

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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There is no single thing that can be bottled and neatly labelled as 'religious experience'. What happens in an Anglican eucharist is not the same as in an Hasidic Seder. A Baha'i Fireside does not feel the same as Buddhist meditation. Participation in a Druid Grove is not like Friday prayers at a Mosque. These experiences are not the same, nor are they easily comparable. Not only are the actions and locations different (this would be a simple matter of description), but the essences, purposes, effects and moods are different. Not only are these religious experiences different in their outer appearances but their hearts are different.

This discussion begins with a sketch of the diversity of spiritualities experienced in Britain today. This is not merely a token recognition of plurality or pluralism, but is an important aspect both of contemporary religious experience and of its study. Central sections are devoted to a particular complex of religious experiences which can, with certain reservations, be labelled 'animism'. These both illustrate the diversity available and exemplify the challenge to various alternative understandings of spirituality. The conclusion notes some problems arising from the diversity of religious experience. Observing diversity is central to understanding spirituality because the range of experiences which people label 'spiritual' vary far more than some commentators have allowed. It is also significant as diversity or plurality, if not always pluralism, is an increasingly important part of the contemporary, postmodern world, and of spiritualities which affirm it. The conclusion thus notes not only the importance of diversity for the study of religion, but also suggests that the study of contemporary animism contributes significantly to that discipline.

The Diversity of Religious Experience

It is probable that in the course of a year all the religions of the world are represented in some form in Britain. If we were only talking about those religions which are sometimes named 'the world religions' then we could be certain that all are experienced each and every day in Britain. Indeed, there are a number of different ways of being Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Shintoist, Sikh or Taoist in Britain. None of these is a single monolithic tradition but offers competing (and some co-operating) venues and versions. All are alive and vary depending on the people involved and their experiences and interpretations of their religion. But there are more religions than these. There are New Religious Movements of such diversity that the neat label 'NRM' has become problematic. Some blend aspects of the larger and older traditions into new ways of being. Some are truly new new movements. But even these myriad

forms are only part of the religious scene in Britain. Even the traditional religions of small scale societies (indigenous or aboriginal peoples, or First Nations) can be encountered in Britain. Maori *tohungas* purify auditoriums before Maori opera singers perform there. Aboriginal Australian didgeridu players or First Nation Canadian drum groups play their religious (though not necessarily sacred) musics to a wider audience at WOMAD and other festivals. Yoruba funerals reincorporate the dead as 'ancestors' in their London-centred community. Again though, this is only part of the diversity. There are people in Britain today who understand themselves to be sharing religious experiences which would otherwise seem to have died out millennia ago. There are worshippers of Isis or Mithras, for example, whose invocations are answered and whose offerings are accepted. At least, it seems just as legitimate to say this as it is to describe the experience of the Toronto Blessing by saying that the Holy Spirit inspires laughter and gives visions.

The purpose so far has not merely been to note that there are many religions in Britain. That fact is only noteworthy because some people refuse to recognise that Britain has a plurality of religions – and also decline to celebrate pluralism. More interestingly, however, each of these labels for a religion, and the labels used for the many subdivisions within each religion, indicate that people are experiencing something. To put it another way, there are many religions because people have different experiences and chose to consider some of those experiences to be of more significance than others. Or, people have an affinity with particular kinds of experience which are more significant within one religion rather than another. Or, some people understand certain experiences to be spiritual and find these to be valued within particular religious traditions. Or again, some people first encounter the valuing of particular experiences within particular religions. It might even be true to say that some events (or 'experiences', such as communal wine drinking) are perceived (or 'experienced') in different ways within different religions. These and other things may be true and worthy of consideration.

