

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN LONDON

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Acknowledgements

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Preface

This paper, and the presentation which led to it, represents a trace of our experiences in 1998 when we undertook research into multicultural religious experience in London. We were delighted to have had the opportunity to share our findings with members of the Alister Hardy Society. What follows is a selection of viewings which offer insights into our methodology and practices, both ethnographic and analytical.

We would encourage readers to explore the appendix, which consists of the raw data of our study, before reading what we have to say about it. Our analysis is highly tentative, and, if used as a lens through which to view the data, may obscure more than it reveals.

Introduction

On a cold but bright February afternoon in 1998, we positioned ourselves upon the steps of St. Martin in the Fields. The nerve-settling exercise of listening to the strains of an unfamiliar composer (during a lunchtime concert) was followed by a swift exit into the crypt to take up cups of strong tea and coffee from which we ventured forth into the complete unknown with trepidation and fear!

Armed with a clutch of questionnaires and a letter of introduction from the university, and with tentative smiles on our faces, we approached the first members of the general public in order to ask: "Have you ever had an experience that you would call religious, spiritual, ecstatic, sacred, paranormal or mystical?" To our utter astonishment people responded, overwhelmingly, "Yes".

How was such a Venture Inaugurated?

In September 1997 a new initiative was launched for all new postgraduates in the Department of the Study of Religions at London's School of Oriental and African Studies: the implementation of "Theory and Method in the Study of Religions" within a live research project focusing on religious experience. It was a venture which was designed to accommodate the diversity of specialisations and life experiences of the formidable international student collective that gathered as conscripts and willing victims for this course. Given the body of students, the project couldn't be anything other than multi-cultural.

The first phase of this course consisted of an eight-week immersion into the work of key 20th-century theorists in the following areas:

Comparability and commensurability

Explanation in the study of religions

Hermeneutics

Semiotics and the study of language

Phenomenology and phenomenology of religion

Textual studies.

A further aspect of this process was team work. The class of 20 were divided into smaller units of three to six students which formed the basis of the later research groups. It was intended that all information and experience gleaned through this process would create the backbone of any future MPhil/PhD work. The first test in applying the work of theorists to the phenomenon of religious experience came in November 1997, when each group gave a presentation on one of the above topics to the whole class, plus invited guests.

We chose to work on semiotics, selecting the first revelation of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad, as related by the 8th-century biographer Ibn Ishaq. The text was selected because of its extraordinary literary qualities, even in English translation, and because of its status as an authentic religious experience within Muslim tradition. Our foray through the works of Claude Levi-Strauss, Derrida, Wittgenstein, Benjamin Lee Whorf and others was both illuminating and frustrating. In applying their models of analysis to an extract of religious experience, we found that their theories were not directly applicable to our potential work.

Where and how were we to begin? Help came from a not altogether inexperienced quarter. Having listened to our presentations, Simon Weightman, their head of the Department of the Study of Religions, came to the feedback session in order to respond to the variety of approaches that had been taken up. During the course of the discussion he was asked how one might find out if someone has had a religious experience. "Simple," was his reply, "you just ask them!"

Not content to take our august head of department's word for granted, Olga put this advice to the test the very next day at work, approaching the receptionist and asking if she minded being asked a rather strange question: had she ever had what might be described as a religious experience? "Yes" came the reply. Could she say what it was? Yes she could, and she did. Would she mind taking part in a University of London survey? No she wouldn't mind.

That was it! Simplicity was the key. (We had learnt from the armchair problematising on semiotics that the project would throw up enough difficulties of its own.) The simple approach appeared to work. Reporting the results of this trial run back to the colleagues in our small group, all were agreed. We were up and running. Each of the other small groups involved in the same overall project went on to develop their own strategies for approaching the general topic *Religious experience in London*.

The final task of the third term was to inaugurate the ethnographic process by making decisions about what aspects of religious experience we wished to explore, why, and how. In the course of ethnographic studies, social researchers are advised first of all to formulate their research question, that is, the question which they are asking themselves, and which they hope their research will answer. However, we moved straight on to the questions we wanted to pose to people. Buoyed with advice and a series of positive responses, we knew what we wanted to know: do people have religious experiences, and if so, what are they?

So, theoretical input over, we adjourned to the bar, where we sat ourselves down and wrote out our questionnaire [for the list of questions and responses, see the Appendix, at pages 13-31]. We started with Question 2, a closed question: "Have you ever had an experience that you would categorise as sacred, religious, spiritual, ecstatic, paranormal or mystical?", asking people to indicate which was most applicable. This would determine whether they had had such an experience or not. Next, we formulated Question 3, an open question in four parts: (a) What was the experience? (b) When, and how many times did it occur? (c) Under what conditions? (d) What effects has it had? Conscious of being part of a much larger enterprise, we decided that statistical data could be useful, as it might form the basis of integrating our findings with those of the other small groups in the class. So we included Question 4, requesting basic information about the person concerned (gender, age, occupation, and country of origin).

There was no question of flippancy in the speed at which these three questions were arrived at. Our experiences had led us to a certainty that simplicity was the key. Of the options available to us, we elected for a questionnaire. This choice was dictated by the time limitations imposed upon us: one academic year, with an MA examination at the end of it. To have ventured into the more intimate and perhaps more probing avenues of information gathering such as undertaking personal interviews, taping and videoing, were not viable options for us. As a result of our exercise in semiotics, however, we remained keenly aware of the potential restrictions and problematics that a text-gathering exercise would generate.

Mindful of the extremely personal and intimate details that we would be requesting of people, we introduced a filter question, in order to direct our future respondents to our general area of interest, employing the open and inclusive term 'sublime'. Our intention was to employ the word 'sublime' not in any technical sense: we were ignorant of the word's use in the aesthetic theories of Burke and Kant – as, presumably, were most of our respondents. Question 1 became: "What kinds of things have made you feel most sublime?"

The planning of our questionnaire took about ten minutes in total.

Methodological Preliminaries

The data that we will be studying consists of the individual descriptions of experiences, rather than the experiences themselves. To consider what relationship might exist between the two is beyond the scope of this particular study. Descriptions of an experience will be constrained only partly by the actual initial experience itself. Other constraints may be suggested at will: the person's memory of the experience is subject to change, they may give different accounts of it in different situations, their attitude to having had the experience will affect what they say about it, and so on. Derrida has shown that we cannot know the 'signified', but only the interaction of 'signifiers'.¹ We might suppose, then, that direct study of experience can only be done by the experiencer, who need not mediate the experience through linguistic forms. But this is a fallacy. The direct study of a religious experience is not possible even to the experiencer, for the same problems which attend the linguistic representation of the experience to an outsider also attend the mental representation of the experience to the insider. Long before we asked for accounts of experiences, each experience had already been interpreted and adjusted to integrate it into the life of the experiencer. Each such adjustment, each such integration is unique to the person whose experience it was. The difference between the experience and the account will thus vary from person to person.

We cannot study religious experiences. All we can study is the accounts of the experiences of others, or the memory of our own experiences.

The data of our study was not so much collected as elicited. It did not exist as data until we asked for it. We were therefore co-creators of the data. This consideration highlights our inability to extrapolate behind the accounts onto the experiences themselves. Our study is of texts and, like all texts, these ones emerged from very specific situations under very specific stimuli. The text is our only knowable object. Any theory of why the text is as it is is unverifiable. The scope of our project therefore is limited: we are not studying religious experience, but a small quantity of accounts of religious experiences. We are nonetheless able to make comments on the language and idioms used by our informants in the representation of their experiences.

Our survey was small and may well be unrepresentative. The question of how a representative survey of Londoners might be done is a very troublesome one, which we were unable to confront because our time was so limited.

In the early stages of our project, if we had been asked what we were going to do with the data, we would have to have said that we didn't quite know. Our exact methodology was to be evolved according to the data. We didn't yet know what that data was, or what kind of analysis it would submit to.

The question of whether or not there is any supernatural source of religious experiences, though no doubt vital for some of our respondents, does not have to be asked by the researchers. Since the data consists of texts, the focus is phenomenological and anthropocentric rather than theocentric.

The Need for an Empathetic Approach

Throughout this project we were acutely aware of the extremely sensitive nature of our work. It would be fair to say, retrospectively, that our approach was both unconsciously and consciously empathetic. We already knew that there were people who had religious/spiritual/mystical experiences. Thus, following the compilation of our questionnaire in December 1997, we returned in January 1998 to consider our research question and our methods of eliciting information. Our reflections on the subject matter of our project created a recognition of the 'sacred space' within individuals, which we hoped people would wish to reveal to us in some measure. How were we to go about initiating this process?

