

**PERCEPTIONS OF GOD IN THE PARTICULAR:  
A CASE STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPIRITUAL  
EXPERIENCES AND EXPRESSED FAITH AMONG MEMBERS  
OF A BIRMINGHAM CHURCH**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Building on the work of scholars in the field of religious experience, and with reference to research into the state of the Church in Britain, a case study was set up, in a Birmingham church, to investigate the place of spiritual experiences in the context of the life of individuals and the church. The findings from the research indicate that spiritual experiences are common among these church-goers taking many different forms and relating to the type of faith the person expresses and their concept of God. Most indicate that God is perceived to be immanent. Providing a sense of contentment and well-being, the experiences are instrumental in developing faith, while the precepts of faith also interpret the experiences. In an age of general decline of the Church in Britain, it is acknowledged that there is an increase in the reporting of spiritual experiences, indicating that there is a move from the institutional to the individual expressions of spirituality. Therefore the results of the research suggest that the church is spiritual, should emphasise the place of spiritual experiences in faith and worship, and confirms the importance of studying spiritual experiences in the context of the individual and the faith community.

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**PART 1**

**INTRODUCING THE PROJECT**

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **A NEW SPIRITUALITY: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT**

## 1. A NEW SPIRITUALITY: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

The 1960's musical "Hair" declared that "this is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius", and for many people it did herald a new age. That new age may have different titles such as "New Age", the "Age of Aquarius" or "Postmodernism", each with its own particular understanding of society. History tells us that it was a time of experiment and change in society, possibly as a reaction against the austerities and disillusionment of the second world war and its aftermath. It may also have been a response to a growing dependence on technology, and a general disillusionment with the ideals and values of a Modern society which seemed only to provide false truths and promises.<sup>1</sup>

With the advantage of hindsight, it is now considered that this was not just a reaction against the status quo, but it was the birth pangs of a new paradigm<sup>2</sup> which represents a shift in values and worldview. There was the start of a movement away from an era that has become characterised by rationalism, cognition, authority and certainty in the goodness and progress of Humanity, to one that was to be as concerned for the power of the intuition, emotion and experiential. Rather than a rejection of technology and science, a more sceptical use of their benefits and methods helped the "New Age" to redefine a balanced and healthy lifestyle, acknowledging the importance of the senses, the mystical, the spiritual and experience. Many writers of the "New Age" phenomenon list the central place of spiritual or mystical experiences as a hallmark of "New Age" belief and practice.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Joyce Pearce in the foreword of SPINK P. (1980). *Spiritual Man in a New Age*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, p. vi.

2 BOSCH D. (1991). *Transforming Mission: Paradigms shifts in theology of mission*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, p. 349.

3 Groothuis lists "peak experiences" (GROOTHUIS D.R. (1986). *Unmasking the New Age*. Illinois: I.V.P.) Hanegraaf lists "transpersonal experiences" (HANEGRRAAFF W.J. (1998). *New Age Religion and Western Culture: esotericism in the mirror of secular thought*. New York: State University of New York Press), Osborne

## 1.1. Church and Spiritualities

So many parts of society have moved from a culture that provides answers and security to a culture that demands choice and freedom to choose. This freedom of choice is found in all areas of life. It is particularly obvious in the commercial and retail world, but is also demanded in healthcare, education and the religious and ethical spheres. Once being a largely mono-religious nation and part of Christendom, Britain can now be described as a “Spiritual Supermarket”.<sup>4</sup> Alongside the Church can now be found many options including other Major World Religions, Eastern and Primal religions, neo-Paganism, Holism, belief in “meta-empirical” beings<sup>5</sup>, angels and spirit guides, and innumerable courses on personal growth, human potential, channelling, and the healing power of crystals. The list is far from exhaustive.

The new freedom of choice of spirituality has given rise to a forest of books providing guides and DIY spiritualities and prophecies for the future. Such authors as Redfield<sup>6</sup>, consider that while the past has seen physical and ideological development as part of the process of evolution, the next stage will be a spiritual development.<sup>7</sup> It is also the freedom to reject the constraints of the communal for a more individually tailored life. The “Spiritual

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lists “mystical experiences” (OSBORNE Lawrence (1992). *Angels of Light? The Challenge of the New Age Spirituality*. London: Darton Longman and Todd). Their importance is partly attributed to the understanding that personal experiences are always valid because they are real to the individual. See also STREIKER L.D. (1990). *New Age Comes to Main Street: what worried Christians must know*. Nashville: Abingdon; FROST R. (2001). *A Closer Look at New Age Spirituality - explaining the challenge of psychotherapy, astrology, holism, leylines and more*. Eastbourne: Kingsway; SPINK P. (1980).

4 SUTCLIFFE S. and BOWMAN M. (2000). *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p 7. ROOF Wade Clark (1999). *Spiritual Marketplace: baby boomer's and the remaking of American religion*. Princetown: Princetown University Press. While the title and content of Roof's book is about the contemporary religious scene in America it has also been influential in understanding the changing situation in Britain.

5 HANEGRAAFF W.J. (1998), p. 201.

6 REDFIELD James (1997). *The Celestine Vision: living the new spiritual awareness*. London: Bantam Books.

Marketplace” has become a description of religion in a post-modern culture, in which there has been a movement away from organised religion to a more individual spiritual quest. Such is its potential that not only have “New Age” practises been embraced by business<sup>8</sup>, but it is now considered possible for organisations to have a spirituality.<sup>9</sup> Anecdotally it appears that Britain is becoming a more spiritual place, even if there is not yet sufficient evidence to prove that this is so.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, during the second half of the twentieth century, Britain has seen a serious decline of the institutional church. This phenomenon is not unique to Britain, as it is considered to be a significant change in European society and to a lesser extent also in North American society. Different scholars look for reasons for this decline and describe it variously as secularisation<sup>11</sup>, a rejection of institutionalised religion<sup>12</sup>, or a sea change in the concept of religion<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, it seems that people are leaving the Church and looking elsewhere for spiritual development. Indeed one survey has found that the majority of people who leave the church do not do so because of a loss of faith, but may actually be looking for a deeper or different spirituality.<sup>14</sup>

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7 Philip Seddon also considers this a mark of the “New Age”. SEDDON P. (1990). *The New Age - An Assessment*. Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Booklets, p. 20.

8 KAY William K. (2005). Selling Spirituality. *In Expository Times*, vol. 116, no. 8, May 2005. This is a book review on HOWARD S. and WELBOURN K. (2004). *The Spirit at Work Phenomenon*. London: Azure.

9 Cf. The first ICOS (International Conference on Organisational Spirituality) was arranged in 2002 and drew together people from the business world to explore the importance of spirituality in the business and market place. “The Body Shop” following the ideals of its founder Anita Roddick has a spiritual manifesto.

