

**SEVENTY-FOUR CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCES:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF EXPERIENCES  
FROM FOUR DIFFERENT TRADITIONS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In our investigation of religious experiences, one interesting set of questions is, 'Do Christians of different kinds - Catholic, "Middle-of-the-Road", Evangelical or Charismatic, have different kinds of religious experiences, or have them in different circumstances? Do some of them tend, more than others, to see visions of the Virgin, or of Jesus, have "conversion" experiences or find themselves in mystical or strange sensory states?'

As early as 1902, William James, in his monumental study, reported on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, while later of course Sir Alister Hardy and others recorded the experiences of large numbers of people, both believers and those of no settled faith.

Professor Lawrence Brown, a former Director of the Religious Experience Research Centre, and Professor Michael Argyle, then a Trustee, suggested that I might carry out a study to examine and compare the experiences of current members of a wide variety of Christian churches, and three members of the Alister Hardy Society were approached who kindly agreed to help with a pilot.

### **METHOD**

I decided to use as my technique the un-timed, unstructured interview, supplemented if necessary by questions designed only to clarify and elucidate. As a former personal counsellor, I was aware of the necessity of being warm, non-judgemental and empathetically (and in this context silently) encouraging. I asked my volunteers to tell me about any 'relatively short, intense spiritual experience' they might have had, the attendant circumstances and any possible 'triggers', and what had been the final effects or outcomes.

Some, older people especially, are a little uncomfortable with audio-taping, but I felt that it was crucial that I should capture everything they said. Fortunately I found, like Bobbie McKay (1999), that I could 'write like crazy' and yet, I hope, still appear interested and exhibit a minimum of observer bias. In so doing I departed from the technique of subject-written reports used in the 6,000 cases collected by the Research Centre, because I felt that such reports do not give as much 'flavour' or convey the emotion which becomes apparent as participants relive their experiences.

I also rejected the questionnaire technique, feeling that it was too rigidly structured for such sensitive and often detailed material.

To provide some quantitative data it was proposed to ask participants to rate aspects of their experiences on a scale of 1 to 5. Hood's questionnaire (1975) (Research Form D: Mysticism Scale) (Argyle, 1997) based on an earlier one devised by Stace (1960) contained 21 finely tuned elements divided into 6 groups. However, from the responses to the pilot study it was decided to adopt a simpler range of 10 elements. I am grateful to Professor Michael Argyle for this suggestion. This range is set out in Table 1 below.

It will be seen that Table 1 includes three 'mystical' elements:

[1] loss of self, [2] unifying vision and [3] timelessness;

a '*communitas*' element: (Turner 1969)

[7] harmony, unity and love;

a 'noetic' element:

[4] new view of reality;

three 'subjective sensory' elements:

[5] peace and joy, [8] light and warmth and [9] beauty;

and finally (as might seem important in this context) two 'religious/transcendental' elements:

[6] awe and [10] religious figures.

**TABLE 1: Religious Experience Scales**

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Loss of self by being absorbed into something greater</li> <li>2. Aware of the unity of all things or oneness</li> <li>3. Time and space meaningless or void</li> <li>4. Deeper or new view of reality revealed</li> <li>5. Profound sense of peace and joy</li> <li>6. Contact with a greater force, spirit or person; a feeling of awe and reverence</li> <li>7. Feelings of harmony and unity with others, love for other people (<i>communitas</i>)</li> <li>8. Felt bathed in light and warmth</li> <li>9. Perception of incredible beauty</li> <li>10. Sense of the presence of religious figures</li> </ol>
<p>Each element to be rated from 1 to 5:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 = None or not at all</li> <li>2 = A little or low</li> <li>3 = Some, or medium</li> <li>4 = Quite a lot, or high</li> <li>5 = Very much, a great deal or very high</li> </ol>

In order not to influence the narrative in any way, the quantitative analysis was introduced only when the 'story' was finished. When subjects were asked to rate their experience(s) in respect of each of the ten elements this was usually done without hesitation and as I might have anticipated from their verbal descriptions. A few very elderly women needed a little

guidance and one was so exhausted after recalling a number of experiences in great detail that she was able to rate only one experience; realising that the experiences were very sacred in her eyes I thought it best not to press her further.

Immediately on leaving I made a note of how I felt each interview had gone, of any non-verbal communication that had occurred and of any particular emotional content, my aim being to see the experiences as the subjects saw them themselves.

It was, in fact, not very easy to find an appropriate number of suitable subjects in the chosen categories of Charismatic, Evangelical, 'Middle-of-the-Road' and Catholic (Roman or Anglo-Catholic). Eventually, in the time available, I found 44 subjects. Some were recommended by local clergy (though I think some were worried that I might influence their flock!) and by friends. I also wrote a letter, which was very helpfully published in the Diocesan magazine *The Door*, and this produced 17 suitable offers. The 'Middle-of-the-Road' subjects mostly named themselves as such or as 'straightforward', 'wide' or 'broad' church, and included one Quaker and one Spiritualist. Four of the fifteen 'Charismatic' subjects said they were 'Evangelical' but worshipped in a distinctively Charismatic style. I felt that it was important not to interview people I knew, but travel distances were important because I had to visit 40 out of the 44 in their own homes. I interviewed 11 men and 33 women.

## QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Table 2 gives a general summary of the results.

**TABLE 2: General Summary of Results**

Church type	Charismatic	Evangelical	Middle-of-the-Road	Catholic
No. of subjects: Male	3	3	4	1
Female	12	5	9	7
Total	15	8	13	8
Mean age at interview	47	63	65	69
Mean age at experience(s)	30	43	46	47
Years since experience(s)	17	20	19	22
Age range at interview	21-86	39-80	47-92	53-78
Mean no. of experiences per subject	1.7	1.7	1.8	1.4
No. of experiences: in church or similar	10(38%)	2(21%)	7(30%)	1(9%)
with one or two others	9(35%)	5(36%)	3(13%)	6(55%)
alone	7(27%)	7(43%)	13(57%)	4(36%)

There appeared to be no obviously discernible differences between men and women as regards either the experiences or the ages at which these experiences had occurred. The Charismatics were younger than the others, but Charismatic churches are of fairly recent origin. The Charismatics had had a higher proportion of their experiences in the company of others rather than alone.

Table 3 is a histogram showing the median rating in each group for each of the ten 'elements'.

**TABLE 3: Group median ratings for each element of the experiences**

Ratings:		1	2	3	4	5
		None				Highest
<b>Elements</b>						
<b>Mystical</b>						
1 Absorption	Ch	%%%%%%%%%				
	Ev	))))))))))				
	Mi	////////////////				
	Ca	!!!!!!!!!!!!				
2 Unity	Ch					
	Ev					
	Mi	////////////////				
	Ca	!!!!!!!!!!!!				
3 Time/Space	Ch	%%%%%%%%%				
	Ev	))))))))))				
	Mi	////////////////				
	Ca	!!!!!!!!!!!!				
<b>Subjective</b>						
5 Peace and Joy	Ch	%%%%%%%%%				
	Ev	))))))))))				
	Mi	////////////////				
	Ca	!!!!!!!!!!!!				
8 Light/ Warmth	Ch	%%%%%%%%%				
	Ev	))))))))))				
	Mi	////////////////				
	Ca	!!!!!!!!!!!!				
9 Beauty	Ch	%%%%%%%%%				
	Ev	))))))))))				
	Mi	////////////////				
	Ca	!!!!!!!!!!!!				



[5] Peace and Joy. Peace was mentioned more often than joy, although one woman felt intense joy. Another woman, 'middle-of-the-road', who 'shone' as she related her 'transforming experience', rated both [5] and [6] (Contact) at 10+.

[7] Feelings of harmony and unity, and love for other people. An evangelical subject reported feelings of 'concern' for others rather than 'love'. Another 'felt loved' (receiving rather than giving) and 'felt such happiness she could go round hugging people.' 'I felt love as my view of my father changed.' Conversely: 'I felt harmony and unity but not love.'

It seems therefore that there are two aspects to [7], though they are not unrelated. Several commented that it was not easy to separate out their feelings at the time rather than later on.

[8] Light and Warmth also produced comments such as 'The light accompanied me.' 'Warm but shaking like a leaf.' and 'I felt the church was lit up luminously.' Two subjects, by contrast, felt 'cold and shivery' or 'chilly'.

From Table 3 it will be seen that the situation is confused, apparently more by shared variation between the intensities reported, on average, between the individual elements than by variations between groups. If we ask the question, therefore, 'Do the four groups appear to show differences in their reported experiences (in terms of the ten elements)?' it would seem from Table 3 that they do not, except for an apparent tendency of the Anglo-Catholics to report the highest intensities for all the elements except [9] (Perception of incredible beauty) and [10] (Sense of the presence of religious figures), for which most of their ratings were lower than in the other groups. The mystical elements were in general given low scores, especially [2] (Unity), and not surprisingly these Christian subjects gave high scores to the two Religious/Transcendental elements and to [4] (Reality).

One must be careful, of course, not to ascribe too much statistical significance to 'results' observed from studies of this kind, because in any random collection of figures apparent 'effects' can usually be observed by the persistent observer. I thought it wiser, therefore, to apply formal statistical analysis only to the original question behind the study, namely, whether there was, for any of the ten elements, significant variation between church groups. On the advice of Dr. Pat Yudkin, therefore, I carried out a Kruskal-Wallis (1952) one-way analysis of variance by ranks. This was to ascertain whether the differences between the four groups (Charismatic, Evangelical, Middle-of-the-Road and Catholic) observed, for each element, when all 44 subjects were ranked according to the scores that they had reported for that element, were likely to have occurred by chance. Where a subject had reported more than one experience, the mean score for all those experiences was used.

The procedure calculates a statistic H, which, can be assumed to be distributed as chi-squared with 3 degrees of freedom (there being 4 groups). The probabilities (p) of the calculated values occurring by chance were mostly greater than 0.1 and therefore definitely not significant but in the case of elements [4] (A new view of reality) and [5] (Peace and Joy), p was calculated as 0.054 and 0.069 respectively, suggesting that real differences may exist.

When the test was performed using all the elements combined (i.e. using each subject's total score) p was calculated as 0.094. It must however be borne in mind that to obtain a few values of p of the order of 0.05-0.1, from a group of eleven tests, is hardly statistically significant.

#### **ANTECEDENTS OR "TRIGGERS"**

I asked participants what had led up to their experiences. A few gave their life histories; but all gave one or more possible antecedents. In Table 4 I have set out the frequencies with which these 'triggers' were reported by my church groups, together with a comparison with the results of other investigators. It should be borne in mind that, in these other studies, the triggers reported were numerous and somewhat differently expressed.