We felt that religious experiences were in the domain of intensely private and personal matters, and thus we could do nothing other than approach people personally, with sensitivity and interest. In fact it was our first question ("What kinds of things have made you feel most sublime?") that directed our choice of location, and of whom to approach.

So, whom did we want to ask? Definitely not people who were part of a recognised religious group. We felt that it would have been all too easy, and perhaps predictable, to put our questions to a religious community. What we were after was something as yet unknown to us, elusive, and possibly non-existent.

Therefore it had to be the general public: but where? Oxford Street was out of the question because people only had one thing on their minds there (shopping!) and we weren't prepared to run the gauntlet in such a predatory environment. No: we desired a place which combined elements of privacy and stimulation, a haven of repose in the bustle of London, a place where peoples of all religious practices and cultures could find a time and place for their 'sacred spaces'.

The situation which fulfilled all these criteria was St. Martin-in-the-Fields and the immediate environs of Trafalgar Square. The choice of location and personnel provided us with the means of establishing the specific focus of our research: we were not interested in the religious experience of any particular group, religious or otherwise, currently located in London, but in those aspects of the experience of ordinary people which may be said in some way to be religious. We use the word 'religious' here in a suggestive rather than a definitive manner: we are interested in experiences which have a bearing on issues of deep meaning, truth and purpose, rather than ones which occur within a framework or situation conventionally known as religious. We hoped that this approach would enable us to study something pertinent to most people, despite the popular contemporary apathy towards conventional religion.

The performance of this operation² involved two types of consciousness. The first, which may be described as unconscious, was manifested in our natural and spontaneous feelings of empathy, sensitivity and interest in our subject matter. The second deployment could be termed 'professional empathy', which was applied in the field and in the subsequent analysis of texts.

Thus our empathetic approach was informed by our personal engagement, simplicity of purpose and honesty. In return, we were entrusted with some of the most intimate and profound life experiences of the people we came across.

In the Field

To go out and confront the general public in London, requires something. We are not sure what. We were novices: neither of us had ever engaged in any sort of ethnographic research before. How were we to approach people, and how would they react? Particularly in view of the nature of the questions we would be putting to them, we couldn't know. Nevertheless, it was our intention to empower our respondents with every facility to convey the nature of their experiences to us, by constructing an ethnographically situated, semi-structured, focused encounter, wherein a narrative of a real-life situation could be meaningfully relayed and sympathetically received.³

In the spring of 1998, contact was made through personal approach to members of the public, colleagues and friends, and after a brief introduction the closed Question 2 ("Have you ever had an experience that you would describe as sacred, religious, spiritual, ecstatic, paranormal or mystical?") was put verbally. If respondents answered in the affirmative they were invited to complete the questionnaire. Sensitive to the intimate nature of the material being requested, we thanked those who declined to assist us further for their time. Respondents who participated were accorded due time to represent their data, some filling in their answers there and then, others taking the questionnaire away and returning it by post.

We were surprised again at the intensity of responses: many people simply lit up, some immediately started to pour their hearts out verbally. Sometimes it was too much to take and we were almost compelled to say "Don't tell me, just write it down!" Moments of embarrassment were juxtaposed with deep sensations of having suddenly made intimate personal contact. The after-effects of an afternoon's data-collection were a combination of exhaustion and exhilaration. We were delighted by the responses, but we found that we were often washed out from this high-energy activity.

People wanted answers: we felt sure that many of our respondents were hoping for our work to provide some sort of explanation or validation of their extraordinary experiences.

We did not record all the positive and negative replies: however, an estimated 70% or more of those who were approached responded "yes" to our first question. Not all of those who responded positively filled in the questionnaire or posted it back, so we calculated a figure of 65% positive responses, based on the number of completed questionnaires that we received. These figures are not percentages of passers-by who had had such an experience, but only percentages of those approached: we very quickly became adept (or so we thought) at making a snap visual judgement of which people were likely to respond positively.⁴

A high degree of empathy existed in this exercise: our empathy towards the people whom we approached, and theirs towards us. It is impossible to determine even now the vital chemistry that allowed such a successful line of communication to be set into motion, but, employing a retrospective reflexivity, we think that it was in no small measure due to our being situated at an opportune point in time: our interest in religious experiences seemed to coincide with, and thus be a part of, a general interest in them amongst the public at large.

The Effects of the Experiences Reported

This section is an analysis of the responses to Question 3d: "What effect has it had?". Most people responded, some enthusiastically, to this question. They spoke in terms of what their experience has meant to them. As researchers we were more interested in the difference an experience makes to the biography of the experiencer, than in the reported nature of the experience. We found that our respondents had transformed their own experiences from being a private series of consciousness-moments into being a resource for the construction of a self-narrative, a story.

Everybody has such a story: ideally, the story has the ability to assimilate and understand each new moment of experience and each new interaction, however strange, between the self and the world. This understanding ability of the story is far more important than its contents or details. It allows human beings to match the physical continuity of their body with a corresponding psychical continuity.

The ontological basis of a person's physical aspect is body: the ontological basis of a person's psychical aspect is story. Without story there is no person. Each story is generated totally through one individual: sensations are filtered through the existing story to become experience, and then the existing story is filtered through that experience to become a slightly different story, which in turn will promote different intentions and different imaginings in the person. Thus, the stranger the initial sensations, the more likely they are to have an effect on the story.

Of course, this is an extremely crude picture. The story is not so unitary as the physical body it is associated with, and every person's story consists of a constellation of sub-stories, some relatively independent, some relatively short-lived.

Most of our respondents spoke of the effects of their experiences in terms of their internal story. Some spoke of an effect in terms of what they have done. In these cases, their doings, having been performed self-consciously, are filtered through their story. Any unself-conscious effects there may have been do not figure in the accounts given.

We have categorised the effects reported into five main groups. Some respondents reported effects of several group-types. Pretty much all the effects reported fall into one or other of the groups. The first three groups are fairly loose.

1. Spiritual Tonic

The first effect-type is a change in the internal atmosphere of the experiencer, often of an emotional nature, lasting for a short time. The general effect is that of feeling better: key words would be boost (4), comfort (5, 23), encouragement (11, 40), moved (14), joy and gratitude (22), peace (23), elevation (32). Several respondents speak in terms of having received something through the experience, such as confidence and faith (6), hope (11), clarity (34, 37), guidance (40). The experience has had the effect of a spiritual tonic.

This effect is typical of experiences which have recurred. Some respondents said that the tonic effect can be recreated at will by remembering the experience (3, 13, 15).

2. Long-term Change

An effective, long-term change in the internal or external life of the experiencer which may be expressed as a kind of conversion. Some examples are: "Guided me onto the path of self-

discovery" (1) "My whole outlook on life has changed ... I never worry about life any more" (10) "I became Hindu" (18) "I got my act together" (21) "It's brought me peace" (23) "Made our life complete" (27) "It gave me the strength to stop abusing drugs after 10 years" (28)

Four respondents suggested that their occupation has been changed or determined by their experience. (Respondent 8 is "a Roman Catholic priest now, due to that experience", 19 teaches music, 34 is "learning more about religion", respondent 38 retired as a result.)

3. Knowledge of Reality

Many respondents reported having received knowledge or awareness of reality, the true nature of things, through their experiences. They speak as if one of their prime concerns is to map the world in their heads as closely as possible, and as if their special experiences have allowed them to do this in a deeper way than other more mundane experiences. We might even hypothesise that experiences would stand out as special just because of their making a large contribution to such mapping.

There is much mention of various beliefs arising from the experiences related: "Belief in Lord Rama, Krishna" (18); "I do believe in spirits following this experience" (25) "Clarified my belief in a God/force" (37) "The effect is to make me believe in a level of reality beyond or coexisting with the more obvious one we live in" (38) "A belief in a supreme power" (39).

Many respondents stopped short of mentioning the word belief, but had certainly had an ontological or metaphysical awareness, had been shown something important about the way things are. Key words here were aware, realisation and feeling: "Made me aware of the reality of some force of evil ... at the same time showing me the power of the name of Jesus" (6) "A realisation that God is everywhere" (9) "It has given me a greater awareness of the planet as a living being, and my responsibility towards it" (15) "Left me with a feeling of the oneness of nature and life/death" (25) "It has made me realise that there are connections between our subconscious reality and conscious one" (31) "Made me very aware of the spiritual/mystical/religious dimension in life" (34) "I feel that non-rational responses to things, people and events are to be valued ... I often feel that ordinary, everyday experience is second-best" (36)

The idea that the receipt of rare knowledge puts the knower in a position of special responsibility was stated twice (15, 30) and was implied elsewhere, particularly through mentioning Christian faith, which we understand as normally implying responsibility.