10 Cf. the findings of the Kendal Project (HEELAS Paul et al. (2005). *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing) and surveys and polls of beliefs in Britain around the millennium such as the Soul of Britain Survey indicate that there is a move away from organised religion to alternative beliefs. However, it has to be noted that the Kendal project concluded that less than 1% of people are involved in these alternatives (the “Holistic Milieu”).

11 BRUCE Steve (1995). *Religion in Modern Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

12 DAVIE Grace (1994). *Religion in Britain Since 1945: believing without belonging*. Oxford: Blackwells.

13 HEELAS P. et al. (2005).

14 RICHTER P. and FRANCIS L.J. (1997). *Gone But Not Forgotten: Church leaving and returning*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd. A survey conducted for the Methodist Church.

One response of the church, more informally than formally, is the promotion of different types of spiritualities. It is now very common to find on the shelves of Christian book shops volumes that encourage the practice of different spiritualities and reprints of older “spiritual” texts of the medieval mystics. Indeed the “spirituality” section of the book shop seems to be competing for space with sections on Biblical Studies and Theology. But while there might be a new trend in the readership of Christian books, how is the church responding to the changing paradigm? Christian liturgy and worship has been influenced by new and revived spiritualities, including Celtic, Ignatian and Benedictine, but the effect is limited and could be described as marginal to the life of the church. Indeed it might be that the new spiritualities are significant for the individual but impinge little on the mainline churches.

The concept of spirituality, and spiritual experiences has always been part of the faith community even if at times they are considered ambiguous or marginal. The accounts of the life of the early church in the New Testament show that spiritual experiences were important for faith. Indeed it was the experience of the risen Christ that brought the Church into being.<sup>15</sup> But because such experiences are largely individual there are always disputes about them. Did Joan of Arc experience God who commissioned her to lead the fight against the oppression of the English in the fourteenth century or was she psychologically disturbed because she reported hearing voices? There is little doubt that Joan understood her experiences as spiritual because of her faith and that they influenced her life, but in her story, Church and Politics colluded against her.

What is the role of the spiritual or supernatural today? O’Murchu considers that spirituality has always been part of the human nature and that religious institutions have tried to constrain

it and marginalise it, but in the late twentieth century the Church has now lost this role as people try to reclaim it.<sup>16</sup> John Drane considers that much of society has rejected the Church as a place that will provide spiritual fulfilment and looks for other means of expressing the sacred in life.<sup>17</sup> And Bruce agrees saying:

“In so far as the supernatural or the spiritual is still to be found in the mainstream, it is almost homeopathic concentrations: so watered down as to be a shadow of its former self, nearly undetectable to the untrained eye.”<sup>18</sup>

Other comments about the state of the church include:

“We in the Western Church have become embarrassed by the spiritual and the supernatural. It is ironic that the Church is in serious decline at exactly the same time as our whole culture is experiencing a rising tide of spiritual concern - and that many of today’s spiritual searchers dismiss the Church, not as irrelevant and old-fashioned, but because in their opinion it is unspiritual. A “gospel” that has no place for the mystical and numinous will not be a relevant gospel for the people of today and tomorrow.”<sup>19</sup>

“The trouble with the Church is that it nowhere goes to the root of people’s deep, deep spirituality. It’s not equipped to deal with a new restlessness that people are feeling. It’s an end of the millennium restlessness. It’s a feeling that the materialism and the way that we’ve gone in the last thousand years has got to change into a new form of spirituality... that relates you to the universe, the cosmos.”<sup>20</sup>

Surveys undertaken by various groups such as the BBC Soul of Britain survey<sup>21</sup> indicate that there is much faith and spirituality in the nation but most of it is found outside the church.

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151 Cor. 15: 3ff.

16O’MURCHU Dairmuid (1997a). *Reclaiming Spirituality: a new spiritual framework for today’s world*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan. O’Murchu writes from a Roman Catholic perspective.

17DRANE John (1999). *What is the New Age Still Saying to the Church?* London: Marshall Pickering, p. 197.

18BRUCE S. (1995), p. 15.

19Review of John Drane’s Book “Cultural Change and Biblical Faith” in *Idea Magazine*, Sept/Oct 2000, p 9.

20METHODIST CHURCH (1998). *Gone but Not Forgotten: What people who leave churches are saying to us?* Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House. March 1998, p 3. A discussion sheet produced for the churches.

21Commissioned by the BBC to form the basis of a series of programmes broadcast on the Television in June and July 2000.

David Hay's surveys on spiritual experiences<sup>22</sup> indicate that about 75% of people will acknowledge that they have had a spiritual experience, yet only about 10% of the population go to church. The implication seems to be that the divine or supernatural is more likely to be encountered outside of mainline Christianity than within it and it raises the question of whether spiritual experiences have a place in the life of the church. The church as an institution is said to be unspiritual in an age of renewed spirituality.

## **1.2. The Study**

It is in this context that the current study was undertaken to look at the question of whether the Church is unspiritual or whether it has a different type of spirituality, one amongst a number in the contemporary "spiritual marketplace." Because the concept of spirituality is fluid, it was necessary to find a particular indicator of spiritual activity among church-goers and so it was decided to use spiritual experiences as an indicator of faith.

Using this basis, a study was undertaken to assess the way that church-goers in a particular congregation of the United Reformed Church (URC) in Birmingham expressed their faith.<sup>23</sup> The URC was selected because the researcher is familiar with this church, having been a minister of the church for many years. Having experienced many different expressions of Church and Faith, different types of spirituality and been the recipient of spiritual experiences, the researcher is far from uncritical about the church of which he is a part, and also sympathetic to the wide range of beliefs and spiritual experiences that were encountered in the study.

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<sup>22</sup>HAY David and HUNT Kate (2000). *Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Don't Go To Church*. Nottingham: University of Nottingham. These statistics will be discussed in chapter 8.



The URC is representative of a mainline Protestant church, which grew out of the Reformation and has been greatly influenced by the ideas of modernity. In the middle of the twentieth century the “social gospel” became a byword for the faith of many mainline Protestant churches and this expression of the Christian faith was very informative when the URC was founded in 1972 by the union of the Presbyterian Churches in England and the majority of the Congregational Church in England and Wales. The emphasis on church life and worship has been largely social and cognitive, and the place of the emotional, charismatic, and evangelical has been marginalised. As such, contemporary public opinion might conclude that the church is no longer relevant to the contemporary era, where there is a greater emphasis on the experiential, emotional and relational, and where the place of the spiritual in life has become more significant, if rather ubiquitous.

The core of this case study was to find out how much spiritual experiences influence individual belief and the way that they are lived out and how much these experiences are integrated into the life of the church, especially its worship. The study is not a sociological or psychological study, although it may draw on some aspects of these. Rather it is a theological and missiological study with the purpose of understanding faith and experience.

