

AN INTRODUCTION TO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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Religion calls for opening up the self, the letting that which is more than the self flow through the organism and direct its activities.¹

INTRODUCTION

What is meant by a 'religious experience'? Is it the same as 'spiritual' or 'mystical' experience and how do such experiences differ from what we might call 'ordinary' experiences? Who has what kind of experiences and how do we hear about them? What could such experiences mean, how do we interpret them? This paper is intended to throw some light on questions such as these, and to indicate areas of further study.

When considering religious experience, one may instantly think of the great founders of the major religious traditions, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad or Guru Nanak. Then there are the saints of the past, Francis of Assisi or Thomas a Beckett and inspiring leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi. More recently people followed Indian gurus like Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, made famous through his association with the Beatles, and today the Tibetan Buddhist Dalai Lama is a well-known figure world-wide, again also due in part to famous followers. Presumably all these people had or have religious experiences, as did and do those inspired by them, whether or not in positions of authority within their religion.

Among other experiences are visions, heavenly music or miracles of healing. Conversion is a religious experience, as are prayer and meditation, but what exactly do we mean by these terms? In general one would probably think of a religious experience as a beneficial event, leading to an increase of goodness and love of one's fellow human beings. Yet these days we are familiar with religiously inspired suicide bombers, taking their own lives, and as many innocent lives with them as they can. There was the mass suicide of people in thrall to a charismatic spiritual leader, such as took place in Jonestown in Guyana in 1978. Religious experiences are evidently powerful and seemingly can be a force for good or evil.

Nowadays, as resuscitation techniques improve and people survive after longer periods of unconsciousness, we are becoming more and more aware of near-death experiences. Are these religious experiences? What might they indicate as to the possible survival of death?

The same experience may be interpreted by one person as religious, and by another as a completely natural event. So how are we to deal with this phenomenon? We shall look at the interpretation of different types of experience.

WHAT IS A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE?

There are various ways of understanding religious experience. First, there are the extraordinary experiences of the great religious teachers, whose messages have led to the founding of the major religious traditions. Then there are the great figures within those movements whose experiences are recounted in the scriptures, and also later saints, gurus, holy people and mystics, as well as the experiences of the more ordinary practitioners of religion. There are non-religious people who have mystical or spiritual intimations, often poets, artists or musicians, who express their feelings in art and creativity. However, there is another category too, that of ordinary people whether or not of any particular religious persuasion who have experiences which they cannot but interpret as religious.

FOUNDERS OF RELIGIONS

Many of the great religious traditions were founded on the inspiration of people who had experiences of revelation so profound that they appeared to their contemporaries to have particular spiritual insight and authority. They taught what had been revealed to them and during their lifetime attracted followers. After their deaths, movements sprang up, of people emulating them and following their examples and teachings. Many religious traditions came into being in this way and have continued over the centuries. Here are a few experiences, which led to the founding of four major religious movements.

Siddhartha Gautama, who is thought to have lived in the sixth or fifth century BCE, was a North Indian prince with a wife and child. In what became known as the Great Renunciation, he left palace and family to seek to understand the meaning of life, suffering and death. After much fruitless searching and years of extreme ascetic practice he sat down under a tree, which later became known as the Bodhi Tree, vowing to remain until he gained Enlightenment. Once he felt that he had indeed understood the true nature of reality, he began to teach the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path and became known as the Buddha, the Awakened One. He taught for about forty years and Buddhists follow his teachings, whether in the Mahayana, Theravada or Vajrayana schools.

Moses who is thought to have lived in the twelfth century BCE, was reputed to have had an experience of seeing God face to face and of communicating directly with God on Mount Sinai. He was transformed into someone whom his peers could hardly look at, so brightly did he reflect the majesty of God. After this experience, by working miraculous signs he was able to persuade Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to leave Egypt, where they had spent years enslaved. He subsequently led them out of captivity towards the Promised Land. In Deuteronomy it is recorded how on Mount Sinai he received the Law from God, which is summed up in the Ten Commandments. He is regarded as the founder of Judaism while also being revered by Christians and in Islam as Musa, who conversed with God.

Jesus was born in Palestine around 6 BCE and lived in close communication with God, whom he called 'Abba' which is a familiar term for father. After his baptism by John the Baptist Jesus preached the coming of the Kingdom of God, told parables and performed healing and other miracles. He travelled around Palestine with his twelve disciples, preaching and healing, his ministry lasting for about three years before he arrived in Jerusalem. There he was arrested and crucified. Scripture tells us that after his death there were appearances to his followers, who became convinced that he had been raised from the dead. They began to worship Jesus as the risen Messiah, Christ, the Son of God. As they spread the word and the movement grew away from Judaism, the Christian Church was established.

Muhammad was about forty years old in 610 CE when he began having visions which were so powerful that he feared for his sanity. He was instructed by the Angel Gabriel to recite (Qur'an means 'recite'). It is said that he then received and taught the Qur'an, which was only later written down. He taught for twelve years in Mecca, before moving to Medina, where he founded the religion of Islam, which means 'submission' (to the will of Allah). Some years later, he returned to Mecca, conquering the city and establishing it as the main site of pilgrimage.

Followers

Many followers of these traditions (and others) also had profound experiences, as is recorded in the scriptures of the traditions as well as in later texts. To take just two examples, the experience of Saul on the Road to Damascus, when he had a vision of Jesus and heard his voice, transformed him from one bent on persecuting Christians to a follower of Christ. As Paul he established churches and his letters, which later became part of the New Testament, are regularly read in church services.

The Buddha's cousin and companion Ananda, who accompanied him on his travels, later recited the Buddha's sermons so that they could be recorded, and was influential in setting up the *Sangha* or community of monks.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND RELIGION

As religious traditions grew, more emphasis was often put on doctrine and allegiance to the original vision, with a tendency to overlook the inner response of the individual. But this personal awareness of, and relationship with, ultimate reality is part of what keeps religion alive for the practitioner. This has been a point reinforced from time to time by theologians and commentators through the ages, within the Christian tradition, notably by Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rudolf Otto.

In 1799 Friedrich Schleiermacher, a Prussian theologian, wrote his influential *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, which was translated from German into English in 1893. This had the profound effect of stressing the fundamental importance of feeling and the experience of a personal response to the divine in religion, as opposed to a dry, dogmatic, doctrinal approach. He challenged

... the empiricists' restriction of experience to sense-observation. There are, he held, other sorts of perceptions ('intuitions', *Anschauungen*), which give knowledge of objective reality. Religious faith is based upon a distinctive sort of non-sensory apprehension, what he called an 'intuition of the infinite', or of a reality upon which we are absolutely dependent.²

The Idea of the Holy appeared in German in 1917, and in English in 1923. The author, Rudolf Otto, was a widely travelled German theologian who had come into contact with the religions of Asia as he made his way round the world. He was interested in what the various religions had in common as well as in what set them apart from each other. He found the religious impulse to be one of an awareness of the numinous, experienced as a 'mysterium tremendum et fascinans'.

These two works were highly influential in introducing the experiential element into the religion of their time.

The psychologist, William James, whose seminal work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (published in 1902) is still the starting point for discussion of the topic, defines personal religion as

... the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.³

More recent studies have not limited the experiences to the solitary, nor have they, unlike James, concentrated on the more extreme forms of religious experience. They have, however, tended to keep the open definition of the divine, not limiting this to an experience of God but of a transcendent or immanent understanding of divinity. Religious experiences across the spectrum, from totally extraordinary to more everyday occurrences, have been studied.

Surveys have asked questions such as that known as 'The Hardy Question', after Sir Alister Hardy, Professor of Zoology at Edinburgh and Oxford, who used it to collect people's religious experiences,

Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?

Such questions have resulted in the collection of numerous accounts of all different kinds, having in common the sense of contact with a greater reality, often interpreted as divine. Interestingly, however, many of these accounts reflect no particular religious tradition, but an awareness of something much less specific. The experience may be thought of as being an experience which points beyond ordinary life, and which is taken by the experient to have spiritual or religious significance. Whatever form it takes, such an experience seems to give an indication of a greater reality underlying the physical world of the senses. Some people have their experiences in the context of a religious tradition, perhaps in a place of worship, or while reading the scriptures, and thus interpret them within that framework. But for many this is not the case. For them the experience comes unexpectedly and often remains secret, not spoken of, for fear of ridicule. Some people simply do not know what to make of what has happened to them. Yet for many, the experience is the most important event in their lives, giving a meaning and direction which is never lost.

Some have contact with what they would interpret as angels or spirits or with loved ones who have died, while others experience an impersonal guiding power. Experiences may be sudden and short, lasting only a few minutes, others are more in the nature of a constant awareness of a spiritual power.

In the 21st century, many people prefer not to belong to any formal kind of religious institution at all, but this does not mean that most are atheists. Many in fact are not even agnostic, as various surveys and the recent national census have shown. They feel an awareness of the spiritual side of life, but often in a vague, unformulated way. Some disregard this side of life, and opt out of formal religion. Others search for years, perhaps exploring New Age movements or Eastern religions, sometimes ending up with a mixture of practices.

Materialist science explains away religion as a delusion, convinced that 'what you see is what you get' in life, that there is no more to humanity than meets the eye, or direct sense experience. For such thinkers, religions are not founded on any external reality, and are simply comforting notions to help people deal with human mortality and the inevitable

vicissitudes of life. Immortality and an eternal soul are firmly denied. By equating the mind with the brain conclusion is drawn that when the one dies, so does the other, bringing consciousness to an end. This denies the possibility of consciousness beyond the brain, or any kind of survival of death.

These views are increasingly being challenged by thinkers such as the biologist Rupert Sheldrake. In his *The Sense of Being Stared At and other Aspects of the Extended Mind* he suggests that consciousness does extend beyond the brain, actually far more in line with general experience and common sense, rather than in accordance with accepted scientific theory. Religious experiences also seem to counter a reductionist point of view, indicating at the very least a greater capacity than has been assumed hitherto, and possibly the existence and influence of something beyond, which also seems to continue after this life.

EXAMPLES

Books abound on the guidance which people have received in their lives. George Müller financed and ran an orphanage in Bristol without appealing directly for funds, simply relying on prayers to be answered through timely donations. His story is told in *George Müller and his Orphans*. The Reverend David Wilkerson became convinced that, although a country preacher with no experience of city life, he should go to New York and help boys involved in gangs, drugs and even murder. He did, and set up 'Teen Challenge' to help youngsters find God. He recounted his story in *The Cross and the Switchblade*. People who have come off drugs or alcohol with the help of religious programmes have written of their experiences of help, which seem beyond the norm. Many then change their lives completely, incorporating spiritual awareness.

Let us take a look at some examples of experiences, which ordinary people have interpreted as 'religious'.

Although one cannot make them happen, it does sometimes seem as if such experiences come as an answer to a passionately posed plea.

'Alone in my room, feeling extremely desperate about the seeming foolishness of life, I asked, out loud, that 'If there was a God, could He help?' I was immediately overwhelmed by the feeling of a Presence/Light/Love, all around; it seemed everywhere, I really can't explain. It appeared to last for a minute or two, although I can't be sure. I lost all sense of time. I was left with an indescribable feeling of peace and joy.

This moment completely changed my life. Everything, suddenly seemed to make sense.

Now, in middle age, I still look back to those few moments as the most real and important in my life. I am firmly convinced in the reality of God (called by whatever name) and the power of prayer. I have an inner certainty that life, even under the most tragic circumstances, is good. Even more so now than in childhood, I feel a great love for the world and everyone in it.⁴

In the above account a challenge is offered to the divine to make 'himself' known, and the answer comes in a life-transforming instant. Often religious experiences last only for a brief moment, but for most experients the effects are never lost.

A religious experience may take the form of encountering a light, seeing a vision or hearing a voice:

One night when I was saying my prayers I suddenly felt a great light all around me and I seemed to be walking or rather floating up between rows of figures towards something of

intense brightness, and a voice said, 'Go your way in peace and your ways shall be shown unto you.'

But the light was like nothing on Earth, it was all around and uplifted me with an indescribable feeling.

Since that day I have not worried about any decision I may have had to make, as I know that the way that has opened for me has been the right one and always will be.⁵

Some people are convinced that they are in touch with a higher power:

'Since the age of about 6 I have had an awareness of a higher power. At all times I am aware of this power, which is as real to me as any in the physical world. In this sense I live in two spheres of influence.

When I am tranquil, as in bed late at night, I place my problems before this higher power and am shown the way to solve them.

Apart from problems, I open my mind to this higher power and I obtain peace and happiness of a kind not normally associated with the physical world.

Foreshadowings of world and other events are sometimes given to me. These events are not necessarily personal to me, except incidentally. I do not search for prophecy, as it is usually best to live in the present and not burden oneself.

I avoid all trance conditions. I am not a spiritualist.

Through being as I am it seems to me that I am protected in life. One cannot satisfactorily state one's experiences, especially in a letter. Firstly they are too varied. Secondly, language is inadequate for this.

