatement of historical materialism: that would be misunderstanding our thought to an extreme degree.

I now want to turn to the very important ideas of that philosopher the late Michael Polanyi, who first put them forward in his Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen, which were published in a large volume entitled *Personal Knowledge* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958). He pointed out that there are two distinct kinds of knowledge: what he called tacit knowledge, and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is what we are thinking about before we express it in written or spoken words. We may go out for a country walk and enjoy the glories of the countryside, but we are not usually (at least, I am not) thinking of it in terms of words. When we come home and describe what we have seen and enjoyed, we are turning that tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is our knowledge expressed in language, mathematical symbols, in maps, and so on. He then makes a very striking statement: the only real difference between the animals and ourselves is the development of explicit knowledge. It is the tacit knowledge of what we experience of our surroundings that we share with the animal kingdom.

Evolution and religion

With the coming of speech and writing, the very form of evolution was changed. Whilst we are still subject to natural selection, by pathogenic organisms and effects of the environment, which medical science and technology are reducing all the time, man is now living very much by the passing on of traditions. As soon as he became able to communicate his thoughts and ideas in explicit terms, he was able to describe and discuss the various emotional feelings that he had. It was here that man first discussed these curious feelings of being in touch with some power beyond the self. As we heard Durkheim say:

The believer, who has communicated with his god, is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is stronger.

As the anthropologist R. R. Marett has said, such forms of religion have survival value.

So it was, I believe, that primitive religion began, and became more and more of a dynamic force in the behaviour of man. This feeling of a man towards his god took many different forms. Religion, for me, is an important part of the study of life. John Taylor, then Bishop of Winchester, in his beautiful book *The Go-Between God* (SCM, 1972) gives us some accounts of early Christian spiritual experiences and, after making some kind remarks about my Gifford Lectures, he goes on to say:

At first sight this looks like one more attempt to discover a gap into which God can be fitted, but Alister Hardy's deeply rational conviction that the divine element is part of the natural process - not strictly supernatural, as he says, but paraphysical - leads him to assert. . . that a universal response to the experience of encounter with God is just as much a natural response as any other that may be studied by the biological sciences.

That, indeed, is a perfect expression of my thoughts. No-one could admire more than I do the remarkable progress in the study of biophysics and biochemistry, with the discovery of the DNA and the genetic code; and now the molecular biologists are showing us a marvellous natural history of different complex molecules. All, however, are studies of the material vehicles which are carrying forward this divine essence of life.

Religion is a passionate affair. Nothing can be emotionally more disturbing than the clashes between different articles of faith. The only thing akin to them in nature are the passions of sex, which we can see are definitely part of the evolutionary system in bringing together and shuffling the genes which are so important for evolutionary progress. The religious passion, I believe, must have some great biological significance. Once the feelings of religion had advanced from the purely tacit phase, the explicit statements of the differences in belief came to mark a distinct part of the evolutionary system based upon man's advances through tradition. Whilst I have stressed the appalling clashes between members of different faiths, we should remind ourselves of their fundamental similarity. To set alongside a series of examples of spirituality, which we Christians find so vividly presented to us in the New Testament, we may turn back to the Judaistic traditions of the Book of Psalms:

Cast me not away from thy presence
and take not thy holy spirit from me.
Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation;
and uphold me with thy free spirit.
(Psalm 51)

Or from the Bhagavad-Gita of Hinduism:

God is seated in the hearts of all

Or from the Sufi poets of Islamic mysticism:

What pearl art Thou, that no man may pay the price?
What punishment is greater, than to dwell afar from Thy Face?
Torture not Thy slave, though he be unworthy of Thee!

And so on from every faith. It is all summed up so well in the words of Mahatma Gandhi (*Lamps of Fire*, ed. J. Mascaro, 1961):

I claim to be a man of faith and prayer, and even if I were to be cut to pieces I trust God would give me the strength not to deny Him, but to assert that He is. The Mussulman says, "He is, and there is no one else". The Christian says the same thing, and so does the Hindu. If I may venture

to say so, the Buddhist also says the same thing, only in different words. It is true that we may each of us be putting our own interpretation on the word 'God'. We must of necessity do so.

It is well to remember, in view of his opening sentences, that as he lay dying from the assassin's bullet, his last words were "He Ram! He Ram!" ["Ah God! Ah God!"]