Beyond this, it is important to understand that religious experiences are not all of one kind. For example, not every experience which people consider to be religious is concerned with personal growth or development. What Paul Heelas (1996) labels 'New Age' is a currently popular assumption that spirituality affirms the self of the experiencer. (Categorising this as 'New Age' is not entirely appropriate given that most people think that the term refers to a particular, more clearly identifiable movement or trend). People are meant to be healthier, happier, wiser, nicer and perhaps richer by being 'in tune' with spiritual realities encountered in their own 'true self'. However, while this is certainly a prevalent understanding it is far from central to many religions. Some of the Protestant Christian traditions (exemplified by Rudolf Otto and by most University Christian Unions) have at their heart a denial or renunciation of self-worth. It is in repentance that many Christians meet most closely with their God. When these people speak of having been 'in the presence of God' they usually refer to an experience of 'conviction of sin', repentance and an awareness of God's gracious forgiveness. If these two sorts of experience are polar opposites they do not exhaust the diverse forms of religious experience. The final section returns to this issue and notes some of the problems which this diversity causes researchers. Before that, I pay attention to an increasingly popular form of religious experience in contemporary Britain and explain how this attention is repaid.

Listening to Trees

The 'road-protesters' of Newbury and elsewhere highlight the diversity of religious experience and, at the same time, test our understanding of what 'spirituality' might mean.

While there are Buddhists, Christians, Jews, humanists, atheists and others among those who engage in eco-action to prevent the building of some roads, runways or quarries, a high percentage of these eco-activists are Pagans. More precisely, while some of them are initiated members of the Craft, Wicca, Druidry or Ásatrú, the majority represent the increasingly prevalent non-aligned sort of Paganism (see Harvey 1997). Such Pagans celebrate the same seasonal festivals as the more organised groups, and share the same cosmology, but are disinterested in hierarchies and authorities or their proffered initiations. The eco-activists sometimes consider that the majority of Pagans are 'just thinking about it' without ever getting out and 'doing it'. Sometimes it is suggested that this indoor or fair-weather Paganism is not far from New Age 'airy-fairy, wishful thinking' or 'yoghurt weaving'. Generally, however, the full-time activists living among threatened trees or on endangered hillsides are happy when others participate or support their non-violent eco-dramas or protests.

The activism of these animists is not unique among religious people, but is significant. The polar opposites of quietism and activism are useful indicators of differences between aspects of most religions. In this case the activism concerns explicit environmental action and is sometimes contrasted with alleged quietism of other Pagans. In other religions the issue might be evangelism, with the activists sending missionaries out door-to-door while the quietists implore their deity to 'bring in the harvest (of souls)'. Both of these examples show that the polarity is only of limited value in the study of religions. It certainly tells you what religious people want you to know about other, seemingly similar, religious people. Understanding the internal differences between groups within a religion requires acknowledgement that religions do not only bring people together and keep them together, they also divide people and maintain boundaries between them (Platvoet 1995). It might even be the case that the closer the similarities between groups, the more religion is concerned with distinguishing 'us' from 'them' (Snoek 1995). In the case of Pagans, while all express reverence for Nature not all are willing or able to live up or among trees for years, facing the aggression of security guards and the disdain or amusement of the media.

The purpose of discussing the religious experience and motivation of Pagan eco-activists is not merely to note both the integrative and divisive nature of religions, but to challenge some common perceptions about what spirituality is. If 'spirituality' is opposed to what is ordinary, physical, worldly, mundane, material, natural, gendered, sensual, sexual or common, then animists (and most Pagans) are far from spiritual. If, however, the general Western construct of spirituality is itself questionable and challenged by other perspectives, then scholars of religion can learn much from observing such people.

Use of the label 'animist' is problematic – it carries unhelpful associations with theories of the 'original' (or 'primitive') religion of humanity and also with heated debates about whether all children are 'naturally' animist. However, rejecting these unnecessary diversions, the label usefully summarises the heart of these particular religious experiences as expressed in eco-drama, ritual, story, discussion and action or protest. It is also useful here because many Pagans use it as a self-designation.