But prior to this question about the relationship between faith and spiritual experiences, the number of people reporting spiritual experiences in the church had to be assessed. How prevalent are spiritual experiences in the life of church-goers? Does the church encourage or discourage their place in worship? Such an investigation would give important indications

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<sup>23</sup>Details of the method of the study are discussed in chapter 4.

about the types of Christian faith expressed today, and how it might relate to the place of the church in twenty-first century Britain.

We shall show that through an analysis of questionnaires and discussions with the experients in this case study, that a small proportion of the congregation were willing to acknowledge that they have had spiritual experiences and that they are significant for them. We will also find that the types of experiences encountered are strongly related to the type of faith expressed by the individual, but describing this relationship is more difficult. Within the case study the reports are varied, indicating that there is a broad range of belief and expression of faith within the one congregation.

Understanding and describing the spiritual experiences became a major part of the study. Having looked at other scholars' methods of classification, it was decided that a bespoke system had to be devised for the study. This system would take into account the context of the spiritual experience, where the context includes that individual, his or her beliefs, the history of the experience and interpretation and the place of the religious community and tradition. Therefore, it was understood that all experiences are unique.

We did not come across reported experiences like those of "Joan of Arc" or Paul's "Damascus Road" leading to dynamic action, but we found that the consequences of the experiences were a greater feeling of well-being and contentment both in faith and life in general for the experients. This was largely due to the understanding that the experience was perceived as a response to a particular situation or crisis. God, therefore, was seen to be working within the temporal realm. Whatever the understanding of God, and this varied

considerably, God acted in conformity to their perception of God, which was more of an immanent relationship than a transcendent one.

Worship was an important setting for the spiritual experiences, while this was sometimes a personal and individual time of worship, the church also provided the contexts and settings for the spiritual experiences. This was often seen as a surprise by the respondents as it was not generally expected that church worship will be a time of “meeting with God”. So it was found that the congregation investigated was spiritual and the individuals had different types of spiritual experiences and differing ways of expressing their experiences, with a variety of concepts and understandings of the spiritual and of the Divine.

Putting the findings in a broader context of other studies and surveys that have taken place in Britain over the last few decades, will show that there is a correlation with the conclusions of larger surveys. An investigation of these studies will look at trends in the reportage of spiritual experiences both in the general public and within the church, and will indicate that there seems to be more reticence among church-goers to report these experiences, than among the public in general. This gives a number of challenges to the church. It raises the question about the place of spiritual experiences in the life of the institution, and whether it can provide a more conducive environment to encourage individuals in their spiritual experiences, and to provide them with a means and tradition of interpretation. It will also raise the issue of whether the locus of faith has shifted in the post-modern period, so that experience has a greater place than cognition, thus challenging the nature of the institution.

But the study has to begin with a discussion of understandings of the concept of spirituality, which will enable us to define our terms. This will be followed by the development of a system of classification of spiritual experiences and a description of the method adopted for this study. We will then be able to present the detailed analysis of the case study. The findings from this will be put alongside an exploration of the current state of the church in Britain and a comparison of studies of spiritual experiences.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPTS: DEFINITIONS**

## 2. UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPTS: DEFINITIONS

A study of spiritual experiences, like a study of religion, may be approached from one of many disciplines. Sociologists, historians, psychologists, philosophers and theologians would approach the study from different perspectives and so would have different working definitions of their subjects. The project takes a theological and in particular a missiological approach to the study of spiritual experiences. It is not a sociological, historical or psychological study, and yet it will be clearly influenced by these academic disciplines.

Today, the study of experiences of the numinous, transcendent and supernatural is becoming more common, but there is no agreed nomenclature to describe the experience. The most commonly used term is “Religious Experiences” but this can be misleading and ambiguous. Therefore, it is necessary to define the terms used in this project.

### 2.1. Religion

As part of the religious studies discipline, we first need to understand the use of the word “Religion”. We start with two basic aspects: that which is derived from the Divine (revelation) and that which is a human response to the Divine. Historically the Oxford English Dictionary<sup>1</sup> considers that the word is derived from the Latin “religare” which has as its base meaning “to bind”. Hence religion is something that binds the person and the Divine. This commitment is expressed by the human through belief, worship and obedience to the

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<sup>1</sup>*Oxford English Dictionary*. (1989). Second edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, volume 13, pp. 568 - 569.

Divine or supernatural power<sup>2</sup>. These aspects of religion are illustrated in the story of Moses and the Hebrew people in the Old Testament. As the people are gathered at Mount Sinai God reveals himself to Moses and gives instruction for the system of worship that God requires<sup>3</sup>. This giving of the Law also includes moral and legal commandments, which are considered to be part of the religion of the people of Israel<sup>4</sup>. The people are, therefore, expected to respond to God through this system of worship and action. But likewise God binds himself to the people, so the commitment is a mutual one<sup>5</sup>.

From the illustration of the Old Testament, we first see that the word “religion” is also used to mean a system of belief and practices<sup>6</sup>. Smart says that religion involves six aspects, all of which are interconnected and influence each other: Doctrine, myth, ethics, ritual, experience and social institutions<sup>7</sup>. These beliefs and practices are centred in the Institution which takes responsibility for maintaining and organising the doctrines, rituals and myths and policing the ethics. So religion also becomes the institution itself. Hence it will mean, Christianity, Islam, Judaism etc. and will have the overtones of a legalistic and controlling system. Maslow says:

“Religion is a set of habits, behaviours, dogmas, forms, which at the extreme becomes entirely legalistic and bureaucratic, conventional, empty ...”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Collins *English Dictionary*. (1994). Third Edition. Glasgow: HarperCollins, p. 1309.

<sup>3</sup>The books of Exodus and Leviticus primarily.

<sup>4</sup>e.g. Exodus chapters 20 - 23.

<sup>5</sup>Exodus 24: 8, Deuteronomy 7: 7ff.

<sup>6</sup>BURHENN H. (1995). *Philosophy and Religious Experience*. In HOOD R. (ed), *Handbook of Religious Experience*. Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, p. 145.

<sup>7</sup>SMART N. (1983). *Religion*. In RICHARDSON A. and BOWEN J. (eds), *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*. London: SCM Press, pp. 496 - 498. HAY David (1982). *Exploring Inner Space: is God still possible in the 20th century?* Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 74, also lists these aspects of religion.

<sup>8</sup>MASLOW A. (1964). *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences*. New York: Viking Press, p. viii.

The second aspect of religion is the personal and individual response. Burhenn<sup>9</sup> considers that before the word took on the meaning of an institution it was used in a more individual way, akin to the concept of piety. However, from the Reformation, with its emphasis on the individual, religion became associated with the personal response to the Divine, as well as the Institution or system.