In a more sophisticated way the same sentiments are expressed by Aldous Huxley in the opening paragraph of his *Perennial Philosophy* (Chatto & Windus, London, 1947):

The metaphysics that recognises a divine Reality ... the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being – the thing is immemorial and universal. Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditionary lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions.

I am not of course suggesting that we should try to bring about a universal form of religious practice throughout the world, but by studying the records of religious experience from many different kinds of faith we could, I believe, eventually set the world free from these terrible passions of disagreement.

A Systematic Study of Man's Experience

I am hoping that the work of our Unit [now the Religious Experience Research Centre] may eventually lead to such mutual agreement – although no doubt some way into the future.

We are using the methods of science to make a systematic study of the written records of man's experience which will tell us something of the feelings that many people have. Given sufficient numbers of them, we may rightly come to believe, I think, that we are indeed making a true natural history of this side of man. These should, where possible, be followed up by personal interviews with the more interesting cases.

What are the actual proportions in any population that may have this or that kind of experience? Here David Hay of Nottingham University is giving us the answers by taking random samples of the population or using the opinion poll technique. I look forward, now, to a close affiliation between his recent work and the earlier results of our own survey.

In giving examples of so many different experiences of religious feelings, I think it possible that such studies may have a considerable interest for biological philosophy. What I am going to say is, of course, highly speculative, yet I believe it is worth saying. As Polanyi has shown, the one great difference between man and the other animals is the possession of explicit knowledge by the former and its absence in the latter. The universality of religious experience in its many different forms suggests that man, when once he was able to express these feelings in explicit terms, is showing us a fundamental factor in the nature of life. I am not of course suggesting that animals have what may be called religious feelings, but that there may be this fundamental element running through the whole of the living world from the very simplest to the most highly evolved forms.

I would now like to say something which I said for the first time in a Foreword I wrote to a book called *Revelations* which has just been published (Shepherd-Walwyn and Border Television). It is the script of a series of interviews on television with a variety of people, ranging from a Fellow of the Royal Society to a well-known comedian, discussing the elements of revelation in their lives. They are brought together and presented by Mr Ronald

Lello, Programme Consultant. I have to admit that what I said in my Foreword to this book was that from time to time I feel intellectually ashamed of the modern academic attitude to what one might call the study of the nature of LIFE itself. It was not that I was afraid to say this in the ordinary way, but feared that I might have been thought to be arrogant, which is the last thing I would wish to be. I hope, again, that the work of our Unit may lead to better understanding of the nature and importance of man's religious experience in the interpretation of the living world.

I will end my address with the words spoken by Louis Pasteur when he was receiving the highest honour that the French Academy could bestow upon him. I should explain that he was a Roman Catholic all his life, but a very liberal one; he is here comparing the idea of God to the infinite. I quote from the version given by Arthur Koestler in his book *The Act of Creation* (Hutchinson, London, 1964), pages 261-262:

So long as the mystery of the infinite weighs upon the human mind, so long will temples be raised to the cult of the infinite, whether God be called Brahma, Allah, Jehovah or Jesus. ... The Greeks understood the mysterious power of the hidden side of things. They bequeathed to us one of the most beautiful words in our language – the word 'enthusiasm' – *en theos* – a God within. The grandeur of human actions is measured by the inspiration from which they spring. Happy is he who bears a god within.

I can only hope that the Templeton Trustees, on looking at our work, will see the *en theos* – the god within – and that it is enthusiasm that drives us forward.

THE AUTHOR Sir Alister Hardy, FRS – 1896 to 1985

Alister Hardy was a distinguished marine biologist. He became Professor of Zoology in Hull from 1928, Regius Professor of Natural History at Aberdeen from 1942, and Linacre Professor of Zoology at Oxford from 1945 to 1961. He was elected to the Royal Society in 1940.

After his retirement he returned to what had been a continuing and compelling interest throughout his life. In 1969 he founded the Religious Experience Research Unit which was initially based at Manchester College, Oxford. His interest in religious experience had been life-long, and he "wished to make natural history more fertile by linking it to a new kind of natural theology". He was inspired by the work of William James, and was himself invited to give the Gifford Lectures – which are published as *The Living Stream* (1965) and *The Divine Flame* (1966).

His other books are *The Biology of God* (1975), *Darwin and the Spirit of Man* (1984) and *The Spiritual Nature of Man* (1979) which is his account of the first years of the Unit's research.

RERC Second Series Occasional Paper 12

August 1997

Copyright ©1997 Religious Experience Research Centre

ISBN 0 906165 20 2