Animists affirm not only that 'everything that lives is holy' (Blake 1793: plate 27 and 1795: 2.366) but also that 'everything which exists lives'. We humans are surrounded by many living beings, to whom we are related at least as much as we are to our human family and friends. (It is true that our relationships to most humans often seem more intimate than those with other-than-humans [Hallowell 1960] – after all, we eat some of them in order to live and to enjoy life. However, it is the ability to see eating as an ambivalent intimacy or relationship with some of our other-than-human neighbours which inspires some Shamans' activities). In its definition of 'animism' the *Oxford English Dictionary* misleadingly includes an insistence that there are such things as 'inanimate objects'. Animists do not 'believe that inanimate objects are alive', they experience the world as inhabited by many and varied living beings. Words like 'soul' or 'spirit' are not always useful here but are attempts to say what it is about something which makes it alive. Rocks might not breathe, trees might not speak English, hedgehogs might not preach sermons, mosquitoes might not seem to theorise, clouds might not seem to aspire to immortality. But when animists say that they are all alive, they are asserting that it is possible to speak with and listen to trees and hedgehogs, flowers and trout, robins and snakes, rocks and rain. Erazim Kohák argues that a philosopher and a tree can converse, neither exchanging information nor 'decorating a putative harsh reality with poetic gingerbread' but communicating respect and exploring a

... manner of speaking which would be true to the task of sustainable dwelling at peace for humans and the world alike, a manner of speaking that would be true in the non-descriptive sense of being good.

(Kohák 1993: 386)

The religious experience of many Pagans is that it is possible to pursue information in 'speaking with' and 'hearing' trees and other other-than-humans. Trees are willing to communicate, in some way, things of which we would otherwise be unaware.

It is also in the nature of contemporary Paganism that few insist that everyone believe any of this. Belief is less important than the virtue of respect, the pleasure of intimacy and the urgent acceptance of eco-responsibility. A refrain in Paganism is the call to treat the world 'as if' it were so. This is a religion in which experimentation is encouraged, as is openness to any experience which happens. Animism, like environmental action and ritual, is something to do, something to enact, far more than it is something to think or believe. Thus these eco-activists 'act on' their understanding and their experience of a living world.

If belief is not central to animists or Pagans, neither does their spirituality demand reverence towards deities or an engagement with the 'supernatural' or an interest in the 'transcendent'. The spirituality of many small-scale societies (including newly tribal groups like the Dongas, Flowerpots and other eco-activists) does not prioritise the 'supernatural' above the 'natural'. Trees and 'food' are no less important than unseen beings. The world is only inhabited by people: human people and other-than-human people. Among the latter are some who are easily accessible to the five generally acknowledged sense – they include trees, potatoes, humans, clouds and foxes – and others who require special etiquette, and even special techniques, before making themselves known. Similar ideas are discussed by Morrison (1992) and others in a special issue of *Religion* devoted to Native American religions. The ways in which contemporary Pagans attempt to convey what is of importance to them and their experience, makes it clear that similar analyses are applicable in British religious experience too.

Animist Experiences

This section comprises a series of paragraphs narrating typical experiences of British animists. The contexts for these experiences were not only protest and environmental action, but more relaxed occasions of pleasurable interaction with Nature. Two particular locations were significant in my participant observation: Skyworld camp on the route of the Newbury bypass and a wood in Northumberland in which seasonal festivals were celebrated.