Originally a Catholic, since 12 I have belonged to no organized religion whatsoever. I belong to no group.

I should add that I am a very practical person. I now operate holiday accommodation.⁶

Here a constant awareness is described, and a relationship with this power is a very real part of the experient's life. As is often the case, organized religion has no part in this.

However, many people do tell of visions of a loving, comforting figure, which they recognise as Jesus, Krishna or a Bodhisattva.

I was desperately ill. I had received my 'pre-op' shot, which had not taken very well, and I remember the long 'trundle' through the hospital corridors to the operating theatre. I remember also thinking that it was probably my last conscious living journey and I felt terribly frightened and alone.

At some moment in time during that 'journey' I became conscious of a person additional to the hospital staff walking quietly beside me. I recognized Him at once – like an old, familiar, trusted friend, and I tried to say to Him, 'My Lord, you need not have come yourself, one of your angels would have been good enough for me' He did not speak, but somehow I knew that all was well and I felt no more fear or pain. I had a long uphill road to complete recovery (seventeen years ago) but I never doubted that I would 'make it'. I shall also never again fear to walk in the valley of the shadow of death because I know I shall not walk alone.⁷

Visions of Mary are also frequently reported, notably the appearance in France to Marie Bernarde (Bernadette) Soubirous in the 19th century, which led to the founding of Lourdes, and between 1981 and 1993 in Medjugorge, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Many people are convinced that their prayers are answered in ways that indicate that their petition has been heard by God or by the deity to whom they addressed the request.

Some people feel an awareness of God or the divine in the beauty of art, music or nature:

Just occasionally when I was sure no-one could see me, I became so overcome with the glory of the natural scene that for a moment or two I fell on my knees in prayer – not prayer asking for anything, but thanking God, who felt very real to me, for the glories of his kingdom and for allowing me to feel them. It was always by a running waterside that I did this, perhaps in front of a great foam of Meadow Sweet or a mass of Purple Loosestrife.⁸

Often these experiences are not written down until long afterwards. Sir Alister Hardy was 88 years old before he noted down the above, which he had never told anyone before.

For some an awareness of God comes through their own active involvement in singing or dancing. This may or may not be experienced within a religious setting. Singing hymns or chanting mantras can be a religious experience, as can listening to sacred or secular music. Great art can be moving and in expressing oneself through art, creating something, an awareness of one's own creator may be felt, or the oneness with creation itself.

Sometimes a dream may have a message so apposite that it seems to indicate some kind of communication from beyond. Widows have dreamed of their dead husbands, even to the extent of being told exactly where to look for particular papers. In so far as this is a comforting indication of survival, it may be seen as spiritual.

However such an experience is manifest, it will usually entail a belief of having been in the presence of a higher power.

TERMINOLOGY

A range of vocabulary has evolved, referring to religious experience. Many people who have had extraordinary experiences wish to refer to them as 'spiritual' rather than 'religious', as the former term is more open. For them, their experience leads to a wider, more all-encompassing view of a spiritual aspect of reality, which remains unrelated to any particular religious tradition. However, for some people the opposite is the case and their experience is seen as conforming to, or even as confirming, the beliefs or practices of a particular religious tradition and here the term 'religious experience' is more appropriate.

Rhea White, an American parapsychologist coined the term 'Exceptional Human Experience' (EHE) to denote these experiences. Inspired by her own Near Death Experience, she studied parapsychology to learn more, and subsequently founded the Exceptional Human Experience Network to study all kinds of anomalous experiences.

Other designations for these out of the ordinary experiences also tend to avoid making a necessary link with religion. 'Peak-Experience' is a term preferred by Abraham Maslow for its secular connotation. He defined these experiences as indicating a sense of expansion of the self with an understanding of ultimate unity of all things, and suggested that there was no need for a religious context or interpretation. He believed that all humanity could and should be encouraged to cultivate such experiences as they can be therapeutic, leading to personal growth and fulfilment.

In his research in the USA, Andrew Greeley coined the term 'limit experience' to indicate that these experiences point 'towards a limit or horizon of life' while hinting that there may be something beyond this horizon. In Australia Dr. Paul McQuillan availed himself of the

term to interview high school students for research, thereby avoiding specifically religious language. In this way he was able to elicit the response of the youngsters to the spiritual without limiting their thinking to formal religion.⁹

Marghanita Laski wrote of 'ecstasy' when describing the sensation of being outside time and in contact with the transcendent spirit in *Ecstasy in Secular and Religious Experiences*. She looked at the different ways in which people react to these experiences, either by clinging to them and attempting to live by them or by simply dismissing them. She also examined the similarities and differences between alcohol and drug induced experiences and naturally occurring ecstasy.

'Cosmic consciousness' is another term which has been used for an awareness of humanity's place in the great scheme of things. Coined by R.M. Bucke in his treatise *Cosmic Consciousness*, the term was used to describe a final level of development in consciousness, within a progression from the instinctual level to self-consciousness and ultimately to cosmic consciousness.

For some, their experiences are out of the ordinary, suggestive of a heightened level of awareness and linked to art, music or nature rather than being specifically spiritual. At times one may seem to be unaware of oneself, time or place, totally absorbed in creativity, whether in an active or passive role. Some interpret this as spirituality itself.

A more specific experience is an 'Out of the Body Experience' (OBE) which occurs when people feel themselves to be separate from their own body, watching from the outside, usually from above. Such experiences are often part of the 'Near-Death Experience' (NDE) which usually happen when the experient is clinically dead but has a coherent experience of a continuation of existence before being revived. A near-death experience can occur during an accident, cardiac arrest or in times of massive stress. These experiences seem to show a continuation of consciousness after clinical death and to give an indication of a life hereafter.

Such experiences are sometimes thought of as paranormal rather than spiritual and then are interpreted as being different from day-to-day reality in a way which may be explained in the future. Psychical research concentrates on experiences as evidence of the paranormal, looking at verification rather than considering the effects on the lives of the experients. The term 'supernormal' has been used to stress that these experiences indicate a level above the ordinary.

Another kind of supernormal experience is the spontaneous awareness of the presence of a deceased loved-one. Research by Emma Heathcote-James suggests that such 'After-Death Communications'¹⁰ are surprisingly common and often lead the experients to a sense of conviction that 'all is well' with the person they have lost and that death has not been the end. Sceptics may dismiss such experiences as merely 'the hallucinations of widowhood' but those who have them almost always insist that they are authentic encounters which have far more to do with 'reality' than 'illusion'. These spontaneous cases are more evidentially impressive than when the after-death communication comes through a medium at a spiritualist séance. The problem with the latter cases is that it would seem intrinsically more likely that any authentic information about the deceased acquired by the medium was gained telepathically from the grieving sitter rather than from the deceased. However in the spontaneous cases people who sense the presence of their departed with them may be led by such experiences to a more spiritual or religious outlook as a result of what they believe to be a real encounter.

It might be helpful to think of a continuum of experiences, a range of different types of awareness of something beyond, a transcendent reality or of the divine within. These may range from a momentary peak experience or EHE (exceptional human experience), which gives rise to a sense of awe, right across the spectrum of different levels of awareness of the transcendent, to what is often considered the highest form of religious experience, the 'mystical experience'.

Mystical experience is usually described as a state of achieving unity with the divine and is found within most religious traditions. Mysticism has given rise to many wondrous texts and accounts of the profound experience of ultimate reality. Mystics are often set apart from the mainstream of the tradition with which they are associated, as their focus is not on doctrine, ritual or text but on the direct perception of the absolute. Yet most mystics emerge from within the firm grounding of a religious tradition, often as monks or nuns. Mystical experiences may come after much religious and spiritual practice, but they cannot be induced to order. There are mystical movements in most religions: in Islam there are the Sufis and in Judaism the Kabbalists and Hasidim, to take just two examples.

Apart from the specific cases of mysticism, OBEs (out of body experiences) and NDEs (near-death experiences), I shall simply use the term 'Religious Experience' as encompassing all the general experiences of a spiritual and religious nature considered in this paper.

WHO HAS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES?

These experiences may well be assumed to be rare. Indeed those of the great teachers and founders of religions were perhaps the most rare and powerful. But if we look at religious experience as a whole, and think in contemporary terms, the question of who has such experiences leads to a rather less exotic yet no less surprising answer. Between a third and half of the population of the UK today have had what they would describe as a religious experience of one kind or another. Although many people do not talk about these things for fear of being thought odd, in most cases the experience remains clear and meaningful for them. Indeed the religious experience is often the most important event in their lives.

In a recent paper given by Professor Paul Badham, director of the Religious Experience Research Centre, he summed up the results of recent research as follows,

A variety of surveys over the past thirty years showed that between 31% and 49% of British people claimed to have had direct personal awareness of 'a power or presence different from every day life'¹¹. Interestingly however some of the most recent surveys claim much higher figures. For example in 2001 Dr. David Hay found that as many as 76% of the population in Britain now claim an awareness of a transcendent reality.¹² Such a figure is astonishing given the continual decline in institutional Church attendance and erosion of belief in key Christian doctrines. Perhaps however the reason the figures have gone up so much in recent years is that perhaps people now feel freer to claim spiritual experiences without feeling that to do so would identify them with a particular belief system which they no longer hold.¹³

When Alister Hardy began his research, and posed his question in the religious press, there was a disappointingly small response. However, he subsequently repeated his request in the secular press for experiences of a power beyond the everyday, which yielded a great number of replies from a wide range of age groups. Thus he began his research into religious experience. The answers to his appeal for accounts, along with previously collected articles of a religious or spiritual nature, formed his material. Hardy regarded humans as spiritual

animals and religious experience as 'part of the *natural world*'.¹⁴ He found that many quite ordinary, normally unreligious people had had extraordinary experiences of this greater power, which they felt compelled to interpret as religious. He also found that many were not church-goers before or after their experiences, but had nonetheless been transformed. His aim was to build up data in a scientific manner, in order to formulate a natural history of the human experience of the spiritual.

There is much contemporary interest in religion as a powerful force, whether for good or ill in society, and although most commentaries deal with essential similarities or differences in doctrine, much work is being done on religious experience itself. There is a growing interest in the experiences within different religious traditions, as the experiential aspect of religion is where the traditions seem to converge in an awareness and response to the divine or absolute.

An overview of the study of religious experience is to be found in *Religious Experience Today* by David Hay¹⁵. He gives a comprehensive account of research into religious experience from the early years up to his own work in Nottingham and that undertaken in America. He also tells the story of Sir Alister Hardy, and the setting up the Religious Experience Research Unit in Manchester College, Oxford in 1969.

What comes out of the research is evidence that the phenomenon is widespread, found among people of all types, and not at all limited to those of low education who might be suspected of succumbing to a simple credulity or escapism, as Freud had conjectured. In fact Hay's research found the opposite to be the case, with more reports found among the more highly educated. Among his own post-graduate students, Hay found as many as sixty-five out of a hundred students questioned reported some kind of religious experience. Within the population in general, he found between a third and one half feel that they have had a meaningful religious experience.

Another comprehensive account of research into the occurrence and interpretation of different types of religious experience is to be found in Professor Michael Argyle's Occasional Paper (#8) *The Psychological Perspective on Religious Experience*, where he reports on various surveys in UK, USA and Australia, as well as considering various types, triggers and results of religious experience.

Olga Pupynin and Simon Brodbeck took a random sample of people in London, simply by accosting them on the street and found that about 65% answered in the affirmative to the question "Have you ever had an experience that you would describe as sacred, religious, spiritual, ecstatic, paranormal or mystical?"¹⁶

Studies have been done investigating people's religious experiences, all showing that from a third to half of the population have had some such experience which has profoundly affected their lives. Many have been left with an awareness of something deep within themselves, and yet greater and beyond the individual. The resulting search for understanding sometimes leads them to explore their own religion, or other traditions, or to look into spirituality as a whole. That this is happening nowadays is attested by the vast amount of alternative spirituality on offer these days. A glance at magazines such as *Resurgence* and the *Positive News* paper indicates the range of courses, workshops and groups all over the country, while bookshops have popular, expanding 'Mind, Body and Spirit' sections.

The so-called New Age spiritualities involve experiences of different kinds, such as meditation, chanting, dancing and channelling. Those who favour this kind of spirituality over formal church worship do so precisely because of the lack of that experiential aspect in some of the mainstream religions. They find there an appeal to the historical foundations of a tradition, without the immediacy given by direct experience. Charismatic worship is increasing, in all probability precisely because it brings religion alive for its followers in an uplifting and lively experience of the spirit.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN CHILDHOOD

Research shows that children often have a natural spiritual response which, it appears, due to lack of encouragement withers as they grow up, often leading to denial of the spiritual impulse or dismissal of this side of their nature as childish. However, perhaps triggered by a wonderful sunset, great music or even a tragedy, this awareness of a greater reality may return to the adult. Many of the experiences recorded in the archives of the RERC took place in childhood. Sometimes they were treasured from then on, but some people only remembered them years later, when in need of guidance or reassurance.

