

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: BEGINNING THE RESEARCH

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When, some 800 years ago, the funeral took place of the great Aristotelian scholar Averroes, his coffin was carried through the streets of Cordova. It was placed in one of the panniers of a beast of burden while, on the other side, to balance it, were loaded all his writings. One of those who witnessed this event was the young Ibn Arabi, later to become one of the great masters of the Sufi tradition. Seeing the great man's body, as it were, weighed against his works, he was moved to ask the question: 'Were his hopes fulfilled in his achievements?'¹

This Paper honours the centenary of Sir Alister Hardy's birth, and celebrates his achievements. My part in this is to speak about the early days of what was then the Religious Experience Research Unit. For those involved in this pioneering project, those were indeed very stimulating times, and I could attempt to convey some flavour of them with a great variety of anecdotes. We may later have had our disagreements, but it is above all with great affection and gratitude that I look back on my association with Alister – as must, I feel sure, all those who worked with him. Whatever other feelings one may have had when opening that extraordinary mass of letters which came in from those early appeals, it was tremendously exciting. You simply never knew what the next post might bring.

The Early Days of RERU

The whole project was in fact a fascinating revelation of the potential range of human experience, whether one called it religious, spiritual, supernatural, psychic, paranormal, or whatever. Such categories were immediately shown up to be for the most part inadequate and unworkable – if, that is, one were looking for distinct boundaries within which to classify this great wealth of material. Classification was, of course, the immediate challenge. One had to begin by imposing some sort of order on this seemingly chaotic body of data. But was 'imposing' the right word?

One of Alister's great strengths was a simplicity of purpose, a single-mindedness which was not easily diverted. One commonly hears talk of a value-free science. We are encouraged to think of the true scientist as a kind of Giacometti-like figure, stripped down to the bone, having shed all those weaknesses of flesh and blood – not to mention passion and ambition – to which the rest of us mortals are still subject. This is, of course, a delusion. The uncommitted scientist will never discover anything new, however valuable his or her work may be in proving or disproving what others have discovered. And scepticism is itself a form of commitment: a commitment to work without presuppositions. But that is a self-deception likely to prove as distorting as the most strongly held prejudice. Alister did not deceive himself. He was not a sceptic. He knew what he knew, and all his life he had been waiting for this chance to devote himself to it. "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be" – so declares Browning's *Rabbi ben Ezra*, who goes on to say

Enough now, if the Right
And Good and Infinite
Be named here, as thou callest thy hand thine own,
With knowledge absolute,
Subject to no dispute
From fools that crowded youth, nor let thee feel alone.²

The “fools that crowded youth” were, of course, those scientists for whom the Darwinian system of evolution was a purely materialistic structure of ideas, which took no account of what Alister was later to call the spiritual nature of man³ There is, of course, something acutely paradoxical in this proposal to combine this ‘knowledge absolute’ with the empirical methods of inductive science. But, for one who related to the reality of the spiritual life with the same familiarity as he could call his hand his own (as Alister did), the path ahead seemed clear enough. If that life was a reality, then proof must be available – must, in fact, be all around us, if only we had eyes to see it. If a commitment to what is conceived of as ‘the scientific method’ is going to limit the field in which we are to look for that proof, then something must be wrong. If we do not allow the very material we are working on to be continually challenging us – to be asking us: “But is this the best way to get to the heart of this particular problem?” – how can we ever expect to enlarge our view of the world?

Alister himself, as is widely known, was very interested in such phenomena as telepathy and clairvoyance, an area of experience often labelled paranormal. But what then is the normal? To many people, many otherwise quite intelligent people, the world is simply not the kind of place in which these things happen. But if you already know what kind of place the world is, why bother to look further? Remember the French scientist⁴ who declared that what he was observing could be explained only by saying that water might have a memory. The idea was absurd; he was boycotted by all his fellow scientists (I believe he still is). There must of course be some other explanation: one that is consistent with the established paradigms of the world of nature. One must keep solid ground beneath one’s feet. But what if that ground turns out to be no more than the shore of an infinite ocean? That image would have appealed to Alister. It was, after all, in marine biology that his scientific career had begun. Research into the human spirit was indeed to him not unlike the exploration of a vast and limitless sea inhabited by an endless variety of new forms of life.