**TABLE 4: Antecedents or "triggers" of Religious Experiences**

Church type etc.	Charismatic	Evangelical	Middle-of-the-Road	Catholic	Total	Greeley 1975	Hardy 1979 3,000 subjects	Hay 1982 100 students
No. of subjects	15	8	13	8	44			
No. of experiences	26	14	23	11	74			
<b>Antecedent/trigger</b>								
Music, literature or creativity					None	100%	16%	10%
Beauty of nature			3		3 (4%)*	45%	12%	26%
Prayer or meditation	14	9	1	3	27 (36%)*	48%	14%	13%
Services or missions	8	3	4	2	17 (23%)*	81%	12%	12%
Alone in church					None	30%		
Depression or other emotion	2	4	3	3	12 (16%)*		18%	50% 'distressed'
Illness or death Of others	5	3	7	4	19 (26%)*		12%	incl.
Crises in personal Relations	6	3	5	4	18 (24%)*		4%	Incl.
Bible reading	1				1 (1%)*	31%		
Need for God or to be Re-born	4	1	3	1	9 (12%)*			
Silence and reflection						42%	1%	35%
Miscellaneous (Sex, exercise, childbirth etc.)						82%		
Drugs							2%	

\*of total experiences

I could observe no substantial differences between the results from each of my four groups, except that, in the charismatic and evangelical groups, 54% and 64% of subjects reported antecedent prayer (alone or with others), as compared with only 8% in the Middle-of-the-Road group and 3 out of 8 Catholics.

One obvious difference between the triggers reported by the Church members of this study and those in the other (and larger) studies is that none of the former were music, literature

or any other artistic experience and only three were natural beauty, although Greeley's, Hardy's and Hay's subjects reported aesthetic triggers in large percentages of their cases. It is not clear why Greeley's subjects appear never to have reported distress as a trigger, in marked contrast to Hardy's, Hay's and those in this study.

**EFFECTS OR CONSEQUENCES OF THE EXPERIENCES**

The changes reported were not easily categorised, but taken together they may be compared with those reported by Hardy and others. In Table 5, I have compared my results with those reported by Hardy (1979) from 3,000 subjects having a wide range of beliefs.

**Table 5: Effects and Consequences of Experiences (%)**

	Hardy 3,000	Charismatic	Evangelical	Middle-of- the-Road	Catholic	All 44
Purpose/meaning/change of religious belief	22	93	100	93	100	95
Attitude to others	8	27	62	23	25	31
Self-change (personality, happiness healing)	-	60	75	38	25	50

Hay (1982) found that 61 of his 100 students were 'at peace or restored, happy/elated or uplifted/awestruck' and 24% intensified their religious beliefs. Poloma (1989) concluded that ecstatic charismatic experiences led to increased religious activity and two other investigators reported greater commitment after experiences. Later Poloma and Pendleton (1991) found there was a strong positive correlation with subjective well-being; and several others had greatly improved attitudes to self and others.

As the experiences reported in this study had occurred some twenty years before, the fact their effects had persisted, without any apparent negation, for so long is very impressive. The effect on the eight Evangelicals seems to have been more substantial than was reported by the other subjects, particularly as regards self-change and attitude to others.

**THE QUALITATIVE ASPECTS OF THE REPORTS:  
SUMMARY OF MY IMPRESSIONS AND OBSERVABLE LINKS WITH TRIGGERS AND  
PERSISTING EFFECTS.**

**Charismatic Christians**

One subject, a middle-aged woman, had had an experience eleven years previously that was typical of the generality of experiences reported by both Charismatic and non-Charismatic subjects. In the process of striving for the right words and to explore her feelings she seemed to become transformed and somehow softened and she added, like so many others, that describing her experience had helped her to clarify her mind. She had had some personal difficulties and, being a churchgoer, was praying with the curate. 'The Holy Spirit came in an instant and I knew and understood everything. It was amazing. My life changed. I followed God and Jesus is now a real person. I felt tingly and in a trance. The feelings were from outside and not from myself. Poems came, and messages, not in my usual thinking



power. For me it was like an injection having power and it changed my whole life. And God enabled me to forgive my mother-in-law.' The experience was not 'out of the blue', it was aided by another, and it enabled her to forgive, which many find very difficult.

A young student talked non-stop. She was obviously very convinced, inspired and keen; she had been an alcoholic before her experience. This had been at a Christian holiday camp, and appeared to have been the archetypical 'conversion experience' of someone who had been a Christian but had then developed the 'real, personal relationship' mentioned by several Charismatics. Two more experiences followed, all the elements in which were rated highly, except (unsurprisingly) the mystical [1] and [2].

A woman of 79 had at the age of 17, when she was without parents, asked Jesus 'to relate to her meaningfully'. A long life of service to others had followed, both for her and for her husband. A married couple, whom I interviewed separately, mentioned the influence of the widely used and popular 'Alpha Course'. Their relationship had been rocky and they had even separated. He had a temper and she drank, but the wife's two experiences – 'The Holy Spirit visited me; I was tingling from my toes and I was terrified' - led the husband to pray 'for God to come into my life (not physically!)', so that now 'religion binds us despite different interests.'

Many Charismatics spoke rapidly. A middle-aged woman had had three very unusual, powerful and remarkable experiences, all with other people, 13 years before. On a Deliverer's course 'I felt delivered from those occult things in Old Moore.' She had been extremely frightened of spiders and was asked 'to picture myself.' She saw herself just after she was born, on her mother's arm and 'on the counterpane I saw a massive black spider. We asked Jesus to get rid of it. I saw Jesus in a long white robe and he had nails in his wrists so it wasn't from a picture where they show nails in the hands. Two drops of blood dropped onto the spider and it went.' The result was that her 'phobia had gone', permanently. Later the Deliverer lengthened a leg that was a quarter of an inch shorter than the other, so that she lost the pain that she had had in her arm and shoulders. Later again, during prayer with a friend she 'lost the feeling that I was a boy as my father wished' (he had called her by a boy's name). 'I had a feeling that I'm not female - a tomboy in my 40's.' She had a vision of her father coming to see his new child. He was reluctant to approach the bed; 'He said to my mother "What sex?" She said "A girl." As I pictured that I was in tears. The friend said 'We'll bring Jesus into this' and she saw 'Mum and Dad with Jesus in the middle and Dad loving me as his child.' From then on 'I lost the feeling I was a boy as my father wished and I like being a woman.'