One midwinter we were gathering holly, ivy and yew with which to decorate our homes for the festive season. This had begun with a general and relaxed explanation, to the wood itself, of the purpose of this visit. The wood was asked to share in the celebration of midwinter by helping transform human habitations into extensions of the Greenwood. No tree or bush was felled or even seriously damaged, only small quantities of fruiting greenery were taken. Each tree or bush was asked politely, verbally, if it would permit the cutting. People then waited for some sense that they were permitted, or they moved on to another tree. The ways in which people understood that permission was granted or refused varied considerably, and nobody offered their own experience as universally applicable or necessary. A bird call from the tree top, or a breeze gently moving a branch, an inner calm or sense that 'this is OK', a tingle up the spine, a voice saying 'yes' or 'no', or a sense of well-being and acceptance or participation were suggested. After cutting most people gave gifts to each tree. Some tied threads or strands of wool to the donor tree. Others applied spots of their saliva to the cut. Rarely a drop of blood was pricked from a cutter's own finger and dripped for the tree as a symbolic exchange of life. Some shared food or drink with the tree, usually placing or pouring it at the roots. All these actions were explained as being much like gifts exchanged with human relations or friends. The language of sacrifice or offering is sometimes used, and is then often seen as a reciprocal and mutual offering to and from each party. A similar narrative could describe other occasions where plants are cut by animist Pagans for food, festive-adornment or firewood.

On leaving the wood we came across a holly bush with abundant berries. Without pausing to ask permission a member of the group attempted to cut a sprig and was promptly swiped on the cheek by a very prickly twig. This was all the more remarkable given that no other part of the bush was affected by the very slight breeze then blowing. Although sympathetic, the rest of the group were somewhat amused at what they understood as the swiftness and direct response of the holly to the affront it had suffered.

The collecting of firewood is similarly surrounded by requests for permission and, when suitable, explanations of the need for it, followed by gratitude to the wood for fallen timber. Fires themselves are often treated not as mere utilities, but as living beings who give and receive gifts and participate in the event. "Feeding the fire" is more than a metaphor here.

Much of this background and regular respectful encounter is heightened in the more focused atmosphere of anti-road, quarry or runway camps. Rather than paying brief, friendly visits to a wood, the more activist Pagans move in and set up homes among the trees. Often up the trees. Tree-houses are built with care not to damage trees which, as the builders know, are almost certainly going to be felled before long. Toilet trenches are dug with care for tree roots and water sources. Tunnels and other defensive structures are constructed with similar care. But this is true too of environmentalists with more secular motives for participation. It would obviously be counter-productive to be destructive in these circumstances.

The activists, however, are engaged in eco-drama not only eco-action. They re-animate the slogan 'the personal is political' by affirming that 'the personal is political is spiritual'. Furthermore, this affirmation and rallying call is a circle, or an integrated circuit all of which must be empowered to be effective. On its own 'the spiritual is personal' might be simply reactionary, but when allied to an anarchist understanding of 'political' it becomes evocative (Purkis and Bowen 1997). At the same time, eco-actions in threatened woods are not only political statements against those who hold power over this land and its people (whether they be identified as the government, the police or multinational companies). They are ritual celebrations of the life of the land. Thus the trees contain not only protester's houses but are also decorated with symbols of their affection and commitment to the place. Pentagrams and runic symbols are made out of any available materials: fallen wood, cloth, bale-twine, menstrual blood, stones, chalk.

A visitor to a camp between confrontations might be privileged to a round of introductions. Some might make the mistake of thinking that as they are taken around they are being introduced to people and having their more-or-less temporary homes in the tree tops pointed out. They might think that the pointing out of a badger's set, a bat colony or a patch of bluebells is a celebration of the beauty of the place being protected. This would only be partly true. The eco-activists do not share the cosmology of the road-builders in which there is a dichotomy between people and their environment. The tour of the site is an introduction to a community of people, only some of whom are human. The trees, insects, bats, badgers, flowers, snails and others are all significant members of these places. Indeed, it is the integrity and diversity of the inhabited place that defines sacredness for the 'protesters'. In between exchanges with the road-builders there are frequent times of celebration. Musicians serenade the woods and their inhabitants, sometimes including those they confront. In the understanding of animists the whole community is engaged in action celebratory and protective of life. Living in the trees is not only a practical measure to slow down the devastation of a natural environment (on the grounds that human life is more important than non-human life), it is also an intimate experience of personal relationship.