Here is an example of one such experience, that of an active member of the AHS, whose childhood experience affected his whole life. Typically, at the time he did not speak of what had happened, could not reconcile it with formal religion but remained convinced, in the face of all objections, that this was true reality.

It was a hot summer Sunday afternoon, I was lying on my back in a copse lost in reverie. I was not really thinking of anything, and then my mind went blank - suddenly I found myself surrounded, embraced, by a white light, which seemed to both come from within me and from without, a very bright light but quite unlike any ordinary physical light. I was filled by an overwhelming sense of Love, of warmth, peace and joy - a Love far, far greater than any human love could be - utterly accepting, giving, compassionate total Love. I seemed to sense a presence, but did not see anybody I had the feeling of being 'one' with everything, of total unity with all things, and 'knowing' everything - whatever I wanted to know, I 'knew', instantly and directly. And I had the sense of this being utter Reality, the real Real, far more 'real' and vivid than the ordinary every day 'reality' of the physical world.

I do not know how long this lasted, a minute? Back again in this world, I felt thunderstruck. What was that? What did it mean? I felt that it was of great importance and must have some tremendous meaning but what? What was I supposed to do? Why me? Was I being 'called' for anything? I remember at the time being puzzled that the experience did not seem to relate to the 'religion' I was being taught and in which I had been brought up: I saw none of the iconography of Christianity I remember asking myself. Was that God? - but surely not: 'God' wouldn't come to me, an insignificant small boy! But, whilst puzzling over this (and feeling intense chagrin that I was quite unable to remember anything of the wonderful 'knowledge' that I had then enjoyed) I was convinced, beyond all shadow of doubt, of the 'reality' of the experience, the Reality, the overwhelming Love, the 'Oneness' of all things - and this has lasted, despite all reasoning, later 'reductionism', and suggestions that this was just my 'imagination', or that I was 'dreaming', or 'hallucinating'. But, at the time, I could not 'ground' the experience, and I felt that I could not talk to anybody about it, so I locked it away, pondering over it - a very big, unexplained, question ...

Research into childhood spirituality has been done by Edward Robinson, whose *The Original Vision* studies childhood experiences taken from the correspondence of the RERC archive. Here the religious experiences of children are quoted and taken seriously and it is shown how early experiences can affect the rest of a person's life. David Hay and Rebecca Nye have

published research with children in *The Spirit of the Child*. Dr. Paul McQuillan has looked at the spirituality of high school students in Australia, finding 76% of his sample of students reporting what he termed a limit experience. His work is published in Occasional Paper, *Encounters Beyond the Pond: The Limit Experience of Senior High School Students*. Dr. Eleanor Nesbitt also looked at religious experiences in childhood in her Occasional Paper *Children's Experience of Religion: Issues arising from Ethnographic Study of 8-13 year olds' Perspectives* (#22) where she interviewed children from Hindu, Christian and Sikh backgrounds about their perception of religion, and their experiences.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Throughout history there have been accounts of religious experiences. Religion is so entrenched in human nature that anthropologists have yet to discover a civilisation or culture with no trace of religion. From the earliest times of the Vedas and nature worship, humans have expressed an instinct that they are part of something greater. They have felt influenced by powers which they have sought to appease by rituals and religious practice. At times people have felt a particular contact with a divine power, which they have worshipped, and by which they have felt guided. These experiences may be collected under different headings for further study.

Some experiences are quite specific and obviously reflect the religious background of the experient. Others, however, are much more open. In fact

It is perhaps significant that only 22% spontaneously use the word 'God' to refer to the 'other power' they believe they have encountered.¹⁷

What people are more likely to claim is that what they experience was 'ineffable', 'unknowable' or 'indescribable.'¹⁸

A wide-ranging collection of different religious experiences taken from the RERC archives is to be found in *Seeing the Invisible, Modern Religious and Other Transcendent Experiences* edited by Meg Maxwell and Verena Tschudin.

WORSHIP

The power of the divine moves many believers to worship, to acknowledge the greatness of that transcendent power. Different celebrations, ceremonies, services and festivals are held all over the world in a great variety of holy sites, temples, churches and other sacred buildings. Worshippers may bow or prostrate themselves, offer gifts, burn incense and candles, form processions and worship with music, chanting or in complete silence.

Some forms of worship may involve song and dance, but a more constant feature is recitation or reading of holy texts. Special clothing may be worn by those leading the proceedings, and occasionally by other participants. Religious festivals often celebrate particular spiritual events, which are then absorbed into the general calendar. Christmas is not only observed by devout Christians but has become an annual celebration for almost everyone in UK today. Nations of many faiths, such as Singapore, enjoy year round festivals as one tradition succeeds another. At times, especially on days of national importance, such as Remembrance Sunday in London, leaders of different faiths join in worship to reflect different approaches to the divine in mutual respect.

Many events of worship mark specific stages in life or involve religious commitment. These are outward forms of worship which may involve the whole community. Such ceremonies often repeat a major event in the life of the founder of the tradition, such as baptism for Christians, which re-enacts the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. These events can be of deep significance to the experient.

In Hindu terminology such worship is referred to as *bhakti*, or devotion. The many gods and goddesses of Hinduism are seen as manifestations of the divine and these are often represented in brightly coloured statues or pictures. Special ceremonies of *pujah* and rituals are performed around these in temples or in the home, and offerings of food and flowers are made. Lamps are lit and incense burned as the worshippers recite, chant or sing, and bells are rung as all the senses are involved in a complete experience of devotion.

Buddhism, not usually associated with *bhakti*, does, in the Pure Land Buddhism of Japan, become a religion of worship and of salvation through calling on the name of Amida Buddha to attain an end to the ceaseless round of rebirth, and in the Pure Land attain Nirvana.

In the West we are aware of Christian worship of many different kinds, from the impressive rituals of high church services in the great cathedrals to informal expressions of joy in so-called 'happy clappy' celebrations. Hymns accompanied by thundering organs may be sung, or lively songs of worship to the strumming of a guitar. Some services have no music, and Quakers worship in silent waiting-on-the-spirit.

All over the world people worship in their different ways, celebrating their relationship to the divine in everything from noisy, colourful clanging to total imageless silence. It is often at such times that people have religious experiences as they are touched by another dimension.

Places of worship have widespread appeal, and churches and temples worldwide are popular tourist attractions.

PRAYER, CONTEMPLATION and MEDITATION

Prayer may be formal, regular or an ongoing, informal communication. Some prayer is specific, involving gratitude, penitence or petition, while for some people prayer takes place in silence, and listening to God is as important as speaking. Just how far God might intervene in the day-to-day affairs of people remains a matter for debate, as does the question of just how right it might be to pray for selfish ends. A more considered approach might be to think of prayer as a communication with the divine, with prayer considered as the inner response of the person praying to the situation or person in question. In prayer, people are able to focus their full attention at a deep level on a particular deity, or God, or the absolute, however this is conceived. This changes the perspective, and the result of prayer may be comfort, guidance and strength to face problems. As Teresa of Avila said,

Christ has no body now on earth but yours;
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours;
Yours are the eyes through which is to look out
Christ's compassion to the world;
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless men now.¹⁹

Many people do feel that their prayers have been answered, in ways that reflect divine intervention.

I suffer from endogenous depression which occasionally is so acute as to make me suicidally inclined. One of these attacks occurred in 1964 when I was in New Zealand. Being a Londoner and a newcomer, with very few friends in Wellington, I wrote for help to the vicar of my former parish in England. The feeling of despair left me suddenly some days later. When his reply arrived, I learned that as soon as he received my letter he had gone into his church to pray for me, and he mentioned the date and the time. Calculations, allowance for the time difference and so on, showed that this was the moment of my release. I am quite convinced that the prayers of this good man were in some way instrumental in bringing the power of God to bear on my desperate situation. ... The Christian faith is important to me and were it not for the support and comfort I derive from it I should probably have put my head in the gas oven long ago!

RERC Archive, M, 36 yrs (000642)

Experiments have been undertaken to establish whether prayers for healing are effective. The results reported in various medical journals seem to indicate that prayer is indeed effective. These experiments have focused on AIDS patients, and on patients undergoing operations with and without prayer.

There are rituals involved in prayer, with different religions having different practices. It is quite usual for people to kneel or prostrate themselves as a sign of humility. Some religions require regular, formal prayer, and many faiths have prayer beads to aid concentration. Buddhists turn prayer wheels to disseminate the prayers across the world. However, most religious people also practise more informal prayer through which individual concerns may be addressed.

Prayer and meditation can be quite different, the former a more active, thinking activity, the latter a form of inner silence, removed from thought. In the prayer of deep inner silence and listening, the active mind is stilled. Contemplatives and meditators too are able to quieten their minds to shut out the everyday world and in that inner silence they may touch a greater reality. This is simple, but not easy and may take years of perseverance before results are felt. Then a break-through to a more profound awareness may be experienced. A Catholic nun might say she had communed with the Holy Spirit or been with Jesus. A Tibetan Buddhist like the Dalai Lama would say that he had stilled his mind and achieved calm abiding. Here is a description given by a Sikh,

I can't really explain the feeling; I have no words to express the feeling that one has, or I have, when I sit down to meditate. But I do know that there are occasions when my mind wanders and I feel that at the end of my devotional period, I have sat and meditated and that I've achieved nothing. But there are other occasions when my mind gets in tune with something beyond, and you have a feeling of peace inside, and you can sit in devotion for hours on end, and you are completely oblivious of your surroundings and everything; and what you see or hear is something I can't describe, but it is a unique feeling; and at the end of the period you have that innermost satisfaction of having been ... of having achieved something. But how to describe that, I don't know.²⁰

There are various techniques of meditation, such as being aware of the breath, contemplating an object or pattern such as a mandala, or being guided into a visionary reality. Some people meditate on texts, or repeat mantras to absorb the inner meaning. These are ways into the inmost heart or soul, sometimes named as the 'Christ within' or Buddha nature'. The well-known Vietnamese Buddhist monk and Nobel Prize nominee, Thich Nhat Hanh writes,

Buddhists and Christians know that nirvana or the Kingdom of God is within their hearts. Buddhist sutras speak of Buddha nature as the seed of enlightenment that is already in everyone's consciousness. The Gospels speak of the Kingdom of God as a mustard seed planted in the soil of consciousness. The practices of prayer and meditation help us touch the most valuable seeds within us, and they put us in touch with the ground of our being.²¹

Buddhist meditation techniques bring about altered states of consciousness which can be measured, and also effects which are unusual. Here is an example, taken from the RERC archive by Andrew Burns, and involves a man from an Anglican background, but a Buddhist from the age of 21.

The experience occurred when he was about 40 years old. Interestingly in an accompanying letter to Sir Alister he says,

"The following is NOT of a 'religious experience', but given for what it is worth, if anything ..."

The writer goes on to say that he was in a forest temple in North East Thailand studying meditation under a bhikku (a monk) who happened to be English by birth. After 5 days practice he says, "something was on the brink of happening." A short while later he describes what happened, "My mind became very still and very clear indeed ... my centre of consciousness was centralised not in my head, but just below neck level. I did not know at the time but Thai Buddhists say the CITTEE – which seems to correspond to the seat of consciousness – is near the heart. The impression reaching my centre of consciousness was completely objective as though I was an observer, but I knew I was still in charge of all normal voluntary action. There was no sense of Divine unity, or Divine anything, or unison with nature etc.

I was elated at my achievement, in particular because it seemed to me that by slight effort of will I could send my centre of consciousness out from my body without apparently affecting its function. After several minutes I decided to voluntarily return from this state –which seemed to be receding – and returned to a normal state."

He concludes by saying that he discussed this experience with his teacher-monk who said that, "it was a recognised state of good insight. And although the writer continued to practise meditation for several more weeks at this monastery, he says that he did not achieve, "this extraordinary state ever again."

Mystics are those who sink so deeply and completely into prayer that they lose the separate sense of self entirely in unity with the divine. Teresa of Avila (1515-82 CE) writes of different types of prayer, such as recollective prayer, in which God, and only God, is sought, but nothing else asked for. Within contemplative prayer, which she sees as ultimately mystical, as it can only be initiated by God, Teresa includes Prayer of Quiet, in which thought is stilled. This leads on to the Prayer of Union, ecstatic prayer or rapture when the individual is no longer aware of individuality, but is caught up into a spiritual union with the divine. This is described in *The Interior Castle*, where the soul is likened to a castle with different mansions or rooms, of different levels of prayer, leading up to union with God in the seventh mansion.

CONVERSION

Conversion may refer to the decisive change from unbelief to belief, from one religious tradition to another, or a more vague recognition of the right path in life. A change of state of mind is involved, often from confusion or discontent to clarity and happiness. This is often related to religion, and frequently includes feelings of awakened love for others and a new direction in life. The first major study of conversion took place right at the outset of the study of religious experience, by Edwin Starbuck in *The Psychology of Religion*, published in 1899, in which he examined the adolescent phenomenon of conversion, within and outside the context of formal religion.