Another young woman 'bargained with God,'-'Show me yourself!' At midnight she became aware of Jesus in the room, and then came the immediate 'realisation that there were no obligations, e.g. Do this-Do that-but he loved me.' Her parents sensed that 'something had happened.' he had found 'meaning, love and security' which she could hold on to despite later questions and challenges: 'a profound effect on my life.'

Only one subject, a young woman, described an experience during sleep – 'a very vivid dream.'

A young woman had prayed despite not being a Christian (indeed the family was actually anti-Christian) because she had difficulty walking uphill, and heard a voice directing her which 'said I could do it'. She asked the voice what to read and was given a passage about the wisdom of God. On a later occasion at a Charismatic church service she 'went forward in

prayer and fell on the floor.’ She had been feeling bad about an abortion but she felt Jesus was there saying ‘I’ve got your baby and it’s O.K.’, a ‘sign of healing for me’ which lasted.

One young woman was convinced by a miraculous escape from a car accident that ‘there really must be a God.’ Her screams ruptured her vocal chords; people had been amazed when she lived and so she had wondered why God had saved her life. Like a number of other subjects she had bought a Bible and, as a result, lived as a Christian missionary – ‘tough and debts’ – but had kept trusting, and as Paul said ‘Enough but not too much.’

A mother of five small children felt her ‘whole life a religious experience.’ Her home had been strongly atheistic, but she had always felt God was ‘there’. As an example she described how, in a prayer group, she had asked God to send her a sign through specific words if she was to pray for a certain person. Although she had not expected it at all the words were spoken and she offered her prayer ‘which proved clearly right.’

The Charismatic atmosphere of worship and singing was, unsurprisingly, conducive to experiences such as that of a woman who, at the age of 80, ‘had a picture of someone (Jesus) dressed in white, and realised the person standing before him was me.’ This ‘has stayed with me all the years’ - she is now 86.

Several subjects had written down accounts of their experiences immediately after they had occurred, because they had had such an effect. Another had also drawn what she had seen and felt as she had knelt ministering to another person at the altar rail: ‘a figure (shape but no detail), in a sitting or kneeling position, surrounded by white droplets; not certain whether it was me or another young woman.’ The subject felt that she had ‘shifted to a different level or dimension of consciousness, and cold and shivery’; she was aware that her ‘emotional state that year had been heightened by the loss of my father.’

### **Evangelical Christians**

Of the eight Evangelicals, no less than five described hearing voices or seeing visions.

A service man was on guard duty, but feeling cross about a decision to postpone his leave. He was confronted by a Christian who prayed for him and he ‘felt compelled to say “Yes” and felt born again.’ Despite the cold desert air he broke out in a sweat, and his commitment had lasted through 30 years of Christian work.

A woman, who had lost her Catholic faith, was unhappy and crying, but an Evangelical church member prayed for her. ‘I felt like the Tree of Life growing within me - a sudden tingling but very happy.’ The bitterness she had had towards her mother disappeared.

An epileptic woman had been in hospital after a fit and seven stitches in her head. She prayed, and she found ‘another presence in me, felt an inner sense of peace - somebody inside and outside protecting me.’ She had had a hang-up about demonic possession, but now feels ‘protected if I have another fit’ and ‘an inner presence helps me to stay calm’ and enables her to talk about her epilepsy. Her husband, who had spoken on ‘Songs of Praise’ about his experience, is blind. He had hoped to have his sight restored; but at a service with a well-known healer he had said, ‘Father, if it be your will I’ll receive my sight; if not, something else’, but ‘lots of others kept holding up their fingers and asking me how many there were!’ He fell on the ground. ‘I felt my face becoming the face of a child. There were

tears and upsets. Then I had a picture of my five brothers, all playing football except me. I had been bitter. Jesus said, "You tried to be like your brothers, struggling, and you are bitter and lonely. I love you as a blind person. Be a signpost to vulnerable people." I saw in a vision the Lord's hands like a signpost, holding a cross. When I got up off the floor all bitterness had gone. I go back all those years to this profound experience and try to encourage others that God loves them.'

During a period of indecision a young nurse felt compelled to pray, and then she asked a houseman to pray for her. He challenged her; that night, alone on her knees, she saw 'an illuminated cross.' 'The great darkness went', and she realised 'that Christ died for people like me.' There followed 50 years of confident, guided, committed Christian faith during which she and her husband devoted their home to 'God's service.'

Another woman's experience occurred during a period when she felt vulnerable and lonely. She felt 'I can't go on.' 'There were daffodils in the room. Then the room was full of light and warmth, almost a physical feeling.' It felt that 'all was well; the sun was shining, and I saw in the shadow the sign of the Cross: the promise of new life as a resurrection - the Cross a symbol of hope.' She felt that she could 'hang on that promise.' Two years later, as she was falling asleep, she heard a voice, very distinctly: 'Take up your Cross and follow Me', which led to her helping at a Sunday School 'not as a burden or toil but to be a witness and a joyful Christian.'