Similarly, the celebration of a seasonal festival engages not only the human participants but the entire community. The trees not only provide gifts of firewood, they also bring their presence and pleasure. An unseen owl calling as it flies in a circle above a festival fire is taken to be more than mere coincidence. It is the owl's participation, observation and blessing. Again, Pagans narrate such happenings as common experiences and as un-exceptional but wonderful. This prepared me for responses to the flight of an eagle in a perfect circle above the dance grounds as the final honour song was ending at a pow wow hosted by the Mi'kmaq Nation in Newfoundland in 1996. Cries of 'kitpu' or 'eagle' simultaneously conveyed greetings to the eagle, expressed pleasure at its beauty and participation, drew everyone's attention to its flight, and declared that this flight demonstrated approval and success of the event. Owls are not rare in Britain, eagles are common along the Conne River, but their flight in particular ways at particular moments evokes a range of meaning and encourages further exploration of spiritual traditions in which such meaning is important. (I explore this process of re-traditionalisation in an article, currently in preparation, entitled "Becoming Traditional". This will refer to Jews, Pagans, Aboriginal Australians and the Mi'kmaq Nation.)

Among the other-than-human people who inhabit the world around us are some that are rarely seen even by those who 'believe' in them. British folklore names them variously as faeries,

elves, pixies, boggles and a host of others. These are now popularly portrayed as cute, diminutive and decorative. The recovery of an older tradition is taking place among Britain's animists, though it is perhaps best narrated in Terry Pratchett's comic fantasy, *Lords and Ladies* (1993), and playfully summarised when he writes

Elves are wonderful. They provoke wonder. Elves are marvellous. They cause marvels ... Elves are terrific. They beget terror ... No-one ever said elves are *nice*. Elves are *bad*.
(Pratchett 1993: 169-70)

This "badness" is not conceived by contemporary Pagans as moral evil, or implacable antagonism to humanity or anyone else. It is rather that, as in Pratchett's story, "they" (it is traditional not to name them too many times) are not us. They are one indigenous European version of the archetypal Trickster doing antisocial and sometimes dangerous things but creating culture or new possibilities in the process. Sometimes the tricks result in an increase of wealth, health and happiness: gold is found at the end of the rainbow. In the context of contemporary road-protests, the faerie-folk might be implicated in the mislaying of equipment or occasional senses of dislocation (as when someone finds themselves at a destination to which a well-travelled path should not lead). They are considered to be more than mythic justifications for mischievous activities (though they might function in this way too), but are as much part of the Earth's ecosystems as the trees, humans and midges. Their music is sometimes heard among the trees, perhaps at twilight, and their celebrations of the seasons harmonise with those of the human visitors to the Greenwood. Closer awareness of them is sometimes said to be enabled by the initiatory use of psychotropics or hallucinogenics, usually 'natural' ones such as psilocybin mushrooms. Some British animists thus continue the rehabilitation of hallucination not as 'false vision' but as 'enlightening vision', for which Ebersole has coined the term 'hallucignosis' (Ebersole 1995: 256-63).

A final example is of conversations around cooking and festive fires in which 'natural disasters' are discussed as possible responses to the environmental crisis. No single narrative is accepted as definitive or sufficient, or as a creedal statement or meta-narrative, but various possibilities are offered for debate. Hurricanes might not be merely inanimate weather complexes but beings who are 'angry' and giving due warning to humanity that things must change. Australian bush fires which threatened Sydney might have been warnings from the Earth or Gaia that she is running out of patience with humanity. This animation of the entire planet has wider currency than the experienced and thought-about animation of rocks and trees among contemporary Pagans. In it the Earth often seems a rather distant relative (an absent mother?) rather than the near neighbour evident in more localised animist narratives.