The Problems of Classification

Faced with these astonishingly mixed and heterogeneous accounts of experience, our immediate task was to sort them out into some kind of order. The established principles of taxonomy, as devised for the classification of the natural world, suggested a model: a kind of Linnaean system⁵ for the world of the human spirit. Certain accounts which described experience of that world had obvious elements in common; others had features which made them, at first sight, impossible to place in this fashion. Perhaps fresh categories had to be devised for these, as it were ‘new’ species. This, however, was where the model began to seem less apt.

It was natural enough to begin by trying to impose an order on this chaos, much as you impose an order on a sinkful of washing up: everything eventually gets put away in its right place so that, next time you want knives, you know where to look for them. But there are limits to what gets put into a sink. Human experience, and by definition experience of the transcendent, was a rather different proposition.

One of Alister’s great strengths was that single-mindedness which enabled him to go ahead without being distracted by negative criticism, of which there was plenty. This uncomplicated resolve drew much of its strength from an innate assurance, based upon

lifelong experience, that *Homo sapiens* was, quite simply, by nature a religious animal. He was fond of quoting Jung's reply to the question as to whether he believed in God: he did not believe, he said, he **knew**. Such a spontaneous, unquestioned conviction could, at times, raise problems. If you are to make a scientific study – and in particular a taxonomic study – of any area of the natural world, you first have to establish the limits of that area. So the entomologist⁶ establishes clear and straightforward criteria for distinguishing the *Coleoptera* from the *Diptera*, so as to know what is a beetle and what is not. So free was Alister from any doubts in this field that this question of limits was (at first, at least) not really faced. What was it exactly on which we were setting out to impose an order?

When people are asked to give accounts (to use Alister's phrase) of "any awareness of some power beyond their everyday experience of life", then any order to be discovered will be liable itself to have this same open-ended character. Was it right to expect an order on the model of one that had been already discovered elsewhere? Perhaps David Bohm's word 'implicate' is the one we need: it was more likely to be an implicate order, in which everything is found to be intimately linked with everything else – a taxonomist's nightmare⁷. But any such implicate order will not only be one in which everything is (as the word suggests) folded in upon itself in a multidimensional whole. It will be an order in which the observers will themselves be personally implicated. There is, of course, nothing new in this idea that the observer will always to some extent be involved with the thing observed, and that the observation will be affected by that relationship. So the more aware we are of our own presuppositions, or prejudices, the better we are able to allow for their influence. The necessary detachment is still, in theory, possible.

But no less important in any scientific inquiry is the freedom to adopt the methods most likely to get to the heart of the problem. Stand outside Marks & Spencer with a clipboard and quiz people for five, or even ten, minutes each about their religious experiences (if any), following a standard questionnaire, and your chances of a positive response will not be high. Spend more time with each individual in a less public context, and you are likely to get a less negative result. Go out of your way to meet them on their own ground, or in their own homes, where a more personal relationship becomes possible, and let one question arise out of the previous one, and all sorts of surprising revelations may be drawn out, eventually, with patience and sympathy. (We used to call this the "Now that I come to think about it ..." syndrome.) But such an abandonment of clinical detachment is always liable to be regarded with suspicion – and, anyway, any findings from such methods are likely to be less and less amenable to statistical analysis the further you depart from standard procedure. The richer the tapestry of human experience that emerges, the more difficult it becomes to claim for the inquiry the objectivity of science.