Here is an example of a clear-cut conversion from one tradition to another,

For a Jewish teenager at Rugby School, this encounter was unexpected. Hugh Montefiore later became Bishop of Birmingham.

'At the age of sixteen, sitting in my study one afternoon, and indulging in adolescent muse, I saw clearly a figure in white (although the figure was and is still clear in my memory, I would doubt if it would have shown up in a photograph). Although I had never even read the New Testament, or attended a Christian service of worship, I knew immediately that the figure was Jesus, and I heard the words "Follow me". And that is what I have (not all that successfully) tried to do. Many explanations of such visions of Jesus have been attempted (Wiebe, 1997), but so far as I am concerned, it was an incursion of the Transcendent into my life. (I am told on good authority that sixty percent of all Messianic Jews in Israel were never evangelised, but, like me, had a vision or something similar.)

My conversion was as simple and momentous as that. But it never occurred to me that by doing so I was negating my previous religious practice. That was as much an authentic part of myself as my Christian experience, and so it has remained. In the morning I was a Jew, and by the evening I was a Christian; not just a Christian but a Jewish Christian.'²²

Sometimes, however hard someone has been searching for the truth, recognition comes with reluctance. A well-known description of conversion is given by C.S. Lewis at the end of his autobiographical *Surprised by Joy*, which makes it clear that many a convert is half-hearted or even unwilling to acknowledge the change of heart and mind, which eventually becomes unavoidable.

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.²³

Another well-known reluctant convert is Francis Thompson, whose poem *The Hound of Heaven* begins:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; ...²⁴

For some, there is a relief in the ending of a barren period of loss of belief, such as took hold of the Sufi mystic al-Ghazali. Despite being a distinguished academic and well-known teacher,

he had caught the disease of scepticism. 'The disease was baffling, and lasted almost two months, during which I was a sceptic in fact though not in theory nor in outward expression.' At length God cures him of the malady, he says. But what is important in this autobiographical narration is that al-Ghazali mentions, 'This did not come about by systematic demonstration or marshalled argument, but by a light which God most high cast into my breast.' And immediately after reporting his own personal religious experience, he reminds his readers that 'whoever thinks he has the understanding of things Divine rests upon strict proofs has in his thought narrowed down the wideness of God's mercy.'²⁵

For others, however, there is welcome relief at having found the path,

Until I was 21 I was in the 'I'm as good a Christian as any of that hypocritical mob' school of thought, until one evening the now Bishop of Woolwich, David Shepherd, came to the hospital

where I was training as a nurse. I went to hear him, hoping I'd hear some good cricket stories. But instead I heard for the first time (consciously at least) what it meant to be a Christian. I can remember going out in a daze to my own rooms saying to myself, 'If this is true something in my life has to change.' I was clueless as to what one did on the occasion of being 'converted', and there was no Billy Graham advisers and counsellors around, so I started to read a New Testament which I had. At about 1 a.m. I knew something had happened: no voices from heaven but this kind of deep-down certainty that what I had heard was true, and that there had already been a change in me. ... I now *am* a missionary. ... I only know that it's something that gives me tremendous joy and satisfaction. I know that nothing except a superhuman power could have got me out here, or having got me here could keep me here. (Female).²⁶

There are many evangelical services in which people are asked to come forward and profess faith, notably those great conventions held by Billy Graham, alluded to in the account above. Some Christian evangelical services feature the giving of testimony in which individuals recount the change wrought in them by conversion. This may well inspire others to follow suit.

Conversion is sometimes thought to occur more often during adolescence, a period of searching and unrest. Perhaps it is also a period of openness to the spiritual side of life. Often a life-long search is begun at this age, which may or may not lead to a settled acceptance of a particular tradition.

SOLITARY

William James concentrates on religion as the experiences of individuals when they are alone. His work looks at many different examples of such experiences, and the RERC archive too has many accounts of solitary experiences. For many, religion, or spirituality, is more easily experienced in solitude, as there is then an opening to what is beyond the everyday bustle of life, to silence and reflection and the silence beyond thought, and to a sense of the presence of something beyond,

My father used to take all the family for a walk on Sunday evenings. On one such walk, we wandered across a narrow path through a field of high, ripe corn. I lagged behind, and found myself alone. Suddenly, heaven blazed on me. I was enveloped in golden light. I was conscious of a presence, so kind, so loving, so bright, so consoling, so commanding, existing apart from me but so close. I heard no sound. But words fell into my mind quite clearly – 'Everything is all right. Everybody will be all right.'²⁷

As so many of the different types of religious experience recorded in the archive took place in solitude, perhaps this indicates that it is easier to 'see' and 'hear' beyond the barrage of sense impressions and the noise of everyday life when we are alone.

As far back as I can remember I have never had a sense of separation from the spiritual force I now chose to call God ... From the age of about 6 to 12 in places of quiet and desolation this feeling of 'oneness' often passed to a state of 'listening'. I mean by 'listening' that I was suddenly alerted to something that was going to happen. What followed was a feeling of tremendous exaltation in which time stood still.²⁸

COMMUNAL

For many, however, religious experiences take place within a communal setting, often in situations of worship, such as church services, where one feels part of a community united in worship. Sermons and readings from holy literature in any religious tradition encourage reflection and action, and thus religious experience. In some services, experiences are

encouraged or even induced. An uplifting atmosphere is created, with an openness to experience the transcendent, more right brain than left. There are people who are inspired through such an atmosphere, and who enjoy the sense of being part of a greater whole. Communal acts of worship and celebration all over the world encourage such bonding, often enhanced by music, particularly using the drum or the organ, or uplifting choral and orchestral music.

One way of leading people to another level of experience may be through gentle meditative, repetitive chants such as take place in services inspired by the French religious community at Taizé. This is a community led by monks, aimed at young people, and which is very popular and growing at a remarkable rate.

Something very interesting at Taizé is that this formula of calming repetition has been taken up in the liturgy, that is it is not only used in personal prayer, but also in prayer together or common prayer. Some young people who know almost nothing of mystery, are introduced to it here, and they begin to learn how to pray. (Olivier Clement).²⁹

This is what such liturgy can achieve, as recounted on line by Paul Ricoer,

What do I come looking for in Taizé? I would say to experience in some way what I believe most deeply, namely that what is generally called 'religion' has to do with goodness. ... goodness is deeper than the deepest evil. We have to liberate that certainty, give it a language. And the language given here in Taizé is not the language of philosophy, not even of theology, but the language of the liturgy. And for me, the liturgy is not simply action; it is a form of thought. There is a hidden, discrete theology in the liturgy that can be summed up in the idea that 'the law of prayer is the law of faith.'³⁰

Some religious events may be considered manipulative by those outside. The Pentecostal Church offers an example of strongly experiential worship which originated towards the end of the nineteenth century in the USA. The emphasis was on the speaking of tongues, reminiscent of the gifts of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Out of this movement came the *Toronto Blessing*. This began through the preaching of Randy Clark, in 1994 at the Toronto Airport Vineyard Church. Also known as Holy Laughter, the phenomenon can be traced back to the preaching of Rodney Howard-Browne, who inspired Randy Clark. During worship hysterical laughter, dancing and even roaring occur regularly and are attributed to the Holy Spirit. Not everyone would be comfortable with this kind of experience, and there have been accusations of coercion and fraud. As usual, judgement should be made over time, looking at what the long-term effects of the experience produce in terms of comfort, peace and selflessness.

Other forms of communal religious experience include the popular *Alpha Course* where people come together for a meal followed by teaching and discussion of the Christian faith. Many have found a meaningful path through such means, although detractors might find the atmosphere too coercive for comfort. However, lasting benefits and profound changes for the better are widely reported after attendance at such courses. A 21 year-old Indian lad living in Egypt writes,

After leaving school I was only interested in computer games and in living and enjoying my own life. That involved nightclubs, parties, and spending evenings in hotel bars. My parents were quite wealthy, so I didn't need to work.

I used to smoke through a water device more than three times a day. I was an addict. It is much stronger than cigarettes and it affects the mind.

... Niseem invited me to an Alpha course at his church ...

I started to make acquaintances and friends. There were about 30 on the course – mostly people my age. I started to look forward to Alpha each week.

Then an unusual thing happened. I lost my Indian passport and needed to order a new one from India – a process which usually takes a year. ... A couple of months into this process, my friends on Alpha asked if they could pray about it with me.

The day after we prayed I called the embassy on the off chance and asked them whether they had received anything from India. They said yes. Could I come and get a new passport? It was extraordinary.

... When I was asked for the Holy Spirit weekend, they laid hands on me and prayed for me. I was laughing at them inwardly because I thought they were doing something stupid. ... After they prayed and I went home, I thought nothing would change and that I would still keep going to the cafeterias and look at the pornography channels or I would tease girls.

... But when I got back from the Holy Spirit weekend, I started to feel that this wasn't right for the first time.

I resisted that and thought, 'No – I'm going to the café and go back to my old ways of drinking shisha (which is smoking the bubbles).' But on the way to the cafeteria, something in me made me turn my body 180 degrees and go back home.

I had never touched a Bible before. Someone at Alpha had given it to me as a present.

I spent a long time just reading and reading.

That evening I felt that God had blessed me through those prayers at the Alpha weekend. While I was reading through the Bible I prayed, 'Lord, I don't know what you are wanting of me, but I love you.' Through that I gave my life to Jesus. ...

Now my old habits are all gone. I haven't been back to the cafeteria since. ... My parents have seen a big change in me. Now they want to go to an Alpha course.³¹

VISIONS

Some people have experiences which are surrounded by a wondrous light, and indeed light is a common feature in many religious experiences.

On the first night I knelt to say my prayers, which I had now made a constant practice, I was aware of a glowing light which seemed to envelop me and which was accompanied by a sense of warmth all round me.³²

An interesting Occasional Paper on this subject has been written by Dr. Mark Fox, *Sharing the Light: An Analysis of RERC Archival Accounts Describing Shared Experiences of Unusual Light*, from which the following account is taken. Here a more specific message is reported,

My father had had a severe heart attack and I laid him down in bed, semiconscious. Then put out the light and let him sleep. Suddenly he turned his head and looked over to a corner of the room. There was a bright light shining, which, on looking at my father, was reflected in his eyes. 'I have seen the glory of God and I am not to die yet' he said. He lived and walked about for another year. I am 69 and can see that light in my memory as if it were yesterday. Never have I seen a light which could compare with it. RERC account 2031.³³

People may see visions of Jesus or saints, or holy men and their lives are changed forever.

What I am about to relate happened nearly thirty years ago, but the remembrance of it is still vividly clear to my mind.

I was busily occupied one morning in cooking the lunch and with no other thoughts in my mind, when suddenly there was a blinding flash of light and standing at my side was a white-

robed figure. I knew it was Christ when I saw the pierced hands and feet, but did not see his face. The amazing brightness all around me was indescribable and I was filled with such *overwhelming* joy that I cannot find words to express all I felt. It was something quite out of this world. I did not hear any voice but just had the conscious feeling that something very wonderful was happening to me. After a few moments the Vision and the Brightness left me, but not the joy. Friends remarked about the happiness in my face a fortnight after it happened. (Female, age 77.)³⁴

Others, particularly people experiencing an NDE, have visions of dead relatives.

[During a Near Death Experience] Gillian McKenzie ... encountered her grandfather, whom she had known and loved.

A voice at the end said, 'Gill, you know who I am,' and I thought, 'Heavens, this is God and he knows my name.' Then the voice chuckled and said, 'Gill, there is someone here you do know.' It was my grandfather, who'd died two years before. ...³⁵

In *Seeing Angels* Emma Heathcote-James has collected experiences from a great number of people who believe that they have seen and been helped by angels. Sometimes these people saw figures whom they recognised as angelic, often indeed with wings. Many of these mysterious figures gave much needed help and then simply vanished. Many people reported seeing angels at the side of patients, in particular at the point of death, as if the angel were coming to take the dying person away. In all cases, whether the patient died or not, great comfort was received through the angelic presence. Here is an unusual account from *Seeing Angels* in which the angel is seen by more than one person. The husband relates how he and his son were sitting at the bedside of his wife, who had just had an allergic reaction to the anaesthetic of a hysterectomy,

Suddenly, through my tears, I saw what I thought to be a figure, an angel, behind the bed rails – I ignored it, thinking it was [brought about by] exhaustion and anxiety. A few minutes later I looked to see my son staring at the same spot – he turned to me and asked if I too could see the angel behind the bed. That moment the staff nurse was passing the foot of the bed and I turned and asked her if she could see anything other than us in the cubicle – the nurse smiled and told us not to presume it meant the worst. She acted as if this was a normal occurrence. I turned back to my wife and watched the figure melt away. Literally from that moment on my wife regained consciousness.³⁶

What is also interesting here is the reaction of the nurse. She seemed to be unsurprised, yet also alluding to the commonly held view that often angelic presences herald death. In fact many examples in the book are of people's dying visions, often of those who have predeceased them. Sometimes these visions are invisible to others present. However, following is an example where the person recounting the vision is quite accustomed to seeing angels and therefore convinced that we are always in their presence. This is a vision where the figure seen was later explained.