“Recognition on the part of man (*sic*) of some unseen higher power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence and worship; the general mental and moral attitude resulting from this belief, with reference upon its effect upon the individual or the community; personal or general acceptance of this feeling as a standard of spiritual and practical life.”<sup>10</sup>

But from the personal perspective, particularly influenced by the evangelical and puritan movements, it is not just a response to God but a relationship. So James says religion is:

“the feelings, acts and experience of individual men (*sic*) in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”<sup>11</sup>

Cantwell Smith<sup>12</sup> suggests religion is a faith relationship with a divine figure such as Christ. This makes religion an individual matter and the consequences are seen in the individual in ethics, life and actions. This aspect of the human response to God, is illustrated in the New Testament. The Johannine literature presents the love commandment as the authentic response to belief in Christ<sup>13</sup>, and the epistle of James states:

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9BURHENN H. (1995). Also Cantwell Smith, the scholar of comparative religion and history of religion, agrees. (SMITH Wilfred Cantwell (1978). *The Meaning and End of Religion*. London: SPCK.)

10Oxford English Dictionary. (1989), volume 13, pp. 568 - 569.

11JAMES William (1960). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. London: Fontana, p. 50. A reprint of the original edition published in 1902.

12SMITH W. Cantwell (1979). *Faith and Belief*. Princetown: Princetown University Press, p. 11. But note that Cantwell Smith prefers the term “faith” to “religion”.

13e.g. John 13: 34f. 1 John 3: 16ff, 23f, ch 4.



“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”<sup>14</sup>

The response and relationship may be due to a cognitive acceptance of God, but it can equally be a response to the experience of God. Smart has included “experience” in his definition of religion. The New Testament material is full of illustrations of this understanding of religion, but perhaps the most pertinent is the disciples’ response to the experience of the Risen Christ, where they are described as worshipping him<sup>15</sup>. This is most clearly expressed in the story of Thomas in the Upper room, encountering the Risen Christ. His response is to proclaim that Christ is God.<sup>16</sup> So Schleiermacher will say that religion is the response to the experience of God<sup>17</sup>.

But not all scholars would define religion in relation to the Divine. It can also mean the devotion a person has to a particular ideal, ideology or supernatural power. Hence the concept that a person can be said to act religiously, by being dedicated to, or exhibiting zeal for something.

“Religion is a varied, symbolic expression of that which people (I-we) appropriately respond to as being of unrestricted value for them.”<sup>18</sup>

For Hay<sup>19</sup>, religion allows the person or group to get in touch with whatever is ultimately real. While Hay would understand this to be the Transcendent Being in some form, it can also be seen that such definitions can lead to divorcing the concept and definition of religion from a

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14James 1: 27. New Revised Standard Version. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

15Matthew 28: 16, Luke 24: 52.

16John 20: 28.

17BURHENN H. (1995), p. 146.

18COX J.L. (1992). *Expressing the Sacred: an introduction to the phenomenology of religion*. Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications. p. 15.

Transcendent Being, and although it may relate to a supernatural object, it implies that religion is a wholly Human construct, and, therefore, part of the discipline of Anthropology and Sociology. According to Tylor, religion is a human construct, originating in personal experience, guilt, dreams, death and the like.<sup>20</sup> Scholars in these fields will, typically, approach the study of religion, for its influence on culture and society and the understanding of human psychology. Hick, approaching the subject as a theologian, largely agrees with this analysis stating that religion enables people to perceive the transcendent “through the lens of a particular religious culture with its distinctive set of concepts, myths, historical explanations, and devotional or meditational techniques.”<sup>21</sup>

A further concept of religion is when it is understood in a “generic” sense;<sup>22</sup> as something that is inherently human. Bailey<sup>23</sup> calls this ‘implicit religion’, and is expressed in different ways by everybody. This is also similar to the idea of religiosity or piety, but it may not relate to the Transcendent Being, or indeed, an Ultimate Reality of any sort, just an ideal<sup>24</sup>, or in popular usage to that which is the most important in life. Maslow considers this the true “religion” and he describes the institutional form as “anti-religious”<sup>25</sup>. This is a common contemporary understanding today, which is referring more to what would now be considered a concept of spirituality rather than religion and it will be explored further as we discuss the term spirituality.

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19HAY D. (1982), p. 28.

20Edward B. Tylor, the late 19th century anthropologist. Reported in HAY D. (1982). p. 34 - 35.

21HICK John (1989). *An Interpretation of Religion: human responses to the transcendent*. London: MacMillan Press, p. 8.

22SMITH W. Cantwell (1978), p. 49.

23BAILEY Edward (1998). *Implicit religion: an introduction*. London: Middlesex University Press.

24BAILEY E. (1998). p. 17.

25MASLOW A. (1964), p. viii.

A new approach to the study of religion is the work of Neurotheology. Neurotheology emanates from a physiological study of the brain, to attempt to isolate that which is used to process religious activity. The work of such scholars as Ramachandran<sup>26</sup>, who work with people who have had religious experiences and suffer from Temporal Lobe Epilepsy, claim to have isolated the temporal lobes as the area of the brain that is activated when religious experiences occur. It is possible to extrapolate from this that religion is no more than an emotional response triggered by abnormal electrical activity in the brain<sup>27</sup>. However, the danger of this is expressed by John Haught:

“[The scientists] have isolated one small aspect of religious experience and they are identifying that with the whole of religion.”<sup>28</sup>

So, at the lowest level, religion is simply a human reaction to stimulus, and at worst a malfunctioning of the brain. However, this new science may simply be exploring aspects of religion in a new way, by attempting to ascertain which areas of the brain are involved in religious and spiritual belief.<sup>29</sup>

From this attempt to explore the meaning of religion, it is clear that the concept is varied and the definition can include a wide understanding. In essence there are three axes around which the debate revolves. The first is the debate about how much religion is a revealed phenomenon and how much it is a human construction. The second is the discussion about

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26A popular presentation of the V. S. Ramachandran's ideas were made in the BBC documentary "God on the Brain" broadcast in April 2003.

27ALPER Matthew (2001). *The God Part of the Brain: scientific interpretation of human spirituality and God*. New York: Rogue Press.

28Reported in SHANKAR V. (2001). Tracing the Synapses of our Spirituality. *Washington Post*, 17th July 2001. John Haught is Professor of Theology at Georgetown University. Available at: <http://www.gustavarol.org/washingtonpost.html>, (downloaded 28/05/03).

29BBC (2000). *Neurotheology - The God-Shaped Hole in the Head*. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/classic/A933635>, (downloaded 04/05/03). Also see NEWBERG Andrew et al. (2002). *Why God Won't Go Away: brain science and the biology of belief*. New York: Ballantine Books.

its relation to a Transcendent Power or a supernatural Being and how much it is purely human, possibly simply a physiological reaction. The third axis is whether religion is largely an institution and system, and, therefore, to some extent imposed upon people, and how much it is personal and a relationship with the individual's values or quest of life.