At one point in those early days, prompted by these and other such methodological problems, I published an article under the title of *Tolerating the Paradoxical*⁸. On this Alister observed that, whereas he (as a scientist) made it his business to eliminate paradox, I seemed to be celebrating it. There is of course no reason why the analysis of paradox should itself be paradoxical. Nevertheless, as I have said, there is a strong tendency for those who immerse themselves in the study of the more mysterious aspects of human life to find the material of their study, so to speak, encroaching on their own inquiry. Alister would often claim to be following in the steps of William James⁹. But James's striking insights into the varieties of religious experience were not the fruit of a cold detachment, but rather of a passionate enthusiasm for his subject. William James was indeed a great pioneer. But we might have gone back even further, and claimed an even more illustrious forerunner – one of the greatest scientific minds of the 17th century: Blaise Pascal, for whom the last step of reason was to recognise that there are many things that lie beyond it.

The Data

One way out of this dilemma was to say that it was not, in the first instance, the infinite varieties of religious experience that we were subjecting to this scientific scrutiny, but rather the data which our inquiry was putting at our disposal. It was the written accounts themselves that we had to look at. Alister himself was fond of describing our work as a kind of natural history, the collection of material which would later be analysed along systematic lines. In those first days we did indeed feel something of the excitement of the explorer, cutting a path through unmapped territory, investigating caverns perhaps measureless to humanity. But even the most naïve natural historian has soon to start sorting out his or her collections, if only to provide an index to make them accessible for further study.

Here, of course, the computer is an unrivalled tool. How Aristotle would have loved it. Yet it was he who surely said the last word on the illusions which the computer may generate. It was, he said, the mark of a well-trained mind not to look for a greater degree of precision than was appropriate to the subject matter¹⁰. So the detailed analysis of the language people used in order to describe their experience of the transcendent might well be of great value. But was the precision of such an analysis appropriate? Here we ran into another problem.

This was that the writers of these letters would frequently disavow the language they themselves used. The experience, they would say, was quite indescribable. "I had no words to describe it then", one correspondent wrote, of an experience of her childhood, "and I have no words to describe it now". More often, they would search around for some simile or comparison, some metaphor to convey something which (they insisted) was beyond any such words – something qualitatively of a different order. That is to say, they would use the language not of information but of the imagination: the language of poetry. So if we were still to insist that the immediate matter, the data, of our research was not so much the experiences themselves as the actual accounts which we had in our files, there still remained the challenge of how to evaluate the language in which they were written – language which, for the most part, was notable for its imprecision. Language can be analysed; no problem about that these days. The mind can be well-trained to exploit the resources of modern technology. But what we were up against here was what Kierkegaard would have called indirect communication; and what kind of training is called for if one is to do justice to that?

I may seem to be telling a story of frustration, of false trails and dead ends, but it did not feel like that at the time. Nor should it now. True, as that classification seemed to proliferate almost endlessly, with new categories continually being required to accommodate new material, there appeared to be no reason why, like the universe itself, it should not go on for ever. But if one horizon was perpetually being replaced by another, the terrain to be traversed did reveal itself to be infinitely richer than anyone could have surmised at the beginning. It might turn out that our original objectives were not so easily attainable. But that was no reason for giving up; rather the reverse.

This surely is the kind of situation that any great creative endeavour is likely to find itself facing. I remember once talking with Michael Polanyi¹¹ about this way in which positive results may emerge from apparent failures, both in the arts and in scientific research. "Yes", he said, "all my most interesting discoveries were disappointments at the time." Einstein devoted the later years of his life to a search for a unifying theory which would bring together all his earlier work into a grand overarching design. This he never achieved. It could be said that he allowed metaphysics to take over from physics.