A 62-year-old man had his first experience, when praising God, about 10 years ago when he already had 'God and Christ as my personal Saviour.' He felt the Lord speak to him (not in a physical voice): 'Tom, you need to know me, not just believe in me. Support me, and the Church will look after itself.' Similarly, later on, the Lord said, 'Tom, you don't want me but you need me. I don't need you but I want you.' The subject was keen that I should record correctly precisely what God had said. As his third experience he described how a painfully swollen face improved rapidly when he asked for forgiveness for the criticisms and anger that the Christian camp doctor had discerned. Many more experiences had followed; 'Godincidences' he called them. For example: he'd originally smoked 70 cigarettes a day. At the camp, in prayer, he was told to throw his packets and lighter to the wall. He never felt the need to smoke again and, in contrast to previous brief attempts, immediately had a sweet, refreshing taste in his mouth.

The eighth Evangelical was an elderly woman, a pastoral leader. She described three experiences, which she had also written down. The first, when she was 16, was a traditional conversion experience; she added that she 'subconsciously needed a father's support, after an insecure childhood.' Much later, when in hospital 'haemorrhaging to death', she saw a vision on the wall of her room of the 'crucified Saviour on the Cross' and realised he had 'bled and died' for her. Two minutes later 'I became aware of Him, dressed in white, passing by my bed, the Risen Lord.' Given strength to cope as she was trolleyed down to the first floor, she thought she had 'arrived' when she heard 'lovely singing, but later learned that the C.U. met in the room below!' She showed her sense of humour again in describing how, after an experience of speaking in tongues, she felt for about three months 'floating along on air' and 'I went out from a new supermarket singing and was stopped by a photographer and asked to return again with my trolley. My picture appeared in *The Grocer* as the lady who was so happy with her goods from the new shop!'

#### **Middle-of-the-Road Christians**

The experiences of this group were in many cases followed by joy. One woman worked in a

pub, and a customer had said, 'I'll have some of what you're on!' She had become 'conscious of God's presence' at a rally two days previously. Some time later, just before she heard by phone that her husband had finally deserted her, she had a feeling of 'someone holding me under the elbow, someone standing there. I was never on my own. God was there for the future.'

Agnostics were rare, but one, who was experiencing business difficulties, and had prayed for a sign, had an extraordinary feeling when visiting a church. He 'saw a font (but it was not the font in the church) surrounded with a white light, which then disappeared.' A few days later, while tidying a shed, he had a vision. 'I saw a figure in a monk's outfit.' He realised that these were the signs he'd prayed for, and compared these vivid and real experiences not to a dream but to the visions of St. Teresa of Avila. He began to read the Bible, noted similar experiences, joined the Quakers and aligned his concept of God to theirs.

A woman with various personal difficulties was sunbathing in her garden and reading about visualisations in the context of damaging parenting. Dutifully visualising her own tree, she was amazed to see a vision of a 'long pair of golden, sparkling arms and hands, lifting a tiny baby up.' A tremendous feeling of power and happiness followed, but only lasted a week. Three years later, when she was very weak, and was encouraged to get healing, she reassessed that vision, and felt it symbolised both a chance to let go of the past and that 'hands are receptive'. She is now on the healing team.

My oldest subject was 92. She had had an experience 60 years before, when she was feeling upset and angry with God after three bereavements. 'On a glorious summer evening I was sitting in the garden, two lime trees outside the gate alive with the buzzing of insects and the scent of honey. I heard a voice, the voice of Jesus, saying, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." I was prepared to accept the gift.' There followed great happiness and a desire to love and hug people; later she was confirmed, with other church members.

A clergyman had had one experience, after becoming a Christian. In the middle of the night, when he was worrying about his wife's health 'there was a sense of someone saying "All right. It'll be fine. O.K." No words, just a voice.' Many answers to prayer followed. He had become a Christian because of a friend who had asked if he had had a spiritual experience. He then remembered that when walking on a mountain path he had felt 'completely at one with the world. Completeness, that's all.' He gratefully accepted the friend's interpretation that it was Jesus getting in touch with him. Later he and his wife, who had had the same feeling independently, 'allowed God to come in and change things.'

Meditation and help with spiritual healing were the triggers for the fairly recent experience of a woman who almost shone as she told her story. She was feeling a lot of love, energy and peace, not wanting anything and meditating to music. She had a vision of 'a woman's oval face', four feet away, 'with hair softly brought back round her face. I could paint it if I were an artist! She was looking into my eyes with a tremendous amount of love, serene, graceful; she was spiritual and holy. The look in her face was of pure love. I felt a melting of me, totally embraced in that pure love I was drawing in, totally at peace. I woke up immediately. It was not a dream, as I see the features in her face, but never in a dream. I can relive this experience and tap into it.'

A church attending doctor feels 'love is at the top of the agenda' and, like several other subjects, finds the sayings of Julian of Norwich very meaningful. His three experiences have

had a profound and lasting impact on his spiritual life, convincing him that 'we are rooted in eternity and are not alone in the universe.' One of his patients, a woman, had a radiant Christian faith and they had conversed about God and religion. At 9 o'clock one morning in late summer, he was walking to the hospital. The sky was blue, but there were patches of mist. He became aware that she was 'present in the grey cold mist ten yards away and then seemed just to rise up and float away into the celestial brilliance above.' Later he learned that she had died peacefully at 9 o'clock. His second experience was a series of events he feels a cynic would put down to coincidence, but which gave him a great sense of peace, comfort and trust. The third experience was of great beauty and he shared it with a leading Buddhist in the Far East. 'The Milky Way was like a great star-spangled pathway across the sky. In the centre of the sky was the new moon, facing downwards, and the Evening Star was just above it, almost as if the moon was cradling it.' He said aloud 'The heavens declare the Creator's glory!' and, to his surprise, the Buddhist spoke of 'so many people with God-shaped holes in their hearts', who should experience that to enable them to live in peace.