There was one night in the hospice [when] a lady was struggling for breath, having lung cancer [...] must be one of the most frightening ways to die. As I sat with her, I felt a presence at the foot of her bed; slowly, a young girl of about seven years gradually emerged wearing a lovely pink frock. She gazed at the lady with such love; also, to the back of the bed, appeared two angels with huge wings (one was her guardian angel). They were waiting to guide her on her journey. The lady suddenly opened her eyes and as she saw the girl a calmness enveloped her. She then took her last breath. After such a long, hard struggle with her disease there was peace all around.

It transpired, unknown to me, that she had lost a daughter aged seven and never got over it. It seemed a great healing process had occurred in that moment. No one is alone, you are surrounded by angels and loved ones constantly.

VOICES

Another phenomenon is hearing voices, often of encouragement or comfort, voices sometimes unknown but occasionally recognised as those of loved ones who have died. In this example, the hearer expected those around her to have heard the voice too, but they did not,

About five years ago I went through a domestic crisis. I divorced my husband after much stress and soul searching. I prayed earnestly in church one Sunday evening during prayer time. To my amazement I received a direct answer to my question, quite definitely a voice which to me filled the church where I knelt – a voice “like a rushing mighty wind”. I looked up expecting everyone else to have heard and was surprised to find silence. The message I heard changed my life, and was to me a profound and deeply moving experience, one I can never forget and strengthened my faith, and saved my sanity. (Female, age 50.)³⁷

Some people are given instructions which appear with extraordinary compulsion in the mind. An example was recently sent to the archive. The lady, about 57 years old, had been through a time of great stress in her life, had planned to leave an ill husband whom she was nursing, for a much needed weekend of respite herself.

Unfortunately I had a nasty bilious attack – and up to this point an ‘unbeliever’, I thought it might help if I prayed to God to make me better to go ... the next day. Nothing happened for about twenty minutes, but [then] an amazing thing happened. I had what I can only describe as a message from God. I didn’t see the words or even hear them but these words were as if telexed into my brain – rather like an electric current or shock. These were the words, ‘The Spirit of Man, stay where you are!’ I was absolutely terrified when it happened because I knew the message came from outside. As it happened it rained the whole weekend, and I had the rest I badly needed.

Here the instruction was clear, and as it seemed to come from beyond her own consciousness, she felt compelled to obey. Although not the answer to prayer that she had hoped for, it was in the longer term the right decision.

Speaking in tongues is a phenomenon associated with the Pentecostal Church, named after the events recorded in the New Testament, in Corinthians, of the events of Pentecost in the days after the crucifixion of Jesus. The despondent disciples were dramatically altered. They heard the ‘rushing of a mighty wind’ and ‘tongues of fire’ descended on them, inspiring them and leaving them able to communicate through ‘speaking in tongues’, so that all heard them in their own language and were amazed at such a transformation.

About six years ago there occurred a series of events unique in my life. For a period of days – even weeks – I felt strangely ‘withdrawn’ from my surroundings, but at the same time elated and excited. One evening, while visiting friends (who later described my behaviour as ‘like one drugged’) I found myself uttering the following words: ‘Everything’s relative ... It’s all a matter of degree ... love without touching; don’t touch without loving.’ These words puzzled me at the time, and still do. It was as if I was repeating without understanding something that was being said to me. M. RERC account 711.³⁸

PILGRIMAGE

Most religions have special sacred places where particular events took place, or revered holy people lived, and visits to these have always formed part of people’s response. Hindus go to holy sites to worship and often to bathe in sacred waters. Christians undertake journeys to the Holy Land, and Jerusalem in particular. Hundreds of pilgrims walk on the annual pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, where St. James, who evangelised Spain, lies buried.

Perhaps the best example today is that of the Muslim *Hajj* to Mecca, a journey which is one of the five pillars, or requirements, of Islam. The *Hajj* must be undertaken in the last month of the Islamic calendar and includes rites of purification, visits to specific holy sites, and circumambulation of the Kaaba. Muslims from all over the world converge on Mecca and join in the special rituals together.

The following essay was written in Rabi-ul-Awwal, 1413 (September, 1992) by a 16-year old, and won the North American Contest for writing about the beautiful experience of al-Hajj (the Pilgrimage).

I can't believe I'm actually here! Even though people had described it to me and had told me what to expect, it is all completely different from what I had imagined. I have never seen so many people - so many Muslims - before in my life. I was at the Haram today and because of the overwhelming crowd, I somehow found myself in the center of a tornado of people and was almost suffocated. But it didn't matter as long as I was near the Kaaba, where nothing could possibly hurt me. I don't even feel the intense heat there. I even got the chance to touch the Kaaba! It is all so amazing! I can't be the first person to think that Hajj is the best experience of my life. ...

I have spent the majority of my 17 years living in the Western world, in a society of mostly non-Muslims who are quite ignorant about my religion. This is the reason that those few weeks that I spent performing Hajj seemed like I had stepped into another world. The entire pilgrimage was characterized by an aura of reverence that was alien to me. ...

My suggestion to anyone who would like to go to Hajj is one should always expect the worst, for many things can go wrong. Hajj is not just a tour of the Holy Lands, but a spiritual journey. It requires one to be physically and mentally prepared. Only then can the soul grow with experience.

Here, the understanding of the spiritual nature of the journey as well as the physical voyage, is reinforced by the writer.

HEALING

In the West we are becoming more aware of the link between mind and body, something long appreciated in the East. We are moving towards a holistic view of human beings, enabling healing of mind and body to take place in harmony. This view of humans as spiritual beings underlies much of what is known as spiritual healing. To the astonishment of many scientists, there seem to be indications that people like Dr. Deepak Chopra are correct in saying that there are healing forces in nature, which science is only just beginning to understand.

In their essential state, our bodies are composed of energy and information, not solid matter. This energy and information is an outcropping of infinite fields of energy and information spanning the universe. ... The mind and the body are inseparably one. ... Medicine is just beginning to use the mind-body connection for healing – defeating pain is a good example. By giving a placebo, or dummy, drug, 30 percent of patients will experience the same pain relief as if a real painkiller had been administered. ... Using simple mind-body exercises, almost any patient can learn in a few sessions to convert a racing heartbeat, asthmatic wheezing, or free-floating anxiety into a more normal response.³⁹

Our understanding of stress related illnesses and psychological blockages which can lead to illness, has enabled cures through addressing the underlying causes, and treatment through therapeutic counselling is readily accepted today.

Some people are able to heal through what feels like energy in their hands, with no need of medication. They stress that they themselves are not responsible for this healing, but that they are merely serving as a conduit for a higher power. Some healers work with the National Health Service, some through churches and special healing services, while others are quite independent, and would not express any particular beliefs. Both healer and healed say that they feel the power or flow of energy, quite different from ordinary treatment:

... I was working as a woman doctor in a remote mission hospital in West Africa at the time. For a variety of reasons, one other MO and I were temporarily the only doctors in a 160 bed hospital with a large outpatient department.

The other doctor suddenly became acutely ill and had to be off duty for 10 days.

It looked an impossible situation but had to be faced. I prayed that I might somehow be made adequate. The thought came at once that, as it was manifestly impossible to examine the patients in the wards as one would normally do, at least I could touch each one with an unspoken prayer for healing. This I did, unobtrusively, in the guise of feeling the pulse, made a snap diagnosis of the new patients and ordered treatments.

In the Outpatients department one of the sisters saw the old patients; I saw numerous new cases and dealt with emergency surgery. In this way we got through those 10 days without, as far as I was concerned, undue fatigue but with a real sense of peace.

That alone was remarkable, but what impressed me most was the extraordinary number of rapid and rather inexplicable recoveries that took place during those 10 days. It was so noticeable that the staff remarked upon it though no-one knew what was in my mind at the time. I had not myself expected it, rather the reverse, in view of the lack of normal medical procedures.

The experience was pin-pointed months after when one of the African nurses at the end of the morning round, asked me to go back and see one of my patients who was crying. When we asked her what was the matter, she said that she knew she would not get better because I had not 'touched' her. She said that people in her town who had recently been in the hospital had returned home 'cured' saying that it was because I 'touched' them.

This I know can be explained away easily, but there remains the fact that in normal examinations, such as I had already performed on the patient in question, I had certainly touched a good deal. I think I always had a basic prayerful longing for each patient's recovery, but in the crisis described above there was obviously something else at work.⁴⁰

The influence of saints may be associated with healing:

... Five years ago I suffered an accident to my right leg and it was broken in many places. ... I was told by the consultant that he did not know how I would eventually walk. However, I have the personality that conquers most things and I eventually started to walk again.

However, since that time I always suffered pain in my leg, usually about three o'clock in the afternoon until the end of the day, and I thought that it would be something that I would have to grit my teeth and bear.

Three years ago I was on holiday in France and I was with four friends. It was in the afternoon and we had been walking a lot and I was longing to sit down and rest my painful leg. However, I walked into the cathedral at S and, as I was looking round at the statues of the saints, I suddenly felt an intense warm feeling in my leg, just like someone was filling my leg up with warm liquid. All I know is the feeling was so very strong. I looked up at the statue facing me and it was of Saint Teresa. So overwhelmed at that moment, I remember emptying all the francs in my handbag and lighting the biggest candle I could see. Tears were streaming down my face and it was days before I could tell my friends what had happened.

Ever since that day I have not had any pain in my leg. ...⁴¹

Healing is sometimes performed by shamans in a trance state, and there has been a resurgence of interest in shamanic practice in recent times although belief in spirit possession is no longer prevalent. Japanese religion is particularly noted for healing practices, and the use of amulets is common. Many Hindus and some Orthodox Christians also buy little models of arms, legs or whatever part of the body is ailing to aid in supplication for healing.

SENSE of the PRESENCE of GOD

Some people feel a sudden awareness of a divine presence, while others are aware of God, or however they name the powerful guiding force in their lives, as an on-going presence. They pray when they need to connect to this power, in gratitude or supplication and feel their lives to be guided. They just follow the way that seems to be given to them, keeping in almost constant touch with this spiritual presence.

For the following person, the sense of presence, of which he had been aware since childhood, had not at first been associated in his mind with what was called religion, such as the activities of formal nightly prayers,

Alongside the formal C. of E. there was a different one, natural and spontaneous, which I can only describe in terms of experience. ... I wasn't even aware that these experiences were religious at all. ...

I would simply be aware that I was having communion, conscious, intelligent, intelligible communion with the most authoritative and superior personal being that I knew. ... Though nothing was visible to the eye, to me the presence was *golden*, the atmosphere golden too, though in the ultra-violet range; the voice was audible – but not to the ear. The presence had an actuality beyond the senses – beyond imagination, too: imagination in comparison would be like plastic roses beside the finest real ones. Language lets me down disappointingly; I can only use words like 'quiet', 'unexcited bliss', 'admiration', 'loving kindness' and so on. ... The presence was as though all around me, and everywhere else as well. The responses, too, I could not have imagined. I could have imagined a sort of response, but the ones I actually received were beyond my (then) conscious ability. They were too warmly authoritative, and like cushioned rock in the conviction of security they instilled. ...

There's a feeling of real spiritual upliftment. ... I would be aware, of course, that these experiences were entirely different from any ordinary worldly human experience; but that difference didn't surprise me.⁴²

In his popular books *Conversations with God*, *Friendship with God* and ultimately *Communion with God*, Neale Donald Walsch builds on this sense of presence, interpreting it as God's communication with us. We just need to recognise the way the communication takes place, enter into a conversation, move on to friendship and then communion. In the last in the series, Walsch writes:

Each of us has the ability to access eternal wisdom. Indeed, I believe that God is inspiring all of us, all of the time. And while all of us have had this experience, some of us have chosen to call it something else:

- Serendipity.
- Coincidence.
- Luck.
- Accident.
- Freak experience.
- Chance encounter.
- Perhaps even Divine Intervention.

Most followers of any religion experience the reality of their beliefs in their practice and in their daily lives and in this sense, an ever present relationship with the divine, or God. Without this, the doctrines would be empty and have no lasting effect. But the on-going experience of worship, meditation or living a life in tune with the divine, however this is conceived, generally offers comfort and stability but, more importantly, it leads to a more selfless way of life. It may seem difficult to know what is divine guidance, and what self-interest, and this last factor of selflessness is perhaps the clue.

Followers of religions such as Jainism and Buddhism avoid killing any form of life. Many religious believers avoid all intoxicants and most religions enjoin giving alms and helping others. An example of a life lived in accordance with religious principles would be that of Mother Teresa who gave herself entirely to the poor of Calcutta or the Dalai Lama who travels the world teaching Buddhism and offering an example of a life lived in accordance with what he preaches. To some extent all religious practitioners in following their beliefs alter their lives and so have an on-going experience of their religion.