In three cases (2, 7, 35) the experience did not provide knowledge so much as show that there is some further knowledge to be attained, and so point out the incompleteness of present knowledge. These three examples show an attitude of wonder. In most of the other cases the awareness or knowledge given is vague and incomplete, but incorrigible.

4. Connections with the Deceased

Four people mentioned that their experience had effected a comforting connection with dead relatives (23, 24, 25, 33: 2 also concerns death). This may be seen as an awareness of the nature of death and beyond. We would imagine that if our research were continued, there would consistently be responses of this type.

5. Negative Effects

A small number of effects reported were negative, causing paranoia (17), worry (26), fear (31), disturbance (30), restlessness (36), or inner pressure (38). These last three cases mentioned are not unambiguously negative: the negative feeling serves as a stimulus for the

seeking of a higher type of happiness, a type which would be unknown were it not for the experience. Perhaps these cases can be allied with those mentioned under group three above, in which rare knowledge brings a consequent responsibility.

Reflections on the Sublime

Given that the answers to Question 1 constituted such a small fraction of the data we had received, our reflections on the sublime took a very, very long time. We listened and listened to the cacophony of sounds issuing from the texts,⁵ unable to discern what they were communicating to us. Introduced as a filter question, we did not expect Question 1 to reveal anything of great import to our investigation of religious experience. However, in the responses we received there seemed to be embedded a general attitude to sublimity which took us completely by surprise.

We were operating on the principle of the 'sublime' as something transcendental, elevated, exalted or 'other', but the responses we obtained defied our presuppositions, giving instead a highly physical and concrete interpretation of the word, often relating extremely specific causes for a sublime feeling conceived in terms of mental or sensual pleasure. This, we thought, was worth exploring further.

After a period of almost three months the first traces appeared to us, in the form of a series of triggers of sublime experiences. Further, these triggers seemed to fall into three broad categories which we referred to as the people group, the nature group and the religion group. We would wish to emphasise that this classification is personal and thus highly subjective, and that everyone who approached this data would perceive something different within it.

The People Group

In the people group, sensations of the sublime were evoked through intensely personal interactions with other people in an atmosphere of love. Respondents described the existential qualities of "being in love" (1), "falling in love" (6) and "being with the one I love" (9), supplemented with physical acts of love: "good sex with someone you love" (1), "sex with a particular man" (2); and explicit mention of partners: "to be happily married to the one who is perfect for me" (29).

The vitality of the experience of bringing forth life was alluded to in the four descriptions of childbirth (6, 14, 27, 38). However, the general tone was one of appreciation of the intimacy of being with others, sometimes symbolised by something extremely specific, for example "hearing my son's voice" (6).

The Nature Group

The nature group expressed in various ways feelings inspired by the natural world as a super-personal and super-cultural reality. There was mention of "the beauty of creation" (6), "being in beautiful places in nature" (9) and "gardening, sitting in the sunshine, being surrounded by highly scented flowers" (34). Other responses suggested the idea of the dwarfing of the individual self in the face of a grand, impersonal other, alluding to a macrocosmic beauty and a sense of the awesome: "watching shooting stars at the top of a mountain" (37); "being in places of great natural beauty, usually places with great vistas and endless horizons. The sort of places that make me feel appropriately small in the scheme of things, one part of a larger whole" (15).

The Religion Group

Turning to the third and possibly most nebulous of the three groups, the religion group consisted of those triggers which are ordinarily found as part of recognised institutional systems and processes of worship. Here membership of religious institutions was acknowledged through reference to rites: “Marrying my wife and knowing God was present. Receiving absolution for my sins. Receiving the Lord at Communion” (4); “Ordination, celebrating the Eucharist” (5). Mention was also made of prayer (21, 26, 28) and meditation (2, 9, 28).

Also included under this heading are artistic, architectural and musical triggers. These may not initially seem to be institutional triggers, but they are: we all know what galleries, concert halls and public buildings are for, and the arts are all subject to various conventions world wide. Mention was made of the creation of art as well as its appreciation (10, 19). The trigger “being in places of spirituality” (9) is meaningful for the person who described it as such; no further data was supplied, and we inferred none, but it is clear that a convention concerning what constitutes a place of spirituality must lie behind the ability of the phrase to communicate something meaningful to other.

Each and every trigger expressed in answer to Question 1 is as meaningful as all the others. Each expression reveals an individuality, an alterity⁶, which remains fundamentally ‘other’, despite the attempt to unify such expressions under the blanket term sublime.

Paradigm Shift, Autonomy and the Microcosm

The overall impression given by the respondents was that the sublime is deeply rooted in the elements of life, and attested by the ever-present expression being (“being in love”, “being in beautiful places”, etc). As evidenced in our project, the sublime is very much a people’s thing: it is physical, tangible and part of our very being. The difference between this interpretation and our expectations suggested that perhaps there had been a paradigm shift⁷ in the meaning of the term, from the sublime-as-exalted to the sublime-as-elemental. On the other hand, could the sublime-as-exalted merely have been a superannuated abstraction, kept alive by religious institutions, which we as students of religion have unwittingly taken on?

Our speculations in the arena of the sublime indicated to us that cultural changes are taking place and are being made manifest in the microcosmic⁸ context of individual experience. It is significant that the favourite term chosen from our list to describe the experiences reported was ‘spiritual’, a word which perhaps implies a much more individual and personal matrix than does the traditional ‘religious’. Spirituality is a microcosmic business and people are practising and acknowledging it in their own ways. The evidence of the texts would have it that people do not really need to be told how to participate in sublime phenomena by institutions, and perhaps they never have; in this regard they are autonomous agents. Private experiences have private meanings, and the institutional reflection of those meanings will lag behind the experiences themselves. Where a clear rupture is visible between institutions and experiences, the institutions concerned will only survive by re-employing their old terms with new meanings, or by adopting the new terms which appear. After all, Feyerabend has drawn our attention to “man as the measure of all things”.⁹

Conclusions

Ultimately, as we have suggested, ours is not the kind of research from which important conclusions are drawn. The word 'conclusion' has an unnecessarily final feel to it, and as such is perhaps not really appropriate for the social sciences, where truth, being situated, can be expected to shift through time and space. Instead of concluding, we have presented our results so far. It is clear on the basis of our pilot study that a larger-scale project is viable, and such a project will form the basis of Olga's doctoral work.

The religious experiences described to us had led to extremely private conclusions in individual lives. In the same way, our experience of performing our survey has had a great, but tangential, effect on our general outlook. In other words, the real conclusions of this research are personal, and could neither be expressed nor defended academically.

A criticism that could be levelled at our work is that we took no account of other contemporary studies of religious experience prior to commencing this research. This was a conscious choice on our part, driven partly by the knowledge that we were unaware of the paradigm in which we would be operating; unaware, that is, of the intellectual and personal baggage that would be brought to the work. We feel that our choice has been justified, partly by the evidence revealing a paradigm shift concerning the sublime, and partly by the opportunity afforded to us through this presentation of our work. Retrospectively, we can speculate that part of the success of this project may have been due to our being placed within a time that facilitated the collection of such information. The planning of the project, compilation of questions, our decision to implement a personal approach, and the public's engagement in the whole enterprise, all point to our unconscious location within the context of possible dialogue about religious experience.

Marghanita Laski's description and analysis of ecstatic experiences¹⁰ focuses on experiences which come "out of the blue": she deems those which follow from a deliberately applied stimulus to be trivial. We do not. We surmise that there is a close connection between what people do in their leisure time and what makes them feel exalted. The applying of a stimulus in the hope of inducing extraordinary experience is a testament to the value of such experience and an example of its integration into a person's life. That people will apply such stimulus shows their keenness to alchemise their lives to fuller meaning with the aid of non-rational elements.

It was only after we had completed our initial analysis of our material that we were introduced to the work of the Religious Experience Research Centre, then at Westminster College, Oxford. This centre, set up by Sir Alister Hardy more than 30 years ago, has built up a large corpus of material and publishes occasional papers whose basic orientation and general conclusions, we were delighted to find, are consonant with our own.