Within this thesis, the definition of religion is firstly, closely related to James' concern that:

“The name “Religion” should be reserved for the fully organised system of feeling, thought, and institution, for the church, in short, of which this personal religion, so called, is but a fractional element.”<sup>30</sup>

Second, it is understood to be a relationship with the Divine or Transcendent Power, which is normally referred to as God<sup>31</sup>. For Christians this would include Christ. And thirdly, it is a combination of a revealed phenomenon and also a human response and, therefore, partly a human construction. In this sense, then it is contrasted with the concept of spirituality and we are in agreement with Holt who writes:

“ ‘Religion’ for many people connotes an established system and institution, whereas ‘spirituality’ implies personal involvement.”<sup>32</sup>

## **2.2. Faith**

“Faith” is another term that is freely used in various ways and can be a synonym for religion and belief. However, Cantwell Smith makes an important distinction between faith and belief.<sup>33</sup> Belief is about ideas; it is the holding of certain ideas which are usually systematised into doctrines or a creed, and becomes an expression of faith. This is the traditional concept

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30JAMES W. (1960), p. 49.

31An exception would be Buddhism that does not use the term God.

of faith in the Roman Catholic Church, defined as assent to a set of doctrines<sup>34</sup>, and a total obedience to God<sup>35</sup>. Helm, would agree with this but go further and include practices as well.<sup>36</sup> This makes faith the same as religion, and indeed it is sometimes used in this way. Any expression of faith is, of course, subject to the limitations of language, culture and conformity.

Faith, for Cantwell Smith, though, is primarily understood to be the relationship with the Divine. This is considered by Whitehouse to be the core meaning in the New Testament<sup>37</sup>. It is an encounter with the Divine, whether this is direct or mediated through rituals, and it becomes the means through which a person is orientated to the universe.<sup>38</sup> Cantwell Smith considers that it is an essential character of human life and so comes close to the understanding of religiosity and spirituality. But faith is more than just the encounter with the Divine, or the Transcendent, as it must also involve the intellect in interpretation, reasoning and understanding. So faith, also, becomes the response to this encounter. This is the concept used generally in the Protestant Church.<sup>39</sup> As such, faith will have many aspects, such as the encounter with the Divine, the understanding of the encounter, the expression of it and the practices associated with it. What all this implies is that faith is more about the personal and the individual, than the system or institution. Hence we can distinguish between

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32HOLT Bradley R. (1997). *A Brief History of Christian Spirituality*. Oxford: Lion Publishing plc., p. 16.

33SMITH W. Cantwell. (1979). p.12.

34KORENIG, Ffranz (1972). *Problems of Believing Today*. In SURLIS P. (ed), Faith: its nature and meaning: Papers from the Maynooth Summer School 1970. Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, pp. 11 - 17.

35MACKEY J.P. (1972a). *Christian Faith as Personal Response*. In SURLIS P. (ed), Faith: its nature and meaning: Papers from the Maynooth Summer School 1970. Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, pp. 53 - 69.

36HELM P. (1997). *Faith and Understanding*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 10.

37WHITEHOUSE W.A. (1957). *Faith*. In RICHARDSON A.A. (ed), *A Theological Wordbook of the Bible*. London: SCM, pp. 75 - 76.

38SMITH W. Cantwell. (1979), p. 11.

39BERKOF Hendrikus (1972). *The Act of Faith in the Reformed Tradition*. In SURLIS P. (ed), Faith: Its Nature and Meaning: Papers from the Maynooth Summer School 1970. Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, pp. 99 - 119 and MCGRATH A.E. (1994). *Christian Theology: an introduction*. Oxford: Blackwells, p. 127.

faith and religion, as we define religion as the institutional, including doctrines, codes, creeds and rituals. It is the communal and institutional aspect of faith and represents a part of faith. Faith is the totality of the response of a person to the Divine.

### **2.3. Spirituality**

As the twentieth century progressed, the term “spirituality” became more popular.<sup>40</sup> This must be due, at least in part, to the decline of Christianity in Britain and the West and an increasing interest in other religions and practices and the supernatural. The rejection of Christianity, and with it a diminution of an understanding of a personal Transcendent God, results in contemporary population having to look elsewhere for the fulfilment of the religious aspect of life.<sup>41</sup> Spirituality, then, is said to be the process that looks for development, change and evolution for humanity, and the world, with a process that is open and allows freedom to develop diverse approaches. Religion on the other hand is seen to provide answers and to control access to spirituality, so that people are unable to grow and develop.<sup>42</sup> A rejection of Christianity, being largely a rejection of the institution of the Church, makes the term “religion” unacceptable or irrelevant. Consequently an alternative term needs to be found, and that term seems to be spirituality.

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40SUTCLIFFE S. and BOWMAN M. (2000). *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p 8.

41G.K. Chesterton wrote: “When people cease to believe in God, they do not believe in nothing, but believe in anything (quoted in DRANE John (1999). *What is the New Age Still Saying to the Church*. London: Marshall Pickering, p. 190) and Tillich says: “If we try to expel [religious things] in their divine images, they re-emerge in daemonic images” (quoted in ROBINSON J.A.T. (1963). *Honest to God*. London: SCM Press, pp. 54 - 5.)

42RICHTER P. and FRANCIS L.J. (1997). *Gone But Not Forgotten: Church leaving and returning*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, p. 51.

Donovan says:

“An individual’s or a people’s spirituality refers to the things most precious to them, their inner sources of self-worth and identity, their valued personal goals and ideals, or their shared cultural treasures. The word “spirituality” nowadays has more appeal for many than “religion” with its reminders of institutions, dogmas, bigotry, fanaticism and so on. But spirituality in the sense of piety, devotion, and commitment has a long established meaning within living religion itself, bringing out evaluative overtones of worth, benefit and importance in terms of the deepest human needs and interests.”<sup>43</sup>

And Morgan says:

“Religion is more often than not associated with institution, rituals, with the articulation of doctrines and with what is external to individual experience. Using the word spirituality seems to allow us to emphasise what is deep, personal, inner, experiential and authentic in people’s lives.”<sup>44</sup>

However, the dictionary definitions of spirituality relate the concept firmly to religion. The Collins English Dictionary defines spirituality<sup>45</sup> as “the state of quality of being religious, dedicated to God or spiritual things or values as contrasted with material or temporal ones.” It is also “a distinctive approach to religion or prayer.” Yet there is a hint that it is wider than related to religion only, as the definition includes “spiritual things and non material values”. When it defines the word spiritual, we see this implication spelt out more clearly as it states that spiritual means “relating to the spirit or soul and not to physical nature or matter; intangible.” Relating to sacred things, religious, spiritual or ecclesiastical matters, it is also the “realm of the spirits”<sup>46</sup>.