A woman who had had a tracheotomy prayed for a windpipe and finally got a silver one, which she showed me, after 30 years. After knowing 'Christ as a person' she was enabled to heal others. 'The Holy Spirit tried to push me out of a chair to begin praying for a man on long-term kidney dialysis who recovered and went abroad.' Later, when she was worrying about moving house, she had an experience in bed. 'The Lord came in the doorway. "You must do it or you'll lose a lot of money." he said.' So she sold her bungalow and bought a flat.

A woman of 88 had had her first experience 20 years before, after a long period of 'skipping church.' She was persuaded to attend a grandson's confirmation. At the altar rail, as she received the bread, she felt 'warmth, light and joy.' 'I felt Christ was there dancing inside, giving me bread, a foretaste of Heaven. I danced in my heart.' She started to attend church, and later became 'a listening ear' for people. After another experience she felt 'I was a child again, with my bare legs and silly little frock, carrying a plastic bag with my sins in.'

A woman of 77 had abandoned religious belief at University; but a conviction that God was the ground of all being, yet personal, came back to her through a challenging prayer to Him when she was feeling suicidal. She felt lifted out of the bog of despair; the feeling lasted only for a few seconds, during which she was conscious of a total emptiness or void. Her 'crippling inferiority complex was transformed overnight.' She was later 'at one time a fundamentalist. Things happened in those days - extraordinary!' 'A human being empowered - participation - transforming.'

A young woman was crushed by her horse, 'every bone broken.' In intensive care she felt she was 'in a white tunnel going down but not getting to the end.' She was confident that she would not die. The anger and blame she felt was released by the companionship of God and by prayer. The medical world said she was a paraplegic and would not walk again but hands-on healing from a Christian woman worked a miracle. Now she feels the accident was a blessing in many ways and it has led to much work counselling and healing others. Like several other subjects she was radiant and vital from her experience of the 'opening of awareness' of God, in her case from 'arms'-length churchgoing.'

One woman's religion started during therapy from her priest. She had been 'very depressed, abusive and anorexic'. Her experience occurred when she was walking up a hill. 'Someone might do it for me, I thought; I was so despairing, crying and afraid. Someone came and

enclosed me in love. It was amazing; all right; someone with you. I changed completely. I could go home. I realised God was supporting me, is within, not up there. I felt secure.' In a later experience, she had been sitting alone in her employer's community room when she 'felt at one with everything. The trees were not separated, all part of things.' Although she still needs some support she is now 'more caring and open.'

A clergyman, more and more drawn to the contemplative life, told me 'The reality of my experiences is what stays - and you know you're known.' Both experiences happened when he was 'doing something silly, not being meditative, surprise, gifts when you need them.' The first was when he was 16 and was after an immense row with his father over a trivial matter, when he was, later, alone. 'I felt I was in the middle of an ocean of limitless forgiveness; no boundaries; wonderful; held totally in this ocean.' His view of his father changed. 42 years later he was at the Bede Griffiths Ashram, at an R.C. Mass, and daydreaming that Bede had had another stroke. Although others were rushing about in distress he remained 'wiser than the wise', quoting St. Catherine of Genoa who said that everything that happens is either willed or permitted by God. 'For 30 seconds I knew that that was true; I was part of it, known ever since.'

### **Catholic Christians**

All the Catholics gave long accounts of their experiences and, as mentioned, gave high ratings to the elements of their experiences.

One was a mother of a large family who, 14 years before, had been deeply distressed by her son's third breakdown. Feeling it was undeserved, she 'really raised my voice to God', encouraged by a friar who had been asked to help her. 'Then I saw the crucifix in my mind's eye and I said, "Oh, Christ, I know you were crucified; I'm sorry to complain." I sat down to iron but before I could plug the iron into the socket I was surrounded by angels, laughing angels who reached above the kitchen ceiling. They were like streaks of radiant coloured light, mauve, yellow, orange and a deep rose, but like sunlight. I was awed by their laughter which was the sort of laughter aunts and uncles and Mums and Dads will make when they have given a child a tiny present because a really big one is waiting outside the door. I felt peaceful, my heartache eased, a feeling of benediction.' When she had finished the ironing she felt 'overwhelming compassion' for her husband, who had ignored his son. She understood him, and saw 'the whole human race needing the compassion of God through their fellow men and women.' She wondered why the angels laughed, was it because her 'gift' was not realised immediately?

A church secretary gave a long and rapid account of her life, which had included children and missionary service abroad. She had to return home, and felt she had let her husband down. After his death she was troubled for a long time, and then thought about the death of her father. She went to a secular counsellor who 'unpacked resentment against my Nanny, who had been very controlling.' She asked for prayer at a conference and a husband and wife told her that 'there will be no movement unless you forgive.' As she forgave 'I was released from something that had been holding me.' Then, in a group, someone produced a verse about swords piercing mouths and she felt release; in a temple in Taiwan she had unwisely looked at carvings of knives piercing mouths and cheeks, which had bothered her ever since. Her 'paralysis' went and her faith continued. 'I feel guided day by day.'