Three main points of agreement can be identified between the findings of our research and those of the Religious Experience Research Centre. Firstly, these so-called religious experiences are commonplace. Secondly, they are identified and interpreted as religious (or as mystical, spiritual, etc.) experiences by the people who experience them: the appellation 'religious 'experience' is not imported by theological experts, but chosen by the experiencers to describe something that they see as being in a special category. Thirdly, and consequently, in the words of David Hay¹¹, "for the majority of people in western society, religious interpretations of reality are not mere abstractions, but are rooted in personal experience": this was borne out in our study by the physical, concrete nature of the experiences related and their triggers.

NOTES

1. See Derrida (1974), page 7: “there is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language”.
2. Indicating an externally fabricated process wherein the interpreter doesn’t passively absorb the traces of the ‘other’, but operates on them in such a way as to redistribute them. (Aherne’s interpretation of Michel de Certeau’s historiography; Aherne 1995, pages 15-21.)
3. These terms, and the subtleties of social research which they bring to light, are further explored in Sarantankos (1993).
4. On what basis such a snap judgment was made, we do not know. It may well be that we just approached those whom we liked the look of.
5. These sounds are called “noises off” by de Certeau (see Aherne, *op. cit.*, page 12): this approach acknowledges that the text is ‘other’ and that *it* must set the agenda, not the researchers.
6. ‘Alterity’ pertains to how ‘otherness’ is recognised and accorded *its own* space in the process of interpretation (see Aherne, *op. cit.*, pages 9-10).
7. The term comes from Kuhn (1962).
8. Mary Douglas (1998) has brought our attention to the microcosm, the individual human unit with its consciousness, as the life-organising principle of human phenomena. Cultural and interpersonal paradigms are built from the aggregate of individual microcosms and are conceived on the same model.
9. Feyerabend (1987), page 44. Here he is quoting Plato’s *Theaetetus*, and goes on to propose a “democratic relativism” (page 54) in which “citizens, and not special groups, have the last word in deciding what is true or false, useful or useless for their society” (page 59).
10. Laski (1961).
11. Hay (1990), page vii.

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APPENDIX

This appendix contains an exact transcript of all 40 written responses to our Questionnaire. They are arranged in order of question number: under each question, all the responses are printed, numbered 1-40. Square brackets have been used to indicate where it was impossible to determine what was written by respondents.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Question 1: What kinds of things have made you feel most sublime?

Question 2: Have you ever had an experience that you would categorise as:

sacred?

religious?

spiritual?

ecstatic?

paranormal?

or mystical? (Please indicate which term(s) are most appropriate.)

Question 3: If your response to the above question is 'yes', please complete the following:

(a) What was the experience?

(b) When (how many times) did it occur?

(c) Under what conditions?

(d) What effect has it had?

Question 4: Please indicate your

Gender

Age

Occupation

And Country of Origin

Question 1: What kinds of things have made you feel most sublime?	
1	Good sex, guided meditations. Good sex with someone you love and being in love.
2	Water, sex with a particular man, being in nature with no people about.
3	Meditation, drugs, sport.
4	Marrying my wife and knowing God was present. Receiving absolution for my sins. Receiving the Lord at Communion.
5	Feeling Gods presence through other people's actions and words and through my own actions and words.
6	Falling in love, the birth of my children, ordination, celebrating the Eucharist, the beauty of creation, receiving the gift of tongues, having the family around me, hearing my son's voice.
7	1,000 different things a day – not all of them pleasant except momentarily.
8	<i>no answer</i>
9	Being in beautiful places in nature. Being in places of spirituality. Music. Being with one I love. Meditation.
10	Feeling the presence of God in my life. God helping me and giving me strength to go on.
11	Thinking of people I love while looking at the sky. Painting – after the act recognising the work done as being praiseworthy. People in good moods. Piero della Francesca, Van Gogh's paintings.
12	<i>no answer</i>
13	Trees, the sky, being high up with a huge beautiful view. Love.
14	Birth of our two children. Some church services, especially when hymns are ones I know well and are very uplifting.
15	Being in places of great natural beauty, usually places with great vistas and endless horizons. The sort of places that make me feel appropriately small in the scheme of things, one part of a larger whole.
16	Love, nature, God, the spiritual.
17	Thinking that I have [been] there but never been at the place.
18	<i>no answer</i>
19	Playing music of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms, Elgar, Purcell, Schubert.
20	Happiness with people.
21	Prayer, exercise, kissing.

22	When I meet with divine persons who are highly spiritually elated I feel I am small.
23	<i>no answer</i>
24	<i>no answer</i>
25	Sitting at dawn in the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon, Burma. Being in desert places – Sahara, Thav, Gobi. Moments with all my family at work in the garden. Listening to live performances of music – <i>Turandot, Tristan and Isolde</i> .
26	My Christian beliefs – prayer, sitting in church etc.
27	The birth of our children and grandchild.
28	Meditation and prayer.
29	To be happily married to the one who is perfect for me.
30	Being in sacred places such as cathedrals and temples, some pieces of music and some works of art.
31	Peacefulness, comfort, achievements, love.
32	Experiencing the effect of the creation and energy represented in the construction of all forms of ‘art’ (painting, architecture, literature), expression of energy and life.
33	– define (sublime)
34	Listening to classical music, especially Mozart and Baroque. Gardening, sitting in the sunshine, being surrounded by highly scented flowers. Christmas. Being in places of worship – all faiths. Being with my family. Being loved and loving.
35	Sunbathing – I was lying on a beach in Turkey about 5 years ago and although I am a sun worshipper, I have never in my life had such an experience as I had then. Sublime would sum it up. I felt as though I had died and was floating and it was the most wonderful feeling I have ever experienced in my life. I hope that’s the way you feel when you die.
36	Drugs, sex, some places, one time when I was a teenager.
37	Lying in the bath with candles and scented oils around. Watching shooting stars at the top of a mountain. Silently wandering in cathedrals.
38	Landscape – sea, mountains etc. Liturgy – the mass (I’m an Anglican). Paintings – particularly medieval ones. Childbirth (afterwards not while it was happening). Poetry. Prayer – the type when you’re very still and then you seem to drop.
39	Having made a good speech and being congratulated by someone in high office who previously thought I was a dim wit perhaps! But knowing God was in the driving seat.
40	(Sublime: of the most exalted, grand or noble kind; awe inspiring) Natural surroundings: wild flowers, mountains, trees, lakes, etc.

Question 2: Have you ever had an experience that you would categorise as: sacred, religious, spiritual, ecstatic, paranormal or mystical? (Please indicate which term(s) are most appropriate.)

No	sacred	religious	spiritual	ecstatic	para-normal	mystical	Additional Comments
1		✓	✓		✓		
2	✓		✓		✓	✓	
3			✓	✓			
4	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
5	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
6	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
7	✓		✓	✓	✓		
8		✓					Only tentatively chosen for no better alternative
9			✓			✓	
10	✓	✓	✓				
11		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Synchronically noticed
12						✓	
13			✓				
14		✓	✓				
15	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Many experiences, all different. Prefers mystical term
16		✓	✓		✓	✓	
17						✓	
18		✓					
19			✓	✓			
20			✓				
21	✓	✓	✓				
22	✓	✓	✓				
23			✓		✓		

No	sacred	religious	spiritual	ecstatic	para-normal	mystical	Additional Comments
24					✓		
25		✓	✓		✓		
26		✓			(✓)	(✓)	Yes, dreams I have come true
27		✓					
28	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Meditation?
29			✓				
30		✓	✓			✓	
31		✓		✓	✓		
32	✓		✓			✓	
33		✓	✓		✓		
34	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
35				✓	✓		
36			✓	✓		✓	
37		✓					
38	✓	✓	✓			✓	
39	✓			✓			
40	✓	✓	✓				Sacred: (i) exclusively dedicated to or appropriated (to a god or to some religious purpose); made holy by religious association. Religious: devoted to religion; pious, devout; of or concerned with religion.