Wakefield writes:

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43DONOVAN Peter (1997). *Spirits and Spirituality*. (RERC 2nd Series). Oxford: RERC, p. 12.

44MORGAN Peggy (1996). *Reasons of the Heart*. In BROWN L. et al., *Modern Spiritualities: an enquiry*. New York: Prometheus Books, p. 110.

45Collins English Dictionary. (1994), p. 1491.

“In the contemporary era, Spirituality means those attitudes, beliefs and practices which animate people’s lives and help them to reach out towards super-sensible realities. Historically it has been used to mean the church property or clergy, mysticism and the life, prayer and discipline of the higher levels. Spirituality is not always Christian and the power and motivation in people’s lives may be cultural rather than Christ.”<sup>47</sup>

So while these authorities recognise that there is a history for the word spirituality that has fixed it firmly within the context of religion, it is associated more clearly with the individual and personal piety. Indeed the Oxford English Dictionary says that it is found from medieval English to mean “the quality or state of being spiritual”<sup>48</sup> which in turn is defined as: “of or pertaining to, affecting or concerning, the spirit or higher moral qualities, esp. as regarded in a religious aspect (freq. in express or implied distinction to *bodily, corporal, or temporal.*)”<sup>49</sup> Caxton, in the 15th century, used it to mean “of transcendent beauty or charm.”<sup>50</sup> It also relates to ecclesiastical or religious matters, distinguishing these from secular affairs, and so can be “devout, holy, pious, morally good, having spiritual tendencies or instincts.”<sup>51</sup> and can be something that relates to “spirits or supernatural beings”<sup>52</sup> or the immaterial. The word is also used in an alternative sense, about intellect: “of or pertaining to, emanating from, the intellect or higher faculties of the mind; intellectual”,<sup>53</sup> refinement of thought or feeling, witty, clever, smart.

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46Collins English Dictionary. (1994), p. 1491.

47WAKEFIELD Gordon S. (1983b). *Spirituality*. In RICHARDSON A. and BOWDEN J. (eds), A New Dictionary of Christian Theology, London: SCM, p. 549.

48Oxford English Dictionary. (1989), vol. 16, p. 259.

49Oxford English Dictionary. (1989), vol. 16, p. 257.

50Oxford English Dictionary. (1989), vol. 16, p. 258.

51Oxford English Dictionary. (1989), vol. 16, p. 258.

52Oxford English Dictionary. (1989), vol. 16, p. 258.

53Oxford English Dictionary. (1989), vol. 16, p. 258.



Within the Reformed Church tradition, spirituality would be understood as the practice of the faith and although it is a term that has only recently come into use, it has the same concept as “Christian lifestyle” or piety. Piety, in this sense, while personal is seen to be faith in action which includes social action.<sup>54</sup>

In contemporary church life, the term is used to denote something different or new. In the 1970’s the word used for new and innovative presentations of Christianity would have been “theologies”. Hence the development of liberation theologies, black theologies, feminist theologies. Today, however, the term preferred is spiritualities. This change is not just a change in word, but a change in nuance as well. For theology suggests a cognitive, rational approach to faith, whereas spirituality suggests that it is more about experience, feelings and emotions, while not neglecting the cognitive. It is also a concept that at times attempts to break out of denominationalism so that Sheldrake defines the term as:

“A contemporary definition is “ecumenical, eclectic, not exclusive to one tradition, a living relationship with the Divine, integrates all aspects of life, and about relationships, feelings, experience and nature. ... Spirituality is the theory and practice of the Christian life. It has evolved as individuals and historical or cultural environments change.”<sup>55</sup>

Outside of the Christian tradition, spirituality may concern the Transcendent in some form or other or the supernatural realm, but equally may be exclusively humanistic and material. Hardy considered that the main aspect of spirituality is the way a person shows his or her feeling for the Transcendent.<sup>56</sup> As a biologist, he noted in his series of lectures “The Divine

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54RICE Howard L. (1991). *Reformed Spirituality: an introduction for believers*. Louisville Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, p. 157.

55SHELDRAKE P. (1991). *Spirituality and History: questions of interpretation and method*. London: SPCK, p. 32.

56HARDY Alister (1979). *The Spiritual Nature of Man: a study of contemporary religious experience*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 131.

Flame”<sup>57</sup> that any study of the physical world is incomplete without the recognition that there is a non-material aspect to life. The material is “shot through” with the spiritual. Indeed the present educational policy of the British Government includes the need for inclusion of the spiritual in all parts of the curriculum so that it is balanced and broadly based and “promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society”<sup>58</sup>. However, the concept of spirituality is left open and can range from that related to faith and religion, to being aware of the beauty and charm of the natural world.

So, spirituality is a term that has been increasingly used for the individual and in relation to the well-being of the individual and has been a term appropriated by New Age practices, therapies and rituals. It is an important term because it is understood to emphasise the emotions, feelings and experiences of the individual in contrast to the cognitive. But these approaches are human centred and the spiritual is related primarily to the human spirit, soul, or inner being. The purpose of these new spiritualities, is to develop the individual holistically and to improve life and purpose in life. In this context spirituality is related to self development and personal development. Barrett<sup>59</sup> considers it as going on a journey to develop consciousness, relationship and self-esteem. He bases his theory of spiritual development on Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs”<sup>60</sup>. Others<sup>61</sup> describe spirituality as having a

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57HARDY Alister (1966). *The Divine Flame: an essay towards a natural theology of religions*. Oxford: RERC, p. 102.

58Section 351 of the 1996 Education Act.

59BARRETT Richard. (2002). *The Impact of the Evolution of Human Consciousness on Work and Organisations in the 21st Century*. A paper presented to the First International Conference on Organisational Spirituality, Guildford, July 2002. Also see BARRETT Richard (2001). *Seven Levels of Corporate Sustainability*. May 2001. Available at: <http://richardbarrett.net/download/sustainability.pdf>. (downloaded 07/03/05.)

60MASLOW A. (1970). *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper and Row.

61HARPMAN Alan (2002). *Spirituality at Work: an idea or a movement?* A paper presented to the First ICOS Conference July 2002, and available at [http://users.powernet.co.uk/harpmann/pdf/spirit\\_at\\_work.pdf](http://users.powernet.co.uk/harpmann/pdf/spirit_at_work.pdf). (downloaded 07/03/05).

sense of values and relationships and integrating these relationships. As such everybody will have a spirituality and so it becomes a human phenomenon.

Likewise, Spiritual Direction, is a new aspect of counselling which is not necessarily related to religion or Christianity. Such “direction” is promoted to help people with the “spiritual life” which is “touching more intimately what really matters, living accordingly.”<sup>62</sup> But such an approach can be simply about “building up my (little) self.”<sup>63</sup> This does not necessitate the rejection of the transcendent, and many such spiritualities do involve the supernatural, paranormal, and divine realm.