Hearing Voices

At the heart of religion is the experience of listening to voices. Christians hear God speaking through the Bible, preachers, in the inner 'still small voice', conscience, prophecy and 'words of knowledge' and even through the revelatory beauty of a sunset. Buddhists hear the authoritative voice of teachers with proper lineage, and also 'hear' the lesson taught by ubiquitous suffering. Shamans hear their spirits talking of health and of respect for the land. Jews hear God's words handed down on Sinai to Moses and, on Rosh HaShanah, they hear the *shofar* knowing that it is also heard by the Holy One in heaven.

An increasing number of people in Britain are listening to trees. They also listen to (as well as speak to) rocks, animals, spirits, rivers and everything else which can be considered alive. Their experience counters the conventional disassociation of the words 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' and even 'spirit' from matter, physicality, embodiment, sensuality and so on. They also challenge the idea that spirituality or religion is concerned primarily with the 'supernatural', 'transcendent' or 'invisible' world. Though many of them do 'believe' in the existence of beings unrecognised by scientists or by other religionists, they do not make such beings central to their worldview. Stories are told in which the experience of encountering such beings is central, but the stories are rarely if ever asserted as binding on others as descriptions of ontological reality. Such postmodern openness to the experience of others does not negate the fact that contemporary animists find their experiences and stories convincing. Their religious experience is engaged with the world of nature, of matter and embodiment. Their 'theology' is an aspect of Ecology in that to talk about deities and other-than-human people is to talk about species of beings who inhabit the Earth. The processes, methodologies and presentation of the discipline of Ecology are more useful here than disciplines arising out of Christian deity-talk (perhaps inverting Theology's claim to be the Queen of the Sciences).

Concluding thoughts

There are a number of problems for the researcher interested in religious experience. It is not merely the diversity of religions which makes it next to impossible to convincingly survey the entirety of the contemporary religious scene. It is that this diversity itself makes it impossible to define either 'religion' or 'religious experience' in one simple statement. Religion is not necessarily concerned with deities, the supernatural or the spirit as opposed to the body. It is not true of many of the religions of indigenous peoples that they are concerned with the 'transcendent' or 'the sacred' as opposed to 'the ordinary'. Te Pakaka Tawhai eloquently spoke for his people's tradition in locating religion in the daily quest for food and shelter (Tawhai 1988) and the animists of Skyworld camp expressed their religion in personal, political acts like maintaining a vegan communal kitchen in a threatened wood. Perhaps there is no single thing to which 'religion' refers, and academics studying religions will always be frustrated if they quest after some singular definition of their subject matter. Christianity may be about divine intervention, Ojibway spirituality may be about relationship and agency, Maori religion may be about 'doing violence with impunity', Buddhism may be about enlightenment. None of these things are equivalent and neither are most of the techniques by which they are achieved.

Other problems might be more briefly listed. Contemporary religious experience can be summed up by saying that many people are listening to voices and believe that what they hear validates their spirituality. Sometimes, but not always, they also believe that other spiritualities are invalidated by their experience. That is, religious experiences are frequently taken to prove 'my religion' true and 'yours' false. However, this is only because all religions evoke or provide experiences which can be called 'religious'. Although the researcher in Religious Studies (unlike the Theologian) has no brief to prove the veracity of religions or of their experiences, we misrepresent religions if we do not take these truth claims seriously. On the other hand, how are we to talk meaningfully about these things when the subject matter disallows any single definition? Religious experiences cannot appropriately be tested by comparison to a creed, at least not without becoming partisan and confessional. The danger of reductionism is inherent in this recognition of diversity: what else can an 'outsider' say but that experience(s) follow from beliefs, ideology or ideas? Or 'you get what you expect'. Just as truly as experiences reinforce

beliefs, so beliefs lead to experiences. Or at least, they lead to the recognition of certain beliefs as significant, as 'religious', and of others as irrelevant, misleading, mundane or sacrilegious.