The only childhood experience reported to me was that of a woman who had had a difficult childhood and adolescence, and an admired father who was afraid of closeness. 'It's difficult having God as your father!' The first experience occurred when she was in her parents' bed, afraid of the thunder. 'My father wrapped me in a blanket and ... showed me the lightning

and how beautiful it was. The firmament split open and I could see the gold of heaven. ... It was a very positive experience.' Later, 10 years old, in a clearing 'I felt an enormous awareness of the God of Love.' As an adult, and a devout Christian, she had a number of intense religious experiences. One, all of whose elements she rated at 5 (the highest) occurred when she was caring for a dying woman. She had gone to work full of 'anger and shame'; but as she sat sewing in another room 'a deep peace engulfed the house, like a mountain mist rolling down the valley ... like the emptiness and joyful expectancy of Advent ... a great strength.'

An older man with a heart condition had been a Roman Catholic in his youth and had prayed to God for guidance whether he should go on attending the parish church with his wife or return to the Roman church. He was sitting by himself thinking about it when he had 'a profound and wonderful experience - all words are hopelessly inadequate - I experienced being loved intensely and a feeling of knowing home and of excitement.' He felt that this was an answer to his prayer and his Vicar felt it was about the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Five weeks later three more experiences followed: 'feelings of intense, joyful expectation, anticipation and excitement.' He and his wife were received into the Church of England. His whole outlook on life had changed permanently (though with not quite the same intensity later): 'little or no regard for material things; no betting on horses.' His interest waned even in the astronomical society he had founded, and he now reads religious books; he mentioned three he had found helpful on religious experiences.

My next subject, a lay reader, still glows serenely at the recollection of her experience (as did a number of others). She had only told one other person, although it was 50 years ago. She was receiving at a midweek communion and 'was surrounded by a glorious light, while the sanctuary lit up, enormously happy, a spiritual orgasm, completely carried away, I was so overcome.' She stood up, and the vicar said, 'Something has happened to you.' She poured it out to him and he accepted that it was something wonderful that had been given to her; he said, 'We'll discover God's will for you in time.' And so she became much involved in parish work and clung to 'my proof of cast-iron faith' despite 'adversity of many kinds'. She also mentioned her psychic powers: pre-cognition in a trance of her husband's death and an awful coach crash.

Another elderly woman mentioned a small number of 'intense illuminations' she had experienced when younger but which seemed now not to occur. She said she was 'nervous and highly-strung'; the experiences had coincided with ill-health, in and out of hospital, or contact with nuns. They were like 'feeling the Holy Spirit taking me over' - 'so close on my shoulder'. Despite her father's unbelief she had a 'strong impression' when he was in his coffin 'of the presence of God in the house and that he'd gone to Heaven!' Similarly, after her mother's horrible death from cancer she had been reading by the fire, and 'had a terrific feeling of my mother laughing, - O.K. in Heaven.' She had found it difficult to let her go. She said her experiences 'just happened', like Mother Julian's 'showings', but she clearly needed them for reassurance in crises.

The same seemed to be true of a younger woman with three small children, a disordered life and her relationships in turmoil. She 'woke up in the middle of the night with a feeling of extraordinary darkness not connected with daily survival. I felt it a wrestling with God. Then I found myself saying the last part of the General Confession - great wrestling - and I fell asleep. But when I woke up Jesus was by my side saying, "I will help you." Then an extraordinary feeling of lightness compared to the darkness. I felt a little relief and fell

asleep. In the morning I had a sense of Jesus at the kitchen door - an utter release feeling later when out driving.' Over the next six months, things were sharpened, trees for instance seemed to have particular beauty. She wanted to be on TV, and did in fact talk and write poems in order to share what she had seen and understood. As to what had lasted: 'trusting and remembering to put my trust in Him' and 'leaning towards the contemplative and mystical.'

Another woman had suffered from dry, tearless eyes and poor sight. At a special Cathedral service there was wonderful singing and an invitation to go up to receive the Holy Spirit. She went up and prayed for her tears to be restored. People prayed in tongues around her, and as she sat she 'felt a big thump in my chest and it took my breath away.' She felt it should have knocked her off her chair. She thanked them, rejoined her friends and felt 'full of joy, absolutely on top of the world.' For months afterwards she felt nothing could hurt her; she could safely walk under a lorry. Still, after 15 years she feels 'the Spirit is with me', though she eventually went totally blind, but 'God gave me healing for my inside by giving me the Holy Spirit and I'm so grateful that He is with me now and always will be.'

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

There may be some substantial differences between the experiences reported by the four groups of Christians: when and where they had occurred, who they were with at the time and what the consequences were, but in fact the similarities between the groups are more striking than the differences. The same finding was reported by McKay and Musil who, in their *Spiritual Healing* project (*De Numine*: Sept. 1999) interviewed 700 subjects from various churches who wrote and shared in groups. They found a 'commonness in stories', 'really no credal differences' and outcomes similar to mine.

Certain types of imagery and other features are admittedly absent from the religious experiences reported in surveys of groups imbued with the Christian tradition. When such people see or hear a god, they feel it is the Christian God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit, never Krishna; if the manifestation is female, it will always be Mary, never Kali or Durga. Interpretation seems always to be within the cultural and theological tradition of the recipient; they are 'context driven' (Fox, *De Numine*: Feb. 1999). However it is noticeable that in my small sample no one had been 'bathed in the Blood of the Lamb' as in Victorian hymns; indeed there were only two mentions of blood, both from the accounts of a Charismatic Evangelical, who had been a Charismatic Baptist but had joined the Methodist church and 'missed sound Biblical teaching'.

None of my subjects had any of the demonic, bizarre or terrifying experiences which have been recorded by John Cornwall (1991). Hell and Punishment were not mentioned except that one subject had been frightened by a nun's teaching about Hell. I felt that they were genuinely spiritual experiences and sensed nothing actually pathological, although one or two had had periods of depression and one an 'affective disorder'. I declined to interview the one person who rang me and who did seem to be disturbed, pushing me for answers.