Question 3: If your response to the above question is ‘yes’, please complete the following: (a) What was the experience? (b) When (how many times) did it occur? (c) Under what conditions? (d) What effect has it had?		
1	a	Religious: visits to synagogue, traditional meals/ceremonies, family occasions, repeatedly since childhood.
	b	Spiritual: guided meditations – in group several times. Healing – feeling of connect- edness/power to help.
	c	Contact with nature. In a group seminar, I felt my heart open on the last day. It didn’t last long but it guided me onto the path of self-discovery.
	d	Paranormal: telepathy, twinges of pain when people describe painful experiences – even though they haven’t specified where - I’ve felt them in the same spot the other person did.
2	a	I’ve had quite a few mystical, paranormal – what other people may term paranormal, at the time they felt completely “normal” to me, experiences. The experience I’ve had most frequently which involves other people (day to day I have many experiences which other people term spiritual) is death. I used to be a nurse and had many experiences of my patients dying. I’ve always felt death to be quite natural and feel comfortable with the subject. I always felt it was an honour to ‘look after’ this major transition for people. I felt it important that a person was never laid out before they had left their body completely – a process which varies from person to person. So the experiences were to be with some- one at the end of their physical death and be very aware of them until they had actually left their body.
	b	In hospital many times.
	c	I was a nurse in charge of that person’s care or often asked to care for dying patients when other members of the team weren’t comfortable with it.
	d	People think I’m a looney! I don’t often talk about these things. It has made me wonder what things are my imagination and what is actual. Made me think more about why other people so often fear death and everything around it and why I don’t? I’ve read a few more things around the subject as a result (so I know if I’m looney, I’m not alone!) Kubler-Ross etc.
3	a	A post-meditative state. The experience itself was a combination of tremendous calm and energy and oneness with everything around, particularly nature. There was also a great ‘whooshing’ sound in the head as if one had ‘tuned in’ to a general, all pervasive spiritual or natural energy of some kind. It was incredibly soothing and rejuvenating at the same time. This did not happen during meditation but immediately afterwards.
	b	The experience described above happened only once. The other experiences mentioned (sport & drugs) have happened more often, have been ‘euphoric’ in type & haven’t seemed as inexplicable & extraordinary as that described above.
	c	During a meditative weekend where the concentration was on breathing – particularly timing one’s breathing to chanting at different speeds, slow, medium and fast. The actual tangible experience comes once having come around or out of the meditative state.
	d	None, except that it is memorable & seemed very healthy at the time, & now in retrospect.

4	a b c d	<p>The same answers in Question 1 most definitely applies.</p> <p>Whenever I receive or am involved in the Sacraments but always more so at Easter and Christmas.</p> <p>When the material/working/outside world has been put aside and I am able to concentrate on spiritual life.</p> <p>I'm afraid this is the crunch!!! I come away with all the good intentions and feelings of happiness thinking I can do so much good for the world and it only lasts a short time until the next time I pray or talk to the Lord and my spirits are lifted again, but that's what being a Christian is all about I suppose!!!</p>
5	a b c d	<p>1. Being married to my husband and experiencing his love. 2. Caring for the sick especially the dying or those in great pain or who are experiencing fear. 3. Being in church, both at Mass and during the week on my own. Being on my own in the church and talking to God also gives me the opportunity to be still and "listen" to God as well. 4. When I am experiencing fear ie: During a car crash I was in. Being intimidated and bullied by colleagues. At 3am when I feel like the only person awake and go over all the problems I think I have! 5. Through reading the Bible and writings from others of any religion, faith, creed etc.</p> <p>2, 3, 4 are frequent occurrences. (Approximately 3-4 times per month).</p> <p>To "hear" God and "feel" his presence I need to be alone and still. Experiencing his love through others can happen any time, anywhere, and in any circumstances.</p> <p>My relationship with God has given me stability and comfort in knowing that whatever happens in my life God will always be with me and will give me the courage, wisdom and love to deal with it. I am now able to figure where previously I could not, and when I feel unable to forgive/hurt/angry/frustrated. I can offer both these feelings to God. I carry much less emotional baggage with me than I used to. I have no doubt that ultimately "Gods will be done".</p>
6	a b C	<p>(sacred) 1. Ordination – a feeling of being set apart not just by the Bishop but of God actually affirming my call. (religious) 2. An ongoing relationship with God – even as a young child feeling his presence very near. (spiritual) 3. Awe-struck by the beauty of creation – especially one sun set – which was so bright it took my breath away. (ecstatic) 4. The birth of my children – overwhelming sense of joy – bursting from within. (paranormal) 5. Being involved with exorcisms – both of places and people. (mystical) 6. Receiving the gift of tongues out of the blue just before sleep.</p> <p>1. Grew to a climax at ordination 2. On going 3. ditto 4. twice — two sons 5. 2 ocasions 6. At night having returned to England after a traumatic time in the West Indies.</p> <p>1. Surrounded by thousands of praying Christians 2. Mostly on my own 3. Often on holiday</p>

8	a	When I went to attend the Eucharist with my family, around the age 7-10, I always saw/felt the priest who was ministering them, transformed, from ordinary human being before Mass, into Jesus Christ when vested and offering Mass, and then back to ordinary human being after.
	b	Every time I went to Mass.
	c	During Mass/the Eucharist.
	d	I am a Roman Catholic priest now, due to that experience. Though my reasons for being so, or wanting to be so, changed over the years as I grew, the original impetus was the desire to be Jesus Christ at the Mass, like the other priest of my childhood experience. So that I could speak to other people as Jesus Christ.
9	a	Meditating by a lake in Glendalugh
	b	Once
	c	With 2 friends, early in the morning
	d	A realisation that God is everywhere, (not just/or in churches). The importance of nature in a personal spiritual life (for me). The importance of friends of a similar frame of mind in heightening my spiritual experience. A realisation that the place is special, and that its history and tradition live on – a re-kindling of my awareness.
10	a	Overwhelming feeling that God was with me and watching over me. A feeling that God was looking out for me.
	b	It could happen every day. I've experienced it more often than I could remember.
	c	In my everyday life. God never needs certain conditions, He can work in your life anywhere and anytime.
	d	It has changed my life. My whole outlook on life has changed. I never worry about life anymore, cause I know God will provide and God will feel disrespected if I worry. I've given my life to God and the moment I did that God took over my problems and needs.
11	a	Mystical – singing with children who live on my street in my front room and experiencing their spiritual liberation as they reached a self expression previously unobtainable and all of us being aware of, and verbally thanking God and each other – none of us as 'religious' – purely spontaneous experience as a result of 4 or 5 years consciously 'ideal' effort. Ecstatic – making music painting and breaking thru communication difficulties with a 'soul mate'. As often as possible – boyfriend stuff. Spiritual – a lot mainly on buses or in town in Liverpool to do with unspoken communication of simple love of people.
	b	Increasingly often
	c	Any open-minded i.e. happy state.
	d	Encouraged me – hope for me [...] positive experience of life – personal big view rather than a molecular reduction of spirit on creating work [...] expansion of conscious mind.
12	d	Curtains moving without any reason
13	a	Slowly walking in deep rainforest on an island, looking very carefully for reptiles. I suddenly heard a loud buzzing noise which I thought might be a swarm of bees. I froze, and then noticed there was a humming bird hovering behind me about half a meter away. I turned round very slowly to face it and we were eye to eye for about 10 minutes. It was incredibly

		<p>beautiful to look at but its beady black eyes made me feel intense and looked at by something higher or bigger than just the bird.</p> <p>c It flew away, came back and then I moved more suddenly to make it go away.</p> <p>d I was stone cold sober. I've never forgotten it and remember it as a wonderful intense communication with something benign and other.</p>
14	a	<p>Billy Graham '89. I attended a couple of the meetings and felt very moved. Joseph:- the production at the festival hall put on by the URC.</p>
15	a	<p>Once when sitting near Lake Powell in California, I decided to meditate. As I did so, it was near dawn, I was overcome with the sense that the lake and the land and the nearby trees were my mother and father, my true parents. I can still bring up the memory and feel the sense of peace it brought me originally. Taking it further, since I think the planet was created by a Supreme Being, an experience like this leads me right to God.</p> <p>b Just the one time in that location. However, I often have the same sense of connection to the 'earth' when in the desert of New Mexico, either at dawn or sunset. It's the play of light, among other things, that lifts me right out of my normal everyday self.</p> <p>c This can happen for me while driving a car. I need to be away from other people, I think. Have the sense of privacy and on-on-one relationship with God. Overwhelming beauty will do it.</p> <p>d It has given me a greater awareness of the planet as a living being, and my responsibility toward it. It has increased my sense of the sacred, and the[n] freed me from feeling that I am simply a product of my parents or my genes. It sort of places me in a 'celestial' context?? Makes me simultaneously beloved <u>and</u> insignificant. Both good.</p>
16	a	Astral projection, ESP, Revelation, Spiritual awareness, Enlightenment.
	b	Regularly
17	a	Walking into a village pub but [?] sure that I have been there before (because I recognised the building).
	b	Once
	c	No conditions
	d	Paranoia feeling
18	a	Hindu God drinking milk in 1995.
	b	Two days. Please check the newspaper Sun, Daily Mail, Mirror, Independent.
	c	God knows
	d	I became also Hindu. Believe in Lord Rama, Krishna.
19	a	See answer to 1.
	b	Many, many times.
	c	Usually informal, with friends occasionally in exceptional buildings which enhance the experience.
	d	Makes life worth living – makes me want to “convert” others – I teach music and believe it to be the most worthwhile leisure activity known to me. I recognise that it fulfils what others might term a religious experience but they seem to require some external explanation.