THE NUMINOUS

It was Rudolf Otto in his *The Idea of the Holy* (published in Germany as *Das Heilige* in 1917, translated into English in 1923) who coined the term 'numinous'. Taken from the Latin 'numen', Otto formed the word 'numinous' to express that which is beyond the everyday world, beyond the moral and rational aspects of holiness. He was referring to what he describes as the 'mysterium tremendum et fascinans' of the divine. For him this power was wholly other, and filled him with fear and awe, and yet drew him constantly to it.

He recognised the importance of the numinous at the heart of religion. For Otto this numinous preceded formal religion. It was for him *sui generis*, unlike anything else, and in his view could not be taught. People may be led towards it, and then it may arise, awakened within consciousness. It comes from the spirit and may be manifest in many different ways, even in wild and non-rational ways. It is the mystery beyond human understanding, which generates feelings of awe and fear, and it is eternally fascinating to humanity.

A friend persuaded me to go to Ely Cathedral to hear a performance of Bach's minor B Mass. I had heard the work, indeed I knew Bach's choral works pretty well ... The music thrilled me, until we got to the great Sanctus. I find this experience difficult to define. It was primarily a warning – I was frightened. I was trembling from head to foot and wanted to cry. Actually I think I did. I heard no 'voice' except the music; I saw nothing; but the warning was very definite. I was not able to interpret this experience satisfactorily until I read some months later Rudolph Otto's *Das Heilige*. Here I found it: the 'Numinous'. I was before the Judgement Seat. I was being weighed in the balance and found wanting.⁴³

NEGATIVE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

There are experiences which indicate evil as well as good. Spiritual leaders, often starting out as well-intentioned teachers, sometimes use the power which they accumulate to hold sway over their followers. While receiving good guidance from a spiritual teacher can be helpful, being in thrall to a guru can be dangerous, as disciples take too much on trust and cease to exercise their own judgment.

A case of such a mass following leading to tragedy took place in Guyana in 1978. Jim Jones, a charismatic leader originally a minister of the Disciples of Christ, founded a community named Jonestown in the South American jungle. Following the murder of investigators into the cult, Jim Jones and more than nine hundred of his followers committed suicide and murder, as they drank juice he had poisoned.

Marete Jakobsen, in her Occasional Paper *Negative Spiritual Experiences: Encounters with Evil* investigated the darker side of religious experience. She documents some terrifying experiences of evil, recounted by people even more reluctant to speak about their religious experiences than most, as they felt somehow responsible for attracting them.

Many of these awful experiences took place at night, in the state between waking and sleeping. Others seemed to be associated with specific locations, perhaps where some tragedy had taken place. Some people felt themselves possessed, others experienced being fought over by the forces of good and evil. Some saw horrific visions, others felt surrounded by evil spirits. There are some incidences of negative OBEs and NDEs, which have left people deeply afraid. During these negative experiences, terrified experiencers, believers or not, resorted to making the sign of the cross or reciting the Lord's Prayer to ward off the evil, practices which were always effective, if hard to perform.

Here is a typical example of this type of experience, that of a man in his twenties, taken from the RERC archive, recounted in Marete Jakobsen's paper.

A year and a half ago I was asleep in the night, and woke very suddenly and felt quite alert. I felt surrounded and threatened by the most terrifying and powerful presence of Evil. It seemed to be localised within the room. It seemed almost physical and in a curious way it 'crackled', though not audibly. It was also extremely 'black' and I felt overwhelmed with terror. I stayed rigid in my bed for several minutes, wondering how to combat this blackness. I felt it was a manifestation directed very personally at me, by a Power of Darkness. I was overwhelmed by despair and a desire to go out and kill myself by jumping in the Thames nearby, but I knew that I must withstand this.

[He gets a crucifix and commands it to go away. He is shaking with fear and calls a friend and leaves the building.]

I hasten to say that although I am a sensitive and sometimes emotional person I am usually sceptical about abstract phenomena! I have not told many people of these experiences because of their 'melodramatic' sides. I have been as objective as I can in describing them.

INITIATORY EXPERIENCES

For many people the religious experience is a wake-up call, beginning a lifetime of spiritual exploration and development.

One summer evening in 1924, a seventeen year-old boy was walking alone near the school playing fields. He had walked this way many times before; he had seen other beautiful evenings; he had often heard the birds singing with that full-throated ease which precedes the dying of the day. But this was different:

'I remember the shock of surprise with which the sound broke on my ears. It seemed to me that I had never heard the birds singing before and I wondered whether they sang like that all the year round and I had never noticed it. As I walked on I came upon some hawthorn trees in full bloom and again I thought I had never seen such a sight or experienced such sweetness before. If I had been brought suddenly among the trees of the Garden of Paradise and heard a choir of angels singing I could not have been more surprised. I came then to where the sun was

setting over the playing fields. A lark rose suddenly from the ground beside the tree where I was standing and poured out its song above my head, and then sank still singing to rest. Everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and I hardly dared to look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God.'

This experience was to be the catalyst that inspired the lifetime's search of Alan Griffiths, later to become Dom Bede Griffiths. He came to regard it as one of the decisive events of his life.⁴⁴

Alan went on to become a Benedictine monk at Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire and later, as Father Bede Griffiths, to found a Christian ashram in India, drawing people of many faiths and none. His spiritual journey continued all his life, recorded in numerous publications, including, *Return to the Centre* and *The Marriage of East and West*.

OUT OF THE BODY EXPERIENCES

Some people have experiences of being outside their bodies. This may happen in times of stress or critical illness or even near death. Although an Out of the Body Experience may engender disbelief in others, for the experient there is no doubt of the reality of the experience, nor of the importance of the message received. Richard John Neuhaus recounts his OBE, and his later reflection, tying the experience in with his own belief system, is also interesting.

... a couple of days after leaving intensive care something extraordinary happened, and readers may make of it what they will. ... I was sitting up in bed staring intently into the darkness, although, in fact, I knew that my body was lying flat. What I was staring at was a colour like blue and purple, and vaguely in the form of hanging drapery. By the drapery were two 'presences'. I saw them and yet did not see them, and I cannot explain that. But they were there and I knew that I was not tied to the bed. I was able and prepared to get up and go somewhere. And then the presences – one, or both of them, I do not know – spoke. This I heard clearly. Not in an ordinary way, for I cannot remember anything about the voice. But the message was beyond mistaking: 'Everything is ready now.'

That was it. 'Everything is ready now.' It was not in the form of a command, nor was it an invitation to do anything. They were just letting me know. Then they were gone and I was flat on my back with my mind racing wildly. Had I been dreaming? In no way. I was then and was now as lucid and wide awake as I had ever been in my life.

Tell me that I was dreaming and you might as well tell me that I was dreaming that I wrote the sentence before this one. ... I resolved at that moment that I would never, never let anything dissuade me from the reality of what had happened. Knowing myself, I expected I would later be inclined to doubt it. It was an experience as real, as powerfully confirmed by the senses, as anything I have ever known. That was some seven years ago. Since then I have not had a moment in which I was seriously tempted to think it did not happen. It happened – as surely, as simply, as undeniably as it happened that I tied my shoelaces this morning. I could as well deny the one as the other, and were I to deny either I would surely be mad.

'Everything is ready now.' I would be thinking about that incessantly during the months of convalescence. My theological mind would go to work on it. They were angels, of course. *Angelos* simply means 'messenger'. There were no white robes or anything of that sort. But there was a message; therefore they were messengers. Clearly the message was that I could go somewhere with them. Not that I must go or should go, but simply that they were ready if I was. Go where? To God, or so it seemed. It was obvious enough to me that I was not prepared for the beatific vision, for seeing God face to face. They were ready to get me ready. This comports with the doctrine of purgatory, that there is a process of purging and preparation to get us ready to meet God.⁴⁵

DEATH

At the heart of religion is the view of our earthly life as part of a larger scenario, as a finite period in the context of eternity. In most religions death is not regarded as the final closing of consciousness. On the contrary, spiritual consciousness is an awareness of a greater reality, of which we are part. Some religions have a pattern of reincarnation, some of an eternal hell or paradise awaiting the deceased. Most envisage some kind of post-death judgement, whether this leads to rebirth or continued existence in either a favourable, unfavourable or even tormented state. This affects the way religious persons live. An awareness of a moral order inherent in the universe, such as the laws of *karma*, or emanating from God, puts our lives into a moral context and so leads the religious believer to live a more moral life.

Exploration of ancient burial sites all over the world seem to confirm that ancient peoples regarded death as a transition to another life. The pyramids in Egypt are the most spectacular examples, as the pharaohs went to the next life with everything they could wish for, including servants. The Chinese burn 'hell money' in their temples for the deceased, to ensure riches in the next life, and frequently paper mansions, cars and all the necessary trappings of a comfortable existence as well.

Dying well, according to the guidance offered by special religious texts, was accepted practice. The Egyptians had their *Pert em hru*, the Tibetans their *Bardo Thödol* and Europeans their *Ars Moriendi*, all giving detailed advice on dying, much of which was also applicable to spiritual practice in life.

Shamanic initiation draws on a view of death as a transition to new life, and many rites in tribal religions imitate the pattern of dying and rebirth. There are myths in many religious traditions which reflect this pattern. The pattern of dying and rising was at the heart of the mystery religions of Greece and Rome, such as the Eleusinian Mysteries, with Persephone descending to the underworld for a third of each year. Death and resurrection are also the core of the Christian religion, as in the words of the Apostles' Creed, Christ

was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven.

Special practices and drug-induced experiences can give rise to insights into the pattern of living, dying and being reborn. Much shamanic practice is based on this pattern, with initiation involving experiences such as terrifying periods of isolation out in the wild, and trials such as lying in a coffin overnight, going to such extremes in order to be reborn into the community as a powerful mediator between this world and that of the spirit. Often psychedelic plants are part of shamanic ritual.

Experiences of hypnotic regression into past lives may indicate a connection across time. People do undergo hypnotic regression and find themselves to be other people in other times, yet they feel that this also is the same person as they are now. Many explain this in terms of reincarnation. Tibetan Buddhism chooses its Lamas through children recognising articles belonging to the people they reincarnate. These children are then removed from their families and given special spiritual training in order to fulfil the office they have inherited across time. It is thus that the present Dalai Lama was discovered, when a search party found its way to the house where he was the youngest child, then less than three years old. In his autobiography *Freedom in Exile*, he tells how,

The leader of the party, Kewtsang Rinpoche, then pretended to be a servant and spent much of the evening observing and playing with the youngest child in the house.

The child recognised him and called out 'Sera Lama, Sera Lama' Sera was Kewtsang Rinpoche's monastery. Next day they left – only to return a few days later as a formal deputation. This time they brought with them a number of things that had belonged to my predecessor, together with several similar items that did not. In every case the infant correctly identified those belonging to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama saying, 'It's mine. It's mine.' This more or less convinced the search party that they had found the new incarnation. ... it was not long before the boy from Takster was acknowledged to be the new Dalai Lama. I was that child.

NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

Some kind of survival of death seems to be indicated by the near-death experience. Modern resuscitation techniques have given many people the opportunity to 'return from the dead'. Accounts abound in the popular press and are investigated in television documentaries of people who have miraculously survived clinical death. Since Raymond Moody's bestselling *Life After Life*, published in 1975, brought such experiences to the world's attention, much research has been done. Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick have investigated over 300 near-death experiences in *The Truth in the Light*, Professor Paul Badham's excellent Occasional Paper (#13) *Religious and Near-Death Experience in Relation to Belief in a Future Life* gives an overview of NDEs from sources as varied as St. Paul, Tibetan Buddhism and A.J.Ayer and discusses what these experiences might mean. Dr. Mark Fox recently published *Religion, Spirituality and the Near-Death Experience* which examines the evidence, including cases taken from the Religious Experience Research Centre Archive and gives a considered appraisal of various responses, scientific and theological, to the NDE.

A typical near-death experience begins with an out of the body experience, viewing one's own body from above, seeing and hearing what is going on, but being unable to communicate. Realisation that one has died is followed by entry into a dark tunnel with a bright, welcoming light at the end. There the person seems to be met by a being of light and love, and often deceased relatives as well. As the person does not in fact die, it is often at this point that it is made clear that the time is not yet ripe, and a return to the body takes place, often against the person's will, and occasionally into pain. Some people however, go on to experience a life-review, where they themselves feel the suffering they have caused others, judging themselves and their behaviour. On their return to life on earth these people frequently live completely transformed lives. The experience leads them to greater compassion for their fellows and a more spiritual, less materialistic attitude, and many change to more caring professions.