All the narratives or testimonies are obviously memories of past experiences and as such they may have been remembered inaccurately. But what comes over in the relating of detail and of the emotion felt is that the essence of the experience, often expressed in the most idiosyncratic language, had stayed with them for years and had been radically life-



enhancing. Some even seemed to shine as they told their stories. The stories were very individual and undoubtedly reflected the subjects' mental and physiological selves and their theological development. The subjects also perceived them as being 'windows' onto their own spiritual world. (But Mark Fox, writing about his own researches, seems to prefer the former interpretation).

From Table 4 it will be seen that about 75% of my subjects had had crises of various kinds (e.g. physical illnesses, depression or relationship problems) prior to their experiences and possibly they volunteered because their lives had been changed, 'completely' as one said. 'Negative attitudes disappeared suddenly'; a number were enabled to give up bitterness and forgive, which most people find very hard, and others to understand their parents.

Psychotherapists and counsellors may wish to warn that these accounts seem far too sudden, too magical and perhaps too slick and shallow. Some may interpret them as mere defences or crutches. After all, therapists endeavour to change their clients' perspectives on life over considerable periods of time. However, the changes seem to have happened; many of my subjects actually came to understand their feelings and let go, often through the nature of their visions and pictures; and some reported that their individual emotional needs had been met, especially after loss. One experience seems to have related directly to the subject's physiological state: a woman who was suffering a serious haemorrhage had an experience of Jesus who had 'bled and died' for her.

Therapists give attention, interpretations, understanding, empathy, hope and even love (Halmos, 1965). My subjects believe that God, or Jesus, relates similarly to them, and some experiences seem to have been initiated by pastors, preachers and even 'deliverers'. According to Marianna Lutyens, David Black concluded that the 'internal good object' of modern psychoanalysis is exactly continuous with the fundamental good objects of the mature religions. From what they said, many of my subjects appeared to have their good objects. 'The Spirit is with me.' 'The Holy Spirit came.' 'God came in.' Narcissistic immaturity gives way to love and concern for others, and service.

A number of writers have suggested possible biological mechanisms which might give rise to religious experiences. Hardy asserted that 'we are biologically constructed to have such experiences' and suggested mechanisms have included endorphin release, hemispheric synchronisation, temporal lobe stimulation, and others. Marianna Lutyens reported David Black's acceptance of a theory of Gerald Edelman that the young brain develops synaptic connections in response to its environment. Therapists have found that early patterning is not easy to change; but somehow, however we may wish to interpret the fact, powerful religious experiences enable, in the words of William James, 'a complete division to be established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new.' My examples include: acceptance of being a girl and not a boy, giving up smoking, a complete change of hobbies and joyful acceptance of blindness – 'negative attitudes disappearing suddenly.'

What is thus most striking about these profound religious experiences is their consequences: apparently, a really new view of reality. As William James (1902) said, 'That which produces effects within another reality must be deemed a reality itself.' My subjects felt released, and that they had been enabled to surrender their self-centredness; their focus shifted instead to God or His Son and when this happened the love that they received had overflowed onto others. Their comments included: 'taken over', 'released' and 'empowered'; others described the widening of their minds: 'opening of awareness', 'a Quaker view not dogma'. God and Jesus became 'real'. Several mentioned death as the extension of life, and

'Godincidences not coincidences'.

These new and more dynamic people recognised that they had needed the 'certainty' and 'proof' that they had been given, and some may question this dramatic negation of the obvious uncertainties of life, but their comfort had been

balanced by the inevitable difficulties and conflicts they had faced as they had sought God's will and tried to live more selfless lives.

The verdict of Maxwell and Tschudin after studying the consequences of the experiences of Hardy's subjects was essentially the same: 'constant affirmation of life, enhancing and enriching. They point forward; they are positive; they are benign.' It is clear that my subjects all felt that their experiences contained something of the transcendental, and we feel bound to ask, were they right? Christians who have religious experiences, in the words of Peter Antes, 'see deities, hear voices and witness worlds that are other than the realities here, but recognisable on the basis of traditional religious vocabulary that they have known before.' To repeat Mark Fox, the experiences are 'context driven'. Some would see this as proof that the transcendental elements simply do not exist: there is nothing except physical phenomena in the subject's brain. In fact it proves nothing of the sort; for if one comes somehow into touch with a transcendental reality, which almost by definition is totally different from anything one has ever experienced or imagined, how else can one become aware of it except in terms of something which one has? And if the spiritual world exists, its contact with our material selves must surely be in and through the brain.

The Biblical saying 'By their fruits ye shall know them.' (Matt. vii.20) is often quoted as a guide to validity and authenticity. As Bishop Harries, quoted by Mary Loudon, said, 'No one comes to faith by rational process.' Fr. Tim Ratcliffe said, in his conversation with Joan Bakewell in the Radio 3 series *Belief* on 29 March, 2002, 'Faith embraces rationality and has a sense of the joyful.' None of my 44 subjects were arrogant or seemed to want to proselytise or preach, but most found it rewarding to relive their experiences and a few had never shared them with anyone before. I was a privileged observer, even a participant in their experiences as they were re-told, and I saw their transformations - a glimpse of the Holy and Sacred, their God - this, surely, is how we recognise what is real.

Ultimately, of course, for me, although the experiences of others can be an aid to faith, it is my own personal experience that counts.

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*Oxford, April, 2002*

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