20	a b c	Possibly what would be called an out of the body experience. Once While resting
22		<p>Personal experiences:</p> <p>1. It was in 1971 in Monrovia, capital of the Republic of Liberia, W.Africa where I was living with my cousin Prof.Dr.K. Srinivasan who was teaching chemistry at the University of Liberia, Monrovia.</p> <p>Verily I believe I in God and have my “dialogues” with Him as if He is my personal friend: one 2 one talks! Being a votary of music, a devotee of Indian classical music, one night I began reciting a particular song (prayer) lying on my bed which was about 2 feet from the ground. The song was composed by Saint Tyagataja. The saint describes the Lord as the protector of all creatures from the ants to human beings and has been awarded the Title The Very Compassionate One. Therefore, whatever may be my wrong doings, please forgive my Lord!</p> <p>I began reciting the song quietly (not to awaken my cousin Dr.Srinivasan and his wife) and I must have recited with all love and devotion unto HIM the above song very many times and suddenly I had the Vision of the Lord Vishnu with His consorts seated on His vehicle the Golden Eagle. This lasted for a minute or two, my entire body began shaking and suddenly I was on the floor!</p> <p>What I firmly believe is if one is really devoted and thinks incessantly of HIM through hymns One can have similar experiences. A prayer is between you and HIM and should be chanted/said should never be ostentatious!!</p> <p>2. My Guru, His Holiness Swami Hari Har Maharaj of Shri Geets Ashram Delhi, India came to Liberia to preside over a World Religious Conference. Every day we devotees used to bask in the Swami’s (a celibate bachelor Sanyasi) Divine company where he stayed. Among others I was also busy in the arrangements for the conference and used to stay tolerably late at nights before getting back to my cousin Dr.Srinivasan’s house where I stayed. For safety reasons my cousin used to put the latch on the back door so even if I had my own set of keys to come inside the house the latch on the back-door was an impediment to come in stealthily! And one night it happened to be too late almost 0,01 hours (in the morning) before I could take leave of His Holiness to get back home! When I came out it was really dark, streets badly lit, and was weirdly awfully awesomely lonely for me to stand there all alone waiting for a taxi to go home!?! I did not have any vehicle of my own to get back home and the only thing I thought fit for me to do was to pray unto my Guru for my safe way home. And I did!</p> <p>Believe it or not, then suddenly from nowhere a black Mercedes car emerged which belonged to the Mansion (The President of Liberia’s official home) and the driver asked me if I would like to be dropped off at my place of stay! I was weeping inside with joy and gratitude to my Guru, and was safely and stylishly back home at 0.01-45 hours. And I could not believe myself that my cousin Dr.Srinivasan, a perfectionist, did NOT put the latch on the back door and I was inside the house quietly as a kitten.</p> <p>3. By the Grace of God, and Swami Hari Harji Maharaj, T. Choithram & Sons donated their entire top floor of one of their shops in Waterside, Monrovia, dedicated for worship: Gita Ashram. Two beautiful statues carved in pure marbles of Krishna and Radha brought from Jaipur, India for worship in the Gita Ashram on a Holy ceremony were installed there. There were also African devotees. On that Holy day of installation of Krishna & Radha in the Holy presence of Swami Harji Maharaj I was ordered by my Guru to be the Poojari of the Temple (Gita Ashram) for the time being and before some one could come from Delhi.</p>

	<p>Swami Hari Harji jocularly signalled and said, “Narayan, you could get the Vision of the Lord, if only you pray unto HIM devotedly doing the Pooja everyday.”</p> <p>And I took it seriously and stayed at the Gita Ashram itself much against the wishes of my cousin Dr.Srinivasan and his wife who through I was a bit off the track!</p> <p>At that time I was working as the Chief accountant for Cemenco, Monrovia, Liberia and after my office duty would come back to the Temple and was doing Poojari’s duties. Every morning and evening we used to have “bhajans” (hymns) and worship. And Sundays will be marked with big gatherings of devotees and they were Divinely!</p> <p>Then there came that particular evening! Lord Krishna and His consort Radhaji were beautifully dressed that evening and were looking beautiful with their celestial smiles. My Guru Swami Hari Harji’s portrait was placed on the third step of the sanctum sanctorum. After everybody has left, I meditated upon Lord Krishna & Radhaji and retired to my small room in the corner of the Temple.</p> <p>It was raining and it was quite warm (rather hot) therefore, I switched on the fan to get breeze cool off. I also used to sing “bhajans” (bhaj means to uplift your heart). My thoughts were only on Lord Krishna and Radhaji and I began chanting “bhajans” for quite sometime and I was the only soul there! And suddenly I had a vision of Lord Krihsna and Radhaji and my Guru all three coming out of the Sanctum Sanctorium to my room, to my bedside where I was sitting. The Holy appearance lasted for two minutes or so! Despite the fan blowing I was wet and wept deliriously, sort of a [trance] I suppose. Switched off the fan and stayed put in my bed to rewind in my mind what I saw then ... fell asleep!!</p> <p>What my Guru jocularly indicated, had come true!</p> <p>I am sanguine that there are many more better souls than this animalcule who had better experiences than I had!</p>
23	<p>a 4 different experiences, all relating to death of friend or family. In addition, I also have a “memory” of being in the womb!</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. After the death of a friend – one of the first AIDS victims. I felt aware of a density of air in the ceiling at my flat which he visited often. I felt he was telling me not to be sad, that he was in peace and happy. 2. After the death – of my father, I felt him holding my fingers for many days and talking to me. When I saw his body in the cathedral, multi-coloured/clear sparkles flew out of his mouth, like a burst of energy and disappeared into the air. The next day, while I was out walking, I heard him call my name, and the burst of energy down into me – swirling round very quickly and turning golden. For about 6 months – and still sometimes now, 9 years later, I feel full – from my head and into my ‘trunk’ I suppose, full of energy. Once, after a very stressful day at work I think I came home feeling tired and angry and I had the sensation of fire shooting out of my eyes, ears, nose and mouth. It was quite painful. It has happened since. Generally, though, the sensation of being filled with fire/energy remains. Sometimes it’s violent, sometimes peaceful. But it’s mental energy – not physical energy. 3. Also after my father’s death I had a vision. It was about 10"x 5", oval in size and in shades of blue. My father was walking behind my mother – both in their 50s and wearing clothes which I knew well – He had one hand on her shoulder, but he was falling behind, slightly out of vision. She was looking directly at me and looked worried. 4. After my mother’s death, in November 1997, none of us (brother and sister) slept well. The night we scattered her ashes, I had an illusion or sensation of a burst of white energy looking over me checking that I was OK. It made me feel so wonderfully peaceful and relaxed and peaceful. I felt that the energy was smiling and happy – exuberant, even. It checked my sister and brother were all right and then I sensed it rush round the flat, smiling, pleased with everything we’d done. Then it left. I miss her, but I know she’s happy.