Almost all report that they no longer have any fear of death. In the sample of NDEers in Dr. Peter Fenwick's *The Truth in the Light*, the most common change reported was the change in attitude to death, with 82% reporting no fear of death, for example,

H.N.Smith: 'During the whole of this experience I was not afraid and the feeling that remains with me is one of peace and certainty that there is no need to fear death.'

and

Pauline Hill: 'I have never really feared death since. It opens up marvellous possibilities! If this life were all we had, I should think it most illogical and rather a poor deal for many. As it is, my experience suggests there may be something much more meaningful hereafter. I hope so.'⁴⁶

These days as more people report NDEs and more is publicly known about such experiences, it is possible to study similarities in pattern and effects.

These experiences do seem to indicate some kind of continuation of consciousness after death, although there continues to be much debate with scientists such as Dr. Susan Blackmore who maintain that the near-death experience is no more than the 'cortical disinhibition and uncontrolled brain activity' caused by 'severe stress, extreme fear and cerebral anoxia'.

Some people become convinced of continuation:

I suppose this experience moulded something in my life. I was only a child when it happened, only ten, but now, my entire life through, I am thoroughly convinced that there is life after death, without a shadow of a doubt, and I am not afraid to die. I am not. Some people I have known are so afraid, so scared. I always smile to myself when I hear people doubt that there is an afterlife, or say, 'When you're dead, you're gone.' I think to myself, 'They really don't know.'⁴⁷

Others, like the well-known atheist philosopher A.J. Ayer, ultimately return to their position that death will be their end, even if they have been temporarily shaken out of this assumption:

His first response was to think that, 'on the face of it, these experiences are rather strong evidence that death does not put an end to consciousness'. However after rehearsing some of the philosophical problems associated with life after death, his conclusion was more modest: namely that 'my recent experiences have slightly weakened my conviction that my genuine death, which is due fairly soon, will be the end of me, though I continue to hope it will'.⁴⁸

However they are interpreted, these fascinating experiences are now far more often reported and, due to advances in resuscitation techniques, are on the increase, and so provide a valuable source of material for study.

POST-DEATH EXPERIENCES

Many people who have been bereaved find comfort after the death of their loved ones in experiences which seem to indicate communication from beyond the grave. Some have meaningful dreams, sometimes even in answer to questions. Others hear voices or see those who have died.

My wife Sally died of cancer... We had been married for 30 years... As Sally approached death, we agreed to try and tune in to each other afterwards at 10 every Sunday evening. This never succeeded.

Within hours of Sally's passing there began a display of psychic phenomena in the lights of our house and other places which continues to this day. This account is of something different and, to me, more precious: her interactions with me and a friend in the four months after her death, which have not come again, but which were very wonderful.

... In the mid-afternoon, enjoying a mountain walk through a large glade, my mind was almost forcibly drawn back to her, against my inclination. Focusing intently, I saw her lovely smile, with a flash of the high cheek-bones and long hair of our early married days, and sensed her cheerful and loving presence. Then she appeared in front of me as a fairy, small with fluttering wings. I didn't much like this image, as I preferred to think of her with more power. This fairy then nestled with great tenderness in my heart (the bottom left hand corner), with her smiling head to one side resting on folded hands.

There was a short pause, and then I had words given to me. I heard and saw nothing: it was like a date-stamp being imprinted on my brain, a kind of thought-transference. They were: *I will always be with you*. It took another short pause before the significance hit me. This is what

Sally had said to me at Easter-time, when we knew the battle for life was lost, and repeated once or twice before she died. I could not conceive how I had forgotten them, except perhaps that I had not found them a great comfort at the time. ... I felt that I had received a clear message that Sally was closer than I could have dreamt, and that she was lodged in my heart. I wept with joy as I walked, and was deeply comforted.⁴⁹

There have been instances of the deceased communicating through mediums and even materialising during special séances. A notable recent case is that of Montague Keen. A well-known researcher into the paranormal, he died suddenly while asking a question at the Royal Society of Arts. Since then, his widow, Veronica, has had communications from all over the world from mediums who did not know her husband, but who have messages from him for her. She has even heard his voice through a medium. This was recorded on tape and played on TV. They had promised each other that whoever passed on first would do their utmost to communicate with the other, and indeed Veronica is continuing Montague's work on survival with his continued help.

Emma Heathcote-James's *They Walk Among Us* is an investigation into survival and presents evidence from a variety of sources of different kinds of post-death communication, including materialisations. She also gives an overview of theories of survival and the work of the Society for Psychical Research.

TRIGGERS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

Sir Alister Hardy, in *The Spiritual Nature of Man*, has a comprehensive chapter on the different triggers of religious experience, from which some of the following examples are taken. Although, for many, religious experiences, especially communal ones, are triggered during religious services or worship, and some are a result of meditation or prayer, other experiences are triggered by glorious music,

I was aged about 22 and sitting all by myself in a room seldom used by the rest of the family as I wanted to play the gramophone. While I listened to the music I was doing a little peaceful sewing. At one point I had on the Brahms' First Symphony (of which I am not especially fond) and was in a state of complete relaxation. However, a chord sounded and at once I was removed from my normal life. My whole physical being was dissolved and I knew that I was, in reality, a spiritual creature who only had the semblance of a body. I was, quite obviously, the note of music. Not only that, but I was also the light that shone clear blue just to the left of my mental vision. Being thus totally non-physical scared me and at once I was reunited with my ordinary self and for some years preferred to forget the incident. (I did search for that chord, though, but never again found it.) (Female, age 50.)⁵⁰

or the beauty of nature,

As a child in the country, I wandered by myself sometimes but I was rather afraid when I became conscious of solitude and silence. I became increasingly aware of a Presence which I associated with nature around me. In my adolescence I gave it the name 'God', and aimed at being alone to commune with It.

Natural beauty and vastness has always aroused an attitude of worship in me, at times despite myself. The words of Psalm 8 have often been in my mind: 'When I consider the heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and stars which thou hast ordained, what is man that thou are mindful of him, and the son of man that thou visitest him?' This attitude persists and is enhanced by the discoveries of the astronauts. (Female, age 63)⁵¹

or absorption in creativity.

Sir William Rothenstein wrote in his recollections, *Men and Memories*, that one's very being seems to be absorbed into the fields, trees and walls one is striving to paint' and believed the

experience of painting out of doors gave him insight into the poetry of the great mystics, European and Eastern. 'At rare moments while painting,' he says, 'I have felt myself caught, as it were, in a kind of cosmic rhythm; but such experiences are usually all too brief.' Ben Nicholson is, perhaps, saying the same thing more laconically when he is quoted in a monograph on his work as remarking, 'As I see it, painting and religious experience are the same thing.'⁵²

Yet many come at times of desperation or stress, as Sir Alister says:

The number of people who have come to find a greater spiritual awareness through states of depression, forms indeed a relatively large proportion. ...

At one time I reached utter despair and went and prayed God for mercy instinctively and without faith in reply. That night I stood with other patients in the grounds waiting to be let in to our ward. It was a very cold night with many stars. Suddenly someone stood beside me in a dusty brown robe and a voice said 'Mad or sane you are one of My sheep'. I never spoke to anyone of this but ever since it has been the pivot of my life. I realise that the form of the vision and the words I heard were the result of my education and cultural background but the voice though closer than my own heartbeat was entirely separate from me. (Female, age 54.)⁵³

Some experiences are triggered by happiness,

I am aware of a sort of 'consciousness' outside my own. I sense it ... when I am in a state of happiness and well-being, and I feel there is a 'presence' whose hand I should like to grasp in affection and gratitude. F, 54⁵⁴

If there is any common factor in such triggers, perhaps it is a shift of focus from the everyday world, away from more self-centred pursuits, leading to an openness to another dimension.

FRUITS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

For William James it was by the fruits of religious experience that their validity could be tested. He was less interested in what exactly had caused such an experience, but suggested that the effect was more important, fruits rather than roots. This may be a good way of distinguishing between true religious experiences and drug induced experiences, as the temporary effects of the latter are different from the change of attitude which is so often the result of a true religious experience.

I have a growing sense of reality, and personal identity, which comes from being united to something more powerful than myself, something that is helping me to be what I want to be.⁵⁵

Some people find guidance in life,

My work has not been of a kind that I would have chosen for myself or been remotely interested in without this experience of a call which I can only describe as a 'mental voice' from within me firmly telling me what I should do with my life.⁵⁶

Many people feel an increased awareness of their close connection with all things on earth after their experience, which in this case led to a change of profession,

I find it difficult to describe my experience, only to say that it seems outside of me and enormous and yet at the same time I am part of it, everything is. It is purely personal and helps me to live and love others. It is difficult to describe, but in some way because of this feeling I feel united to all people, to all living things. Of recent years the feeling has become so strong that I am now training to become a social worker because I find that I must help people: in some way I feel their unhappiness as my own.⁵⁷

The comforting sense of a presence helping one through life is expressed, entailing a response,

I have always felt myself sustained in my darkest hours by a loving and understanding power ... That abiding presence of a Father and a Friend has, thank God, become an increasing reality to me as the years have passed by, but it necessitates an effort at continued loyalty, such as any friend demands.⁵⁸

Perhaps the most dramatic changes today are in those people who have had NDEs.

Sarah McAdam: 'Since this experience sixteen years ago I have always felt 'different'. I always want to help people. I cannot stand all the evil, war and fighting going on as it is so opposite to the place we all go and to what I now feel inside.'⁵⁹

MYSTICISM

Mysticism is generally understood to be a direct awareness of ultimate reality, whether this is conceived of as a personal, as God or Allah, or impersonal being, as Brahman, or as the more abstract Buddhist state of Nirvana. Much mysticism is the result of prolonged spiritual practice, and originates within a specific religious tradition. However, the experiences seem to move on to transcend the limitations of religion itself, as all things become one, and the sense of the individual self is absorbed into the absolute. By leaving behind specific dogmas and beliefs, many mystics find themselves outcasts within their own religious tradition. Although in general it would seem that much preparation would be necessary for such events, they cannot be forced or induced to order, however much spiritual practice is undertaken. Such extraordinary experiences do also occur completely unexpectedly to the spiritually untrained, including children.

In most of the major religious traditions there have been great mystics, who have described their extraordinary experiences. Accounts have been given by Plotinus (Greek, Neoplatonic, 205-270 CE), Meister Eckhart (German, Christian 1260-1327 CE), Julian of Norwich (English, Christian 1342-1420 CE), and Jalalud-din Rumi (Persian, Muslim 1207-73 CE) to name only a few. Ramakrishna (Indian, Hindu, 1836-86 CE) explored the experiences at the heart of various religious traditions and was convinced that this was the same for all religions.

The major religious traditions also have groups who practise mystical techniques, and special systems of practice have evolved. Hindus follow the path of *yoga*, using breathing techniques and postures and *mantras*, words with spiritual powers, to calm the mind. Buddhist meditation aims at calming the 'monkey mind' and realising the underlying emptiness of pure consciousness. The Tao is the 'Way' to understanding the oneness of everything and one of its aims is to lose the self in the state of '*wu wei*'. Within Judaism, there is the mystical system of the *Kabbala*. The Sufis are the mystics of Islam, who include well-known poets such as Rumi, and the famous Whirling Dervishes, who dance themselves into ecstasy.

Within Christianity, the Eastern Orthodox Church has maintained a more mystical approach, with the Jesus Prayer frequently used like a *mantra*. In the West however, the creedal form of Christianity of the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions developed, sometimes finding itself at odds with mysticism. Yet Christian mystics abound, and in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a 14th Century treatise, instructions are given on contemplative prayer and meditation, which amount to a technique of mysticism.⁵⁹

Here is the example of a mystic, profoundly affected by beauty.

One day as a child, Ramakrishna was crossing a paddy field holding a large bowl of rice; when some cranes flew across a black storm cloud, the sense of beauty was so overwhelming that he fainted, and the rice flew all over the place. Later in life, Ramakrishna became subject to moods of 'God-intoxication' – 'samadhi' – in which he was overwhelmed by ecstasy, and would lose consciousness.⁶⁰

Despite the claims by most mystics that their experiences are ineffable, they nonetheless produce lengthy accounts, and have given humanity some of its deepest and most beautiful writings. The Sufi mystics in particular are renowned for their exquisite poetry, as in this work by Baba Kuhl of Shiraz, translated by R.A. Nicholson,

THE VISION OF GOD IN EVERYTHING
In the market, in the cloister – only God I saw.
In the valley and on the mountain – only God I saw.
Him I have seen beside me oft in tribulation;
In favour and in fortune – only God I saw.
In prayer and fasting, in praise and contemplation,
In the religion of the Prophet – only God I saw.
Neither soul nor body, accident nor substance,
Qualities nor causes – only God I saw.
I oped my eyes and by the light of His face around me
In all the eye discovered – only God I saw.
Like a candle I was melting in His fire;
Amidst the flames outflanking – only God I saw.
Myself with mine own eyes I saw most clearly,
But when I looked with God's eyes – only God I saw.
I passed away into nothingness, I vanished,
And lo, I was the All-living – only God I saw.⁶¹

The French mathematician Blaise Pascal had a mystical experience which was of such importance to him, that after his death, an account of it was found sewn up in his doublet,

From about half past ten in the evening to
about half an hour after midnight.
Fire.
God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,
Not the God of philosophers and scholars.
Absolute Certainty: Beyond reason. Joy. Peace.
Forgetfulness of the world and everything but God.
The world has not known thee, but I have known thee.
Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears of joy!⁶²

Here we have the passion of raw mystical experience, shattering rational thought and normal composure. Pascal had spent years reasoning about God, but this experience broke through that. The experience can change the value put on theological and philosophical reasoning, putting them into a different perspective entirely, an indication that talking about the spiritual is vastly different from the actual living experience. Thomas Aquinas, author of the great theological treatise *Summa Theologica* did not complete his great work because, after a mystical experience, he felt his learning to be of no more value than straw.