Religious Studies and Anthropology both struggle with the attempt to be 'scientific' and to mitigate the fact that researchers often 'go native' and that 'natives' often 'do research'. Both of these are recognised, and both throw up interesting material for colleagues as for the researchers themselves. One issue, for example, is methodological: can an 'outsider' really see what is most significant to religious people? Can an 'insider' deal adequately with issues that are of legitimate interest to observers? For the researcher (insider or outsider) a more immediate problem arises with religious experience: what do you do when it happens? What place is there in academic writing about religion (by which I mean in Religious Studies) for simply noting that the researcher experiences things which seem to require their assent to that which they study? The flight of an owl need not be interpreted as legitimising a religion, but can simply be noted as having been considered meaningful. Nor, presumably, need the researcher concerned with Christianity agree that the evident wisdom of some biblical passages requires assent to the entirety of Christian teaching. But when similar things continue to happen at significant moments, or when many more texts appear congruent with the researcher's life, are they not compelled at least to acknowledge these as facts about the religion and the research? Howard Eilberg-Schwartz writes

Twentieth-century anthropology has insisted that we have a great deal to learn about ourselves from the study of the other... This is the myth that justifies the anthropological enterprise, a myth that says that the study of the other leads to enlightenment.
(Eilberg-Schwartz 1989: 87)

Can this happen in Religious Studies? Or would it turn us into theologians? The problem might be more straightforward for convinced postmodernists who acknowledge the multiplicity and pluralism of experience and explanation. Recent scientific understandings of the universe (Quantum and Chaos in particular) may also permit Religious Studies to continue to see itself as scientific: diversity is an integral part of life. The researcher is permitted to experience, safe in the knowledge that they can change gear and not be defined by that experience. This seems to be similar to James Cox's proposal that research involves 'methodological conversion' (Cox 1992 and 1996). The position is difficult in the case of those religions which demand renunciation of all other worldviews – since a merely methodological conversion is an incomplete one, is it really any improvement on Phenomenological *epochè*?

Finally, the study of contemporary animism reinforces challenges to predominant understandings of 'religion' (e.g. Morrison 1992) in which it is still seen as primarily a question of ideas about deities or the transcendent. Similarly, oppositions between 'spiritual' and 'material' or between 'natural' and 'supernatural' are not productive of an adequate understanding of animism. Such study might also challenge those who remain wedded to a myth of progress in which 'animism' is a primitive belief outgrown on contact with 'more advanced' religions. The animists of contemporary Britain reflect on their experiences in the context of recent scientific theories as well as of the writings of anthropologists and others interested in Primal Religions. The label 'animist' is not imposed on them, but chosen by them to display the heart of their religious experience. Alice Walker's essay subtitled, "Clear Seeing Inherited Religion and Reclaiming the Pagan Self" is another eloquent expression of the same worldview (though she does not use the word 'animist'). She concludes, "We begin to feel glad, and grateful to be *here*".

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His doctoral thesis concerned the diversity of Judaism in the late Second Temple time. Published as *The True Israel* by E.J. Brill (1996), it argues that neither 'pluralism' nor 'sectarianism' adequately summarises the situation. By exploring the uses of the names Jew, Hebrew and Israel in Ancient Jewish and Early Christian literature, it shows that the religious situation was relatively inclusive. His

continuing research in Judaism largely concerns Jewish participation in Inter Faith Dialogue (its motivations, difficulties and benefits). Results of a visiting research fellowship at the Parkes Library of Southampton University, exploring views of the Council of Christians and Jews, are now being prepared for publication.

He is perhaps more widely known for his interest in contemporary Paganism. *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism* (1997) was published simultaneously in the UK, USA and Australia. It is intended to be a textbook introducing the diversity and main interests of this nature-centred religion. He has also co-organised two international conferences on Paganism (Newcastle upon Tyne 1994 and Winchester 1997). An interest in Goddess Spirituality also led to his co-organising a colloquy on 'Ambivalent Goddesses' devoted to the study of goddesses and their devotees in a wide range of religions.

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RERC Second Series Occasional Paper 14
September 2000
Copyright © 1997 Religious Experience Research Centre
ISBN 0 906165 22 9