For the purpose of this thesis, the term “spirituality” will be used in this largely personal and individual sense. It is used in contrast to religion as an organised system and institution. Spirituality is related to the spirit of the person, and concerned with the experiential as well as the cognitive, where cognitive is not simply an assent to doctrines and dogmas, but the reasoning and interpreting of experiences and beliefs. In particular its close association with experiencing the transcendent, the universe and the supernatural, makes it an appropriate term to use in connection with these experiences. However, it also needs to be noted that as this thesis is concerned with experiences of people who profess the Christian faith in one form or another, then spiritual will also relate to the Holy Spirit, or that of God or the Divine. It is part of the expression of the faith of a person, their relationship with the Divine (or Other, Higher Power, etc.), the natural world (Universe) and other people. Therefore, again we can

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62MADDOCK Julian (2003). Non-Christian Spiritual Direction: Oxymoron or Tautology. *The Retreat Association Spring Newsletter 2003*. London: The Retreat Association.

63MADDOCK J. (2003).

distinguish it from faith, as spirituality is that individual and personal expression of a person's beliefs. Such an expression can be public and communal as well as private.

## **2.4. Spiritual Experience**

The understanding and use of the terms “religious” and “spiritual” will have its influence on how experiences of the numinous, divine, transcendent, or supernatural power are described. The greatly preferred term, for those examining these experiences from a religious, or a faith perspective, is “religious experience”. In this, the understanding of “religious” is a personal one not an institutional one. Though a religious experience might be mediated through the institution, rituals or system, it is normally held to be an individual and personal experience. The institution may provide the trigger, but it is the individual who has the experience. Likewise it is the individual, drawing on his or her own faith and context who will understand and interpret the experience. Yandell<sup>64</sup> says that an experience to be a religious experience must link up with religious institutions, doctrines or practices.

However, the term “Religious Experience” is also used for public experiences. These experiences are the rituals, symbols, and “cultus” of religions. Hick<sup>65</sup> considers that such rituals are a means of experiencing and commemorating the “foundational experiences” of the religion, such as the Exodus for Judaism. From this it can be seen that “religious experience” can mean the experience of religion as an institution and system of belief. For the sociologist,

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64YANDELL Keith E. (1994). *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 68.

65HICK J. (1989). p. 166.

then it can mean the experience of explicit (outward aspects of) religion, by either a participant or an observer.

Returning to the understanding of the term as individual experience, the use of the adjective “religious” is less acceptable from a non-faith or atheist position. Indeed it assumes that a person has religion, whether this be conscious or unconscious, underlying or passive. Yet many people who have such experiences will claim to have no faith or religion<sup>66</sup>. Consequently other words are used to describe the phenomena. Malsow prefers the term “peak experiences”<sup>67</sup>, recognising that the experience is not an everyday experience, but one that is significant in a person’s life. Laski<sup>68</sup> prefers the term “ecstatic experiences” as she considers that the experient (the person who has the experience) has an encounter with the “numinous”. King uses the term “Depth Experience”<sup>69</sup>.

The term “Religious Experience” has a long heritage, and is frequently used with the underlying implication that there is a unity in all such experiences, and that they are independent of any particular religion<sup>70</sup>. Examples of religious experiences are said to be found in all religions. But it must be made clear that surveys have shown that such experiences are not the sole domain of those who are “religious”<sup>71</sup>. Consequently it is a term

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66We shall return to this phenomenon when we compare different surveys of spiritual experiences.

67MASLOW A. (1964).

68LASKI Marghanita (1980). *Everyday Ecstasy: some observations on the possible social effects of major and minor ecstatic experiences in our daily secular lives*. London: Thames and Hudson.

69KING Winston L. (1987). *Religion*. In ELIADE M. (ed), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*. vol. 12. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., pp. 282 - 293. Lane also acknowledges the use of this term, but distinguishes it from Religious Experience. For him Religious Experience must involve the immanent or transcendent reality (God) while Depth Experiences are any experience that gives meaning to life. (LANE Dermot A. (1985). *The Experience of God: an invitation to do theology*. Dublin: Veritas Publications, p. 36.)

70So OTTO Rudolf (1950). *The Idea of the Holy: an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*. (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

71HAY David and MORISY Ann (1978). Reports of Ecstatic, Paranormal or Religious Experience in Great Britain and the United States. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 17, pp. 255 - 267.

that is inappropriate to many people. The term “Ecstatic Experience” draws on the association with mysticism and the medieval church, but, in this context, narrowly defines the boundaries of experience that can be incorporated into this category. It will exclude “everyday” experiences and experiences that are interpreted in a religious manner. However, the use of the term “ecstasy” is popular today among young people and has been associated with the “Club culture” and the use of the drug of this name, to provide a feeling of well-being and of emotional connection with others. Although this may be described in religious terms, it is not considered to be a religious experience.<sup>72</sup>

The use of the terms “religious”, “ecstatic”, or “mystical”, while expressing the importance of the experience, do act to limit the type of experiences included in the definition. They will, by implication, exclude the experiences not associated with religion, and possibly many “natural” experiences, everyday experiences and experiences that are interpreted in a spiritual way. The term “Peak Experiences” will exclude everyday experiences and interpreted experiences. They will also exclude other experiences of the supernatural. Therefore, the preferred term for this thesis is Spiritual Experience. Hay<sup>73</sup> uses the term Spiritual Experience as equivalent to “religious experience”, but prefers the term “spiritual awareness”. The Religious Experience Research Centre<sup>74</sup> is now frequently using the term Spiritual Experience interchangeably with Religious Experience.

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<sup>72</sup>LYNCH Gordon (2005). *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 168 - 178.

<sup>73</sup>HAY David and HUNT Kate (2000). *Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Don't Go To Church*. Nottingham: University of Nottingham, pp. 4 - 6.

<sup>74</sup>The Religious Experience Research Centre, formerly the Religious Experience Research Unit was originally founded by Alister Hardy in Oxford in 1969 as a research centre for the study of the phenomenon of religious experience. It is now located at the University of Wales, Lampeter.

An agreed definition of Spiritual Experience is difficult to obtain, and like “religious” and “spiritual” will mean different things to different people. It is an experience, which is an event that takes place in a person’s life, in which they have a direct and personal participation or observation. Experience is both associated with the accumulation of knowledge, and the emotions and feelings, perceptions and memories about the event<sup>75</sup>. In addition the Oxford English Dictionary says:

“The fact of being consciously the subject of a state or a condition, or of being consciously affected by an event. Also an instance of this; a state or condition viewed subjectively; an event by which one is affected.”<sup>76</sup>

And it also notes that the word can be used specifically with reference to religion:

“A state of mind or feeling forming part of the inner religious life;”<sup>77</sup>

So a spiritual experience is an experience that relates specifically to the spiritual in life. It is either an event that is understood to be spiritual in itself or it is interpreted from a spiritual perspective, so that it is seen to be spiritual in retrospect. However, it is to be understood to include the event, the memory and the interpretation. Consequently there are a number of elements to consider in producing a working definition of Spiritual Experience.