	<p>b Once, except for number 2, which still happens, but to a lesser intensity.</p> <p>c Highly emotional situation. No.3 was just before I went to sleep one night; I was very calm and the lights were on.</p> <p>d 1. The first brought me peace and comfort. 2. The second made me feel that I had inherited all the special qualities my father had, so I suppose it made me feel – still makes me feel – special and that he is still alive. However, the sensation was very violent and painful – and he was a very kind and gentle man. So in that way, it makes me feel as if something more elemental has happened. More to do with the potential power of the spirit. (I have since read about this experience – fairy dust.) 3. Several months afterwards I asked my mother if anything had happened. She had written in her diary that one of her oldest friends had died that night and for some reason she was thinking about me, very worried. This experience made me feel close to my parents and slightly concerned. 4. It's brought me peace.</p>
24	<p>a One morning I woke up to find the gas heater on and a very comfortable feeling inside me. I was very calm, what is unusual is that I turned off the heater over an hour before I went to sleep and made sure it was off in case of overheating whilst falling asleep. I felt like someone was looking after me and I felt it was my grandmother who had died when I was 4 years old. – I only knew her for 2 months. What didn't make sense to me is 'Why do I feel it was my grandmother all the time and not my grandfather, after all I knew my grandfather for longer and loved him very much.' If it was psychological then I should have believed that the presence was my Grandfather. Or it could have been the old lady who use[d] to own the house who was the mother of our landlord.</p> <p>b Once</p> <p>c It was a February morning and my parents were abroad for about 6 weeks so I was living alone.</p> <p>d I feel very calm when I know that whatever was in the house that morning/night was protecting me. I'm not afraid so much anymore of anything paranormal.</p>
25	<p>a 1. Religious a. From the top of a semi-abandoned minaret in Cairo, in the company of a kind, toothless guide, hearing the call to prayer suddenly break all over the city below; I just burst into tears and said in Arabic 'Egypt, beautiful' (N.B. 'Misr' in Egyptian Arabic means Egypt and Mother). I sat with the guide, hand in hand, quietly thinking that there must be a God. b. Running across the paddy fields in Bali, with a group of gamelan players, frantically following the body of a woman on the way to her cremation. Left me with a feeling of the oneness of nature and life/death.</p> <p>2. Spiritual At the funeral of my mother, suddenly seeing her face smiling at me from the end of her coffin as it disappeared from view behind curtains – and finding that a neighbour had experienced exactly the same vision. All my sadness suddenly lifted and I knew she was at peace.</p> <p>3. Paranormal At the British Council in which I worked in Las Palmas, Grand Canary, I 'saw'/'felt' a spirit presence. I was locking up the building at night, when suddenly my colleague rushed past me out of the building without a word of explanation (she and I were alone in the building). I thought she was making a point that I was taking a long time to lock up. I then glanced up to the gallery which ran across the top of the entrance hall and 'saw'/'felt' a presence which made me hurry [to] the door and join my companion at</p>

		the awaiting taxi. She did not want to say anything. I left her at my flat, but could not get the experience from my mind, so telephoned her and persuaded her to speak of what we had witnessed. We had both ‘visualized’ at that time an elderly grey-haired woman. We later found out that the building had been a doctor’s home and the room, in the doorway of which we had seen the apparition, was the old lady’s bedroom. I do believe in Spirits following this experience. <u>All</u> other staff came to ‘enjoy’ similar experiences; there we’ve no doubting Thomas’s.
26	a	I have had many dreams come true. It is different to déjà vû since often I have mentioned my dreams to people and people remember and I have been able to predict things from them. Eg. in a town I have never been in before, what is around the corner. Plus when a shop is certainly open and doing well I will often dream of it selling other things[,] months later it will close and sell those things.
	b	Randomly, since I can remember.
	c	When I’m asleep!
	d	None because it has always happened. But if I have nasty dreams I do worry that they will be one of the ones that will come true. This is something that all the females in my family has happen. My grandmother predicts all the big world disasters!
27	a	The visit and prayers at Monserrat (Black Madonna) in Spain. Where we prayed that my wife would have a child. The following year we had a wonderful daughter. My wife had previously had a number of miscarriages.
	b	Once
	d	Made our life complete. Our daughter, after many years of trying, has also had a child.
28	a	My grandmother who died a year ago appearing before I was about to commit suicide.
	b	Once
	c	Depressing, lonely and isolated times. (Christmas)
	d	It gave me the strength to stop abusing drugs after 10 years.
29	a	Vision — an apparition of a figure passing from/in front of a wardrobe in a hotel room in Tenerife. I had a headache and went to lie down, it got worse and I got up to get tablets. As I slid the wardrobe door open to get the tablets a human shape (quite tall, covered in white like Mother Theresa or an Arab with flowing robes) passed from it, through the room. I was not frightened.
	b	Once
	c	On holiday. Next morning the news was announced that Dodi and Diana had died in an accident.
	d	Thought that it was strange but not afraid. This is the first time that such a thing has happened. On holiday with the (family) children at the time. When I thought about it later it seemed ‘very real’ — it was the only thing that moved in ‘our’ room. When having such a wonderful holiday you don’t expect such things.
30	a	(a) When I was a child around 8 or 9, I had a vision of Christ, clothed in, and shining with gold. It was a brief but powerful vision. I was at home in London. (b) Quite differently, a few years ago, I thought I saw a very poor man, poorly dressed, standing near the exit to Kings Cross Underground station. As I gave him a second look, I saw he was wearing a Crown of Thorns, and blood was trickling down his face. I was too

		<p>shocked to stand and start at him, but after barely a minute I retraced my steps, and went back to where he had been standing, but he had vanished. I believe this was a vision of the suffering Christ.</p> <p>Each vision occurred only once, as described above.</p> <p>(a) May have been a dream. (b) Was certainly in broad daylight.</p> <p>b The first vision helped confirm my early religious commitment and seeking, the second was c more disturbing. It challenged me to ponder whether I have been true to my Christian d profession of faith. I have been an active churchgoer since late teens.</p>
31	a	1. <u>Dreams that happen later on in reality.</u>
	b	Two or three times it has occurred.
	c	There seems no particular conditions under which it happens. Often the details that happen seem insignificant.
	d	It has made me realise that there are connections between our subconscious reality and conscious one.
	a	2. <u>Out of body Experience</u>
	b	2-3 times, when I am relaxed in an almost meditative state.
	c	ditto
	d	I always pull back and don't let it happen too much because of fear.
32	a	See part 1 [i.e. answer to Question 1, pages 14-15]
	b	Internal peace and clarity.
	d	Elevation of the mind and senses above all 'normal experiences'.
33	a	I felt a moment of great sadness; e.g., later found out that my father had passed away. I later said my goodbyes to him in a dream.
	b	Once
	d	It has made me learn to deal w[ith] death as a very normal cycle of life. I have learned not to fear death [and] believe [I have] a very close spiritual connection w[ith] my father whom [I] believe watches over me.
34	a	<p>There are many experiences:</p> <p>From mid-teens — out of body experiences, especially when taking part in worship. Sensation of my consciousness/essence rising out and being above my body looking down upon the proceedings. These occur when I'm awake, usually in religious buildings and regularly throughout my life.</p> <p>Visions: Particularly when asleep. Messages are given regarding present or future. A 'person' will appear in the dream. It's never the same one. During this time with this guide looking on — it provides a completely different perspective and understanding.</p> <p>Information which I would not ordinarily come to know is put into my mind like loading information into a database. I usually wake up immediately afterwards – knowing what has happened and shaking with fear and a feeling of "presence". This state is usually with me for several days afterwards. I sense during these occasions that what is happening to me is not harmful but its effect is overwhelming. This can happen two or three times in a month/year or not at all for several years.</p> <p>I've experienced an angel. Appearing during my sleep. It was delightful, very calm and protective feeling. A young man appeared above my head/shoulder and was just with me</p>

	<p>in very familiar surroundings (my previous residence/then, my parent's home). His presence was comforting and very caring. He was also very beautiful to look at but not what I would call handsome in a conventional way – this was conveyed more in an aura or feeling of what he/it exuded – PEACEFUL and SAFE.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – I've also sensed ghostly presences – but never physically seen one. – I dreamt that I was being violently stabbed – and woke up from this nightmare at the same time that John Lennon was shot in New York. – Also, when our neighbour died, I woke up during the night and felt someone/something move through our house – a presence, it wasn't frightening. – I receive very strong sensations from people and places. – Dalai Lama – during one of his visits to the UK. Sensing the greatest heart/mind spirituality ever. Utter peace and sureness similar to the angel. This was the greatest spiritual experience I have ever had and felt privileged to receive it. I thought at the time that this may be what great religious teacher/founders project or convey: e.g. Buddha and Jesus: Great knowledge, Awareness, Com-compassion. And, I felt as if I had been a part of that. <p>b Many throughout my life from age 13-14 onwards.</p> <p>c Strongest perhaps when asleep. Also when awake and during very ordinary things. Particularly in religious places of worship or with people with very great spiritual awareness/affinity. Sometimes when I need direction or clarity in life, I get shown possibilities.</p> <p>d Made me very aware of the spiritual – mystical – religious dimension in life. It's something which I feel very close to, it's natural and I seem to find myself in the company of people, professionally and socially who think and feel very much as I do. Like attracts like. I do take other people's beliefs and practices seriously and feel that they should be accorded due respect and sensitivity. Learning more about religion is both thrilling and fulfilling for me.</p>
35	<p>a I was on holiday in Greece with two girlfriends, and we ended up late one night in Rhodes with nowhere to stay. In the end, we had to accept a room in the house of a local man, where students stayed. I didn't like the house at all - it made me feel uncomfortable. The three of us had a small room with three single beds, French windows onto a tiny balcony and nothing else. We locked the windows and bedroom door and went to sleep. I woke up in the night to go to the loo and there was 'someone' sitting on the end of my bed. Both my friends were sound asleep in bed. I wasn't asleep or dreaming. It must have gone, because I got up and went to the loo and then went back to bed. The next morning I told my friends, and we just all felt the house had a bad feeling to it, so we left straight away. This was in the Seventies and I've never forgotten it.</p> <p>b Once</p> <p>c Normal</p> <p>d I know I wasn't dreaming and I will always remember the incident, but it has had no effect on my life, apart from the fact that I'd be interested to know why it happened.</p>
36	<p>a (1) As a teenager I think I experienced a hormonal high. On a wild and windy day, going down to the sea to scream and shout and feeling invulnerable.</p> <p>(2) Some experiences with drugs – LSD, strong hashish, etc. which produce sublime experiences with music or pictures or people.</p> <p>(3) The occasional sexual experience, again heightened by drugs.</p> <p>(4) Some places; walking in high mountains, Pyrenees, Himalayas, etc. In deserts, especially in very flat deserts; e.g., the Eastern Sahara. In the presence of great monumental architectural achievements; e.g., The Juggernaut in India, some cathedrals.</p>