This was not Alister's way. His approach never ceased to be empirical. True, he did feel some disappointment at the progress of the work. For someone so deeply committed to a scientific method that was satisfied with nothing less than quantifiable results, it was hard to accept that not all our findings could be expressed in statistical form. Nevertheless, just as what we were coming up with was gradually, if at times imperceptibly, to shift the paradigms of what was to be taken seriously, so Alister himself was to the last open to things that would question his most basic presuppositions. No-one could have been a more loyal Darwinian. Yet, when awkward facts turned up which would not easily fit into that system, he would say, almost in a whisper and, as it were, looking over his shoulder, "Perhaps Lamarck was right after all".¹²

The Archive

Here let me go back to Browning:

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist ...
When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence
For the fulness of the days?¹³

My business here, of course, is not with eternity. and the fullness of the days is something none of us will live to see. Nor is failure the word I would use of the achievements of those early days. What they did have to teach us was that, in an undertaking of this scope, there are no right answers, only the right kind of questions. And no two people will bring the same questions.

That is the real achievement: that this archive has been brought into existence, and is still growing – and it is there, it is here, available as a unique resource for all those who come to it with an appropriate humility, not hoping for some Hegelian synthesis but ready to find new and unexpected light thrown on all the more mysterious aspects of our humanity.

Sir Alister Hardy's Achievements

So if, finally, one were to ask what Alister achieved in this initially very lonely quest, I would sum it up under three headings.

First, he showed that spirituality, however defined, is not the preserve of theology. The chilly silence with which the early efforts of RERU were greeted by the Oxford Faculty of Theology spoke louder than any words. But the very fact that a book with the title of *The Spiritual Nature of Man* could have been written by a scientist was itself a sign that the weather was changing. Sir Alister was not, of course, unique in this. What he did do was to add his not inconsiderable voice to the growing number of those who believed that evidence for the reality of the spiritual world was to be found all around us, in whatever discipline one looked for it. In the field of education alone his influence has been most significant¹⁴. The spiritual dimension is now recognised, along with the historical, the mathematical, the literary, the scientific and so on, as having an autonomous claim to a place in the national curriculum. This by itself is evidence of that change in the climate to which Sir Alister made a significant contribution.

Secondly, there has (as we know) been much development of genetic theory in recent years. Suggestions have been made that the key to an understanding not only of intelligence but even such qualities as altruism may be found in our genes. But may this thinking not

represent a defence of traditional biological values against the idea – absurd, of course – that there may be in us all a capacity for experience of a kind to which biologists have generally been indifferent, the spiritual? A capacity which, to use the language of taxonomy, may turn out to be the most specific diagnostic indicator of our essential humanity? (Altruism is in fact a pretty arid concept; but you cannot expect scientists to talk about love, any more than you can expect herbarium botanists to consider such things as the smell, taste or succulence of flowers in their classification of the living world.)

Finally, though, there is something that may well seem an achievement much humbler than anything to be described in theological or scientific terms. When Sir Alister Hardy died, we received a number of letters¹⁵ from people who said, quite simply, how grateful they were to him. Now, they wrote, it was possible to talk about things they never felt they could talk about before: feelings that, they now realised, were a normal and important part of life but which up to then they could not share with other people because they would be thought queer or even mentally unbalanced. Now the right and good and infinite could at last be named “as thou callest thy hand thine own”. It was like opening a window and letting fresh air into a stuffy room.

I may seem to have trespassed somewhat beyond my brief which was to speak of the early days of this research project. In view of the immense possibilities still to be realised, I can only say that it is even now in its early stages. At least, that is my hope. When I started reading Greats in this University half a century or so ago, I was recommended to go to some lectures given by a very senior philosopher on the subject of *Elementary Problems in Philosophy*. He began by telling us that all the problems of philosophy were elementary. Not easy, perhaps, but still elementary. Can one say anything less for the study of religious experience?