Many mystics, such as the Muslim Ibn Arabi, express an essential unity beyond religious tradition,

My heart has become capable of every form:
It is a pasture for the gazelles
And a monastery for Christian monks,
And a temple for idols,
And the pilgrim's Ka'ba,
And the tablets of the Torah,
And the Book of the Koran.
I follow the religion of Love:
Whatever way love's camel takes,
That is my religion, my faith.

Whether the result of meditative or other religious practice or simply occurring spontaneously, these experiences usually have a profound and lasting effect on the lives and attitudes of the experiencers.

INTERPRETATION OF MYSTICISM

In his Gifford Lectures of 1901-1902, published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James proposed four criteria for the recognition of mystical experience: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity. Thus James believed that the mystical experience defies expression, being more like a state of feeling than a state of intellect, an experience which only those who have had it can fully comprehend. For him, mystical states are also states of knowledge, "states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect." But the experiences are transient, and passive, in that experiencers have a sense of being grasped by a superior power.

As "the fountain-head of Christian mysticism", James cites Dionysius the Areopagite, a Syrian monk writing in the sixth century under the pseudonym of St. Paul's convert, mentioned in the New Testament. Dionysius describes the absolute truth by the use of negatives, because it so infinitely excels all qualifications,

The cause of all things is neither soul nor intellect; nor has it imagination, opinion, or reason, or intelligence; nor is it spoken or thought. ... It is neither essence, nor eternity, nor time. ... not unity; not divinity or goodness; nor even spirit as we know it.⁶³

This is an instance of the apophatic approach to the absolute, that nothing one can posit of the absolute can be accurate, we can only say what it is not.

Ten years after William James, Evelyn Underhill published her *'Mysticism'*. She feels that James' "four marks ... will fail to satisfy us".⁶⁴ First, she sees mysticism as active and practical, involving the whole self and not just the intellect. Secondly, it is not concerned with this universe but has wholly transcendental and spiritual aims, so that although not neglecting his duties, the mystic's "heart is always set on the changeless One". Thirdly, this One, for the mystic, is more than mere Reality, it is "a living and personal Object of Love." Finally, it is a living union with this One which is the aim of the spiritual process of what she refers to as the Mystic Way, the transformation of the mystic's consciousness leading to the Unitive State. She summarises the mystic's path as a gradual process of a growing relationship with the Absolute, although admitting that sudden overwhelming visions are possible.

Rudolf Otto discusses similarities and differences within mysticism in *Mysticism East and West. A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism*. In that work he compares Sankara and Meister Eckhart. Otto contends that there are similarities in the inner spiritual life which are unaffected by differences of race or location or historical period, yet variations can occur

even within the same culture. He addresses the two main types of mystical experience, the inward way of retreat into one's own soul, "The Way of Introspection", and the outward way of reaching unity through multiplicity, "The Way of Unifying Vision". It is Otto's assertion that the two ways converge within both eastern and western mysticism as the experiences of Sankara and Eckhart show. Otto also shows how these mystics transcend the concept of the ultimate as expressed in their respective traditions.

The similarity of the mystical experience as the most immediate, profound experience of ultimate reality, and its taking place across religious traditions and also outside formal religion, has led to the view that all such experiences are of the same ultimate truth although differently interpreted. This was the opinion expressed by Aldous Huxley in *The Perennial Philosophy* and is held by scholars such as W.T. Stace, whose views are expressed in *Mysticism and Philosophy*. Holding opposing views are other scholars, such as Steven T. Katz, who maintain that all experiences are mediated and that one only has experiences within one's own frame of reference.⁶⁵

Some types of mystical experience take place outside religion altogether, sometimes involving various stimulants or even psychedelic drugs. In *The Doors of Perception* Aldous Huxley maintained that his experiences with mescaline were akin to those of the mystics. He looked at a vase of flowers,

The Beatific Vision, *Sat Chit Ananda*, Being-Awareness-Bliss – for the first time I understood, not at a verbal level, not by inchoate hints or at a distance, but precisely and completely what those prodigious syllables referred to.

Others would take issue with this, and R.C. Zaehner wrote *Mysticism Sacred and Profane, An Enquiry into some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience* to refute Huxley's thesis. Zaehner also experimented with mescaline and felt the whole experience to be of quite a different order from that of the mystics.

INTERPRETATION OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Many books have been written on the interpretation of religious and spiritual experience, such as *Interpreting Religious Experience* by Peter Donovan. He considers different types of religious experiences, the way in which they are interpreted and just what can be proved by them.

Religious experiences come in many guises and are capable of a great variety of interpretations. They range from specific visions of figures associated with a major religious tradition to unspecific intimations of the divine or an impersonal ultimate reality. Although in many cases experiences are in line with the religious tradition of the experient, it is by no means the case that only the expected is experienced. There are many instances of the unexpected, one of the most interesting being that of the atheist philosopher A.J. Ayer. He had assumed that his death would bring cessation of consciousness, but was surprised by having a near-death experience which, temporarily at least, made him wonder if death would indeed be an end of him. Others who would expect a Christian figure in a near-death experience have been unable to confirm any such interpretation of the Being of Light. Many of those who have had such experiences in fact leave their former religion and abandon any specific practice. It is usually in subsequent interpretation of experiences that reference is made to the experient's tradition.

A great deal is being written on the study of consciousness. Neuroscientists in particular are studying the brain, not just in isolation but incorporating a study of the mind. This is a fairly recent phenomenon in the West, where study of the brain has long been established, but that of the mind has been a separate field, the province of psychology. In a sense, Buddhists have been in the field of consciousness studies for two and a half millennia, but have been less interested in the workings of the brain. Nowadays the Dalai Lama joins scientists in looking at the two fields together. Science has begun to investigate the effect on the brain of meditation. At the Mind Life Institute in the USA, EEG brain scanning has been used to track changes during meditation and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology the Dalai Lama has met with psychologists and neuroscientists to look at meditation and what it tells us about the limits of the individual's control over the mind. Religious experiences, especially of meditation and prayer, however they are interpreted, are incidences of an expanded awareness beyond the norm, and thus have an important place in such studies.

For many scientists these experiences are illusory, and over-interpreted according to our own religious expectations. If that is the case, then perhaps we simply need to realise that our understanding of the capabilities of the human mind has been unduly limited in the past, and that we need a new frame of reference to include not only these so-called religious experiences but also telepathy, hypnosis and similar phenomena.

Many who have religious experiences do, however, interpret them as such, viewing them as indications of a reality beyond the everyday world of the senses, an indication of a higher reality, and perhaps as messages from there. Are such experiences in fact proof of such a spiritual realm of influence, of what we might call God?

John Hick divides religious experience into Public and Private, and, by definition, private aspects of an experience cannot be verified by others. Here, what Richard Swinburne has written on just what religious experience might prove, is helpful,

'Principle of Testimony', that one should believe a person unless we have good reason not to ...
and
'Principle of Credulity', that what one perceives to be the case 'X' is probably the case unless:
The subject 'S' was unreliable,
If similar perceptions are shown to be false
If there is strong evidence that X did not exist
If X can be accounted for in other ways⁶⁶

This leads to an acceptance of most of the accounts of religious experience as genuine events.

Whatever further meaning others may ascribe to them, these experiences alone can probably not be taken as reliable indications of divine intervention. However, as part of a cumulative argument, they seem to lend authority to previously held religious convictions and also seem to confirm what is contained in the writings of the world's great faiths. An excellent account of the arguments is to be found in Caroline Franks Davies' *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*.

For those who do treat them as revelatory and meaningful, such experiences are of deep significance and very often lead to a complete change in attitude to life and death. Frequently the fear of death is lost, and there is a far more intense appreciation of life. Often these experiences completely change people's lives as their erstwhile values are reappraised, leading to a greater love of others.

Although I had what is called a nervous breakdown, I knew also that it was a breakdown in human relationships. Not being able to go to church, I continued in prayer at home and gradually all the things I had learned in Sunday school and church became clearer in meaning.

As I prayed, I realized I was being made to think, and that thought made me change personally – from being a self-conscious and uncertain person to one of peace and certainty. Becoming sensitive to the needs of others and less sensitive in myself, and not taking offence easily. I still marvel at the change which took place within me, and the gracious way in which it was carried out.⁶⁷

SIR ALISTER HARDY AND THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE RESEARCH CENTRE

It was in 1969 that Sir Alister Hardy set up the Religious Experience Research Unit in Manchester College, Oxford.

Who was Sir Alister Hardy?

Alister Hardy was born in 1896, at a time when science and religion were at war after the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. In his youth, when due to join up for WWI, he made a vow, that if he were to survive, he would work for the reconciliation of the spiritual nature of human beings with the theory of evolution. Advised by his father-in-law, he pursued a career in mainstream science in order to gain respect, before launching into his spiritual pursuits. He went on the Discovery Oceanographic Expedition of 1925-7 and became well-known in his field, holding Chairs at the University of Hull, Aberdeen and eventually becoming Professor of Zoology at Oxford University.

Hardy expounded his own spiritual vision in the 1963 Gifford Lectures, the first series published as *The Living Stream* and the second as *The Divine Flame*.

He explains how he had always thought of man as a spiritual animal and had found no difficulty in reconciling Darwin's theories on evolution with a spiritual outlook on life. He describes his first attempts to collect data from the religious press, which yielded meagre results, and the subsequent success in the secular press, when over a thousand accounts of religious experiences of various kinds were received. These were recorded and classified into 92 different provisional categories, which he sets out in *The Spiritual Nature of Man*.⁶⁸ Studies were then undertaken using the data.

Today the renamed Religious Experience Research Centre is located in The University of Wales, Lampeter. The archive now holds over 6,000 accounts of spiritual experiences, which have been computerised for easy access to researchers. The Alister Hardy Society, which supports the work of the RERC, has well over 400 members and holds an annual Open Day in Oxford, as well as an annual conference. Groups in different parts of the UK hold meetings throughout the year to listen to speakers and to discuss spiritual experiences and their implications in various fields.

CONCLUSION

Religious experiences, however they are interpreted, cannot simply be ignored. They are too widespread to be disregarded as the delusions of a few feeble-minded individuals. Their effects are too transformative for them to be dismissed as irrelevant. Through these experiences, a spiritual or 'higher' realm seems to enter human consciousness.

This may simply be an enlargement of our 'normal' waking consciousness, in which case we need a new, more inclusive paradigm. The experiences may indicate another ever-present, unseen dimension of reality, which is touched inadvertently, or is attained as a result of spiritual practice. This might lead to a change in our understanding of the place of human life in the context of the eternal. It might also mean a reappraisal of the messages at the heart of religions. Looking from this perspective, religions may all be seen as ways to access this level of being, however they formulate the path.

If religious experiences are indeed intimations of a greater reality, a spiritual dimension, which is reflected in the religious traditions of the world, then they are some of the most important events in human history.

NOTES

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RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING:

The history and study of religious experience:

Argyle, Michael *The Psychological Perspective on Religious Experience* (1997) Occasional Paper 8, RERC, Lampeter.

James, William *The Varieties of Religious Experience, A Study in Human Nature*. (2002) Special Centenary Edition, Routledge, London, NY and Canada.

The Gifford Lectures given by William James at the University of Edinburgh in 1901 and 1902. This is the classic text which introduced religious experience into the study of psychology. James looks at different experiential aspects of religion in general, including conversion, saintliness and mysticism. His criteria of ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity for defining an experience as mystical are still in use.

Hardy, Alister *The Divine Flame* (1978) RERU, Oxford.

The second set of Gifford Lectures given by Sir Alister Hardy in 1965 in which he considers religious experience from various points of view, such as anthropology, psychology and psychical research.

Hardy, Alister *The Spiritual Nature of Man, A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience* (1997) RERU, Oxford.

A consideration of religious experiences of many different types, their triggers and consequences and their interpretation.

Hay, David *Religious Experience Today* (1990) Mobray, London.

This is a wide-ranging study of Religious Experience and research into the subject. Examples of different types of religious experience are included, and Hay looks into the implications on education, organised religion and society in general. An account of the life and research of Sir Alister Hardy and the author's own involvement in research and the results are given.

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