	<p>b The teenage experience only once. The drugs experience quite often but with overuse of drugs reduces the effect. Sex – only sometimes, unfortunately. With places, I think it generally happens only once – apart from walking in high mountains which usually gives me a spiritual experience.</p> <p>c See above.</p> <p>d I'm still an atheist and have been since about 14 years of age. I feel that non-rational responses to things, people, events are to be valued. I seek these transcendental moments, and often feel that ordinary, everyday experience is second best.</p>
37	<p>a Religious – a wave of emotion engulfing the group of young people of which I was a part.</p> <p>b Once – during a final service at the end of a Methodist youth weekend at Cliff College.</p> <p>c Calm, group togetherness and a religious testimony.</p> <p>d Clarified my belief in a God/force.</p>
38	<p>a The experience is of a kind of deep inner silence, sometimes, which comes up from inside me and seems to possess me. For example, when looking at a picture, or praying sometimes. Sometimes I have felt an invasion of something from outside – love I would say. I think it is triggered by a collapse of ego boundaries, a kind of moment of insight when I see something that I haven't seen before so I seem to have opened up to something. I once had a very strong experience of this type so that the effect was of very intense joy. Afterwards, I didn't remember where I was and got lost for a bit.</p> <p>b These days I have more experiences of this sort than used to. About once a week.</p> <p>c Under any conditions – praying – being on my own in the country – usually in solitude, however I have had the odd moments like this when I was working.</p> <p>d The effect is to make me believe in a level of reality beyond or coexisting with the more obvious one we live in. The inner pressure towards more silence and solitude led me to retire so that I could lay myself more open to whatever it is. I feel as if the purpose of living is to enter into being as much as you can, lose yourself in it, lose my own ego and get swallowed up in something else.</p>
39	<p>a SACRED: Seeing my niece at one week old, holding her in my arms and a feeling of wonderment came over me at this perfect beautiful being. I just could not stop looking at this creation of God and felt <u>His</u> presence very near. ECSTATIC: when after about 30 years, I contacted a nephew not having much idea where he was – but knowing I was on the right track – and then within a week hearing a voice on the telephone – saying his name ... it was so easy. Why hadn't I been given this lead before – I believe it was divine intervention.</p> <p>b Once both times.</p> <p>c Normal I think?</p> <p>d A belief in a supreme power.</p>
40	<p>a My spiritual experiences have mainly arisen in isolated, natural surroundings when I have felt in contact with some sublime transcendent force that was looking after me and guiding me. I am not attracted to religion in the sense of a 'man'-made formal institution. Religion for me is the quest for a higher level of consciousness, 'absolute reality' if you like. To this extent I am attracted to meditative practices such as one finds in Sufism and Buddhism.</p> <p>b Regularly, all my life (generally outside of London!).</p> <p>c As indicated, in peaceful natural surroundings.</p> <p>d Encouragement to pursue my chosen path.</p>

Question 4: Supplementary information				
No	Gender	Age	Occupation	Country of Origin
1	Female	40-50	EFL teacher	England
2	Female	38	Sole trader	New Zealand
3	Male	30	Aid worker	UK
4	Male	40	M.o.D. employee	Scotland
5	Female	40	Nurse	England
6	Female	54	Chaplain (University)	England
7	Male	27	Student, doley	England
8	Male	[age not given]	Priest	Zimbabwe
9	Male	53	Writer	Ireland
10	Male	20	Student	South Africa
11	Female	30	Artist	England
12	Female	22	Shop assistant	Sweden
13	Female	29	Gardener	England
14	Female	66	Retired	England
15	Female	45	Writer/student	USA
16	Male	41	[occupation not given]	Britain
17	Male	31	Market trader	England
18	Male	35	Director	India
19	Female	38	Musician	Wales
20	Male	51	Stage carpenter	Britain
21	Female	17	Student	South Africa
22	Male	58	Accountant	India
23	Female	43	Teacher/journalist	Britain
24	Female	21	Market stall holder	Israel
25	Male	40-50	Examiner in English and drama	England
26	Female	1	Theatre designer	Britain
27	Male	64	Retired	England
28	Male	30	Unemployed (homeless)	England
29	Female	70	Housewife	England
30	Male	61	Part-time lecturer (semi-retired)	UK
31	Female	20-30	Senior Registrar	Britain

32	Male	27	Computer programmer/writer	Britain
33	Female	25	Social worker	USA
34	Female	40	Teacher	UK
35	Female	47	Film script supervisor	Britain
36	Male	45	Management consultant	Britain
37	Female	20-30	Administrator	England
38	Female	54	Retired teacher	England
39	Female	70	Retired	England
40	Male	50+	Ex-personnel manager/lecturer	Britain

THE AUTHORS

Olga Pupynin was born in Kidderminster in 1957 and attended Harry Cheshire High School. She went on to gain a BA(Hons) in Religious Studies and English Literature (1978), and a PGCE in Religious Studies and TEFL (1979), both awarded by the Institute of Education, University of London. After her first year of teaching English in Enfield, she was made Head of the Religious Studies Dept in a newly created 11-18 comprehensive school. Having established successful CSE, GCE O-and A-level courses, in 1987 she moved to the independent sector as Head of Religious Studies and Community Service at St. Albans High School for Girls where a high proportion of students went on to university, attesting to the success of the new study programme in World Religions and Philosophy.

In a break from teaching, from 1991 Olga worked at the Economic Division of the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia. In 1995 she returned to part-time study and teaching, embarking upon an MA in Oriental and African Religious Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and teaching Academic English to postgraduate students in the One-to-One Department at Frances King School of English, and later at IFCOS (SOAS). Having completed her MA focused on Islamic studies, and having fulfilled her 2-year re-elected term as postgraduate representative for the Dept of the Study of Religions, in September 1999 she began her MPhil/PhD programme of research, again part-time, into multicultural mystical experience under the supervision of Simon Weightman at SOAS. In January 2000 she took up the post of Head of Religious Education at St. Anne's Catholic High School for Girls, Enfield.

Her current academic interests lie within hermeneutics, semiotics and multicultural mystical experience. Her non-academic pursuits include enjoying a wide range of classical music in a variety of settings, participating in choral singing, going to the ballet whenever the Kirov or Bolshoi are in the UK, and gardening.

Simon Brodbeck was born in Lancaster in 1970 and grew up in rural simplicity on a smallholding in the Lune Valley. He attended Queen Elizabeth's School, Kirby Lonsdale, and Clare College Cambridge, where he received a BA(Hons) in Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies. After moving to London and training to teach Religious Education, he returned to academia, studying part-time at SOAS where in 1995 he was awarded an MA in Oriental Religious Studies, with distinction, meanwhile supporting himself as assistant manager in a retail business. Beginning his PhD part-time under the supervision of Prof Alexander Piatigorsky at SAOS, he was subsequently awarded an Arts and Humanities Research Board full-time studentship, and will finish his thesis "*Asakta karman* (Action without Attachment) in the *Bhagavadgītā*" in 2001.

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