NOTES

1. See Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series XCI, 1969), pp.42f.
2. Robert Browning: *Rabbi ben Ezra*. The previous stanza is no less apt:
As it was better, youth
Should strive, through acts uncouth
Toward making, than repose on aught found made:
So better, age, exempt
From strife, should know, than tempt
Further. Thou waitedst age: wait death nor be afraid.
3. *The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience* (Alister Hardy Trust, reprinted 1997) is the account by Sir Alister Hardy of the first eight years' work of the RERU which he had founded in 1969, and focuses on spiritual feeling in a scientific age.
4. Jacques Benveniste, a renowned French immunologist, noted in an experiment that an incredibly dilute solution of a remedy nevertheless had a significant effect on the movement of blood lymphocytes, thus proving the homeopathic principle.
5. In 1737 Carolus Linnaeus (1707-78) enunciated his principles for defining genera and species, adhering to a uniform use of two Latin words (one noun and one adjective) for naming all plants and animals. The best known example is *Homo sapiens*.

6. An entomologist is one who studies insects.
7. See David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1980).
8. 'Tolerating the Paradoxical: A Scientific Approach to Religious Experience' in *Faith and Freedom*, Vol.31, part 2, 1978.
9. William James: *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, original edition 1902, Harvard University Press, 1985.
10. Aristotle: *Physics*, 199B.
11. For an assessment of Polyani's thought, see J. Crewdson, *Christian Doctrine in the Light of Michael Polyani's Theory of Personal Knowledge*, Edwin Mellor Press, 1994.
12. Lamarck (1744-1829) believed that acquired characters in animals and plants could be transmitted to their offspring. Darwin denied this.
13. Robert Browning: *Abt Vogler*.
14. See, for example, the work of David Hay and texts such as *New Methods in R.E. Teaching: An Experiential Approach* : John Hammond, David Hay and others, Oliver & Boyd, 1990.
15. These further letters from those who had written with personal accounts of their religious experiences were filed with their original contributions.

THE AUTHOR

Edward Robinson was born in 1921 and, after reading Classical Mods and Greats at Oxford, held a variety of educational posts in England and Africa. In the course of some 15 years of botanical exploration in the lesser known parts of Zambia and other central African countries, he published a number of studies and monographs on the Tropical African *Cyperaceae*. He subsequently worked on the *Flora of Tropical East Africa* as Senior Scientific Officer, part time, at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew.

Apart from these scientific studies, he has contributed some 30 articles to British, Dutch and American journals on a wide variety of topics relating to education, religion and the arts, ranging from *The Authority of Religious Experience* to *The Apophatic Art of Kasimir Malevich*.

In 1970 he was invited by Sir Alister Hardy to work at the recently established Religious Experience Research Unit at Manchester College, Oxford; in 1977 he became its Director. He was also involved in various projects with the Christian Education Movement, notably the nationwide research on *Religion and Values at Sixteen Plus* (Report published 1987). With the initial support of the CEM, he also set up at the West London Institute of Education, the Centre for the Study of Spirituality and the Arts.

In 2000 when the Centre moved to Lampeter, Edward generously gave the collection of original works of art to the Trust and they are displayed, with a specially prepared catalogue, on the 'staircase gallery' in the Department of Religious Studies.

Subsequently Edward worked in Canada as tutor at the Arthur Turner Training School (Anglican centre for Inuit theological students) at Pangnirtung, Baffin Island; in India with Jyoti Sahi at the Silvepura Art Ashram near Bangalore; and in the USA as Resident Scholar at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Collegeville, Minnesota.

He has had a lifelong interest in the visual arts, first as a painter and later as a sculptor and writer. He has had seven one-man shows of his work, in London, Oxford, Exeter, Canterbury and

other galleries in this country. Examples of his sculpture are to be seen in Portsmouth and Southwark Cathedrals and at Kirkridge Conference Centre, Pennsylvania, as well as in various private collections in India, Canada and the USA.

As Director of the (then) Alister Hardy Research Centre, he published three books: *The Original Vision*, *Living the Questions* and *This Time-Bound Ladder*. With the Christian Education Movement he wrote (with Brenda Lealman) *The Image of Life, Knowing and Unknowing* and *The Mystery of Creation*. His most recent books have been *The Language of Mystery* (1987) and *Icons of the Present: Some Reflections on Art, the Sacred and the Holy* (1993). The Centre also has a video of Edward Robinson lecturing.

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