First any definition will relate to God, the Divine, the Transcendent or “Other”. This is firstly, an encounter with God, the Numinous, the Other, the Higher Power, the Holy Spirit, Christ. In all of James’s<sup>78</sup> categories of Religious Experience there is the association with the Divine, whether that be in conversion, unifying or mystical experiences. His category of

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<sup>75</sup>*Collins English Dictionary*. (1994), p. 546.

<sup>76</sup>*Oxford English Dictionary*. (1989), vol. 5, p. 563.

<sup>77</sup>*Oxford English Dictionary*. (1989), vol. 5, p. 563.

<sup>78</sup>JAMES W. (1960).

Saintliness is not so much a description of the encounter with the Divine, but the consequences of it in a person's life. Otto<sup>79</sup>, describes all spiritual experiences as being an encounter with the "numinous". For Hardy, central to all spiritual experiences is the awareness of the Transcendent, which is implied in his question: "Have you ever been aware of, or influenced by, a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self."<sup>80</sup> Hay develops this idea a little by considering that all spiritual experiences involve the "Universal awareness of the Divine."<sup>81</sup>

Secondly, it can be an encounter with the Universe - a feeling of oneness. This may be related to the Divine, as the feeling of oneness with everything may be interpreted as a oneness with God or Christ. Alternatively it may be seen as a unity with the universe and all things, all life, if there is no awareness of God. For some scholars this oneness is the important aspect that defines an experience as being spiritual. Hay<sup>82</sup> considers it as one of the two major elements and describes it as mystical. Laski's<sup>83</sup> use of the term Ecstatic is consistent with defining spiritual experiences through the mystical element.

Thirdly, it may be an encounter with the supernatural. This could be ghosts, angels, or other supernatural beings or events. A number of authorities prefer to use the term supernatural and this may be seen as an all encompassing concept, but also expresses the understanding that spiritual experiences are wider than just experiences of the Divine or the Transcendent.

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79OTTO R. (1950).

80Quoted in HAY David (1990). *Religious Experience Today: studying the facts*. London: Mowbray, p. 54.

81HAY D. (1982), p. 91.

82HAY D. (1982), p. 91.

83LASKI M. (1980).



Murray says that they are being aware of the supernatural, which may be “special moments, or everyday experiences, however ordinary.”<sup>84</sup>

Kelsey describes them as:

“when man (*sic*) is in touch with a non space-time or spiritual world of images and intuitions, dreams, fantasies, myths and numinous, which are continuous and of more than individual significance.”<sup>85</sup>

It might include encounter with evil, the “devil” or other non-benevolent supernatural beings.

It could include Near Death Experiences.

The second major element of a spiritual experience is that it relates to the Human Spirit, or spirituality. If the spiritual is understood as part of Human nature, it may be considered a sense (sixth sense?) and so, is about feelings, emotions and the like. Hence, this reinforces Kelsey’s statement, already referred to previously, where it involves getting in touch with the supernatural.

Another aspect of the human contribution to a spiritual experience is that the experience is spiritual if it is interpreted as affecting the “spirit” of the person. Lewis uses this concept as a major part of her description of a religious experience.<sup>86</sup> Working with what she describes as “everyday experiences”, then, these become religious (or spiritual) only when they are interpreted from this perspective. Donovan and Hick agree, as they consider that spiritual

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84MURRAY A. Victor (1954). *Personal Experience and Historic Faith*. (2nd ed.). London: Epworth, p. 47.

85KELSEY Martin (1975). *Encounter with God: a theology of Christian experience*. Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship Inc., p. 144.

86LEWIS H.D. (1962). *Our Experiences of God*. (2nd ed.). London: George Allen and Unwin.

experiences are “neutral” and only become religious when interpreted from this viewpoint.<sup>87</sup>

Smart, speaking about Christian spiritual experiences, puts it in another way:

“If the experience can perfectly well be explained without recourse to a causal relation between Christ and the experience of Christ, there is no ground for thinking the experience to be valid.”<sup>88</sup>

As interpretation is always part of the experience<sup>89</sup>, then the interpretation has to be part of the definition. This is influenced by culture, previous experiences, belief and other aspects of context. So while recognising the part of revelation in faith and religion, we see the human aspect in the interpretation. It needs to be noted that the interpretation of an experience is not simply that done after the event; rather it is part of the event. Hick says that “interpretation occurs in the genesis of the experience itself.”<sup>90</sup>

Faith will be different for each person and so interpretation will be different. It may be faith in God but also faith is some other concept. Gillespie says:

“for religious people there are no secular events, since the religious experiences we have are related to the significance we place on them as we interpret them according to our life-viewpoint.”<sup>91</sup>

So we can only use the term “Religious Experience” if the experience is interpreted with religious language and from the world-view of a religious system. Donovan<sup>92</sup> makes the point

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87DONOVAN Peter (1979). *Interpreting Religious Experience*. London: Sheldon Press, pp. 24, 31 and HICK John (1980). *Mystical Experience as Cognition*. In WOODS R. (ed), *Understanding Mysticism*. London: The Athlone Press, pp. 426 - 7.

88SMART N. (1979). *The Philosophy of Religion*. London : Sheldon Press, p. 169.

89STRINGER Martin (1999). *On the Perception of Worship: The ethnography of worship in four Christian congregations in Manchester*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, p. 16.

90HICK John (1999). *The Fifth Dimension: an exploration of the spiritual realm*. Oxford: Oneworld Books, p. 10.

91GILLESPIE V. Bailey (1988). *The Experience of Faith*. Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, p. 39.

92DONOVAN P. (1979), p. 23.

that experiences can only be understood as religious when they are interpreted from a religious perspective. This necessitates first a belief in God, or the Divine, and that the Divine can communicate. Therefore, we can say again that to use the term Religious Experience is to ignore a large part of the population.

Hay considers that:

“at some level, most people, even the most ill-educated are privately convinced that they have a religious dimension to their experience. The problem is that they have neither social permission nor necessary language to articulate it so that it sounds coherent or acceptable to religiously orthodox ears.”<sup>93</sup>

Further, Religious Experience may refer to the experience of religious things or activities. This takes us back to the understanding of religion as an activity that can be externally observed, and so is about the experience of rites and rituals and religious activities. It is, therefore, associated with the organised, structured or institutional aspects of faith. As such it could not be used for a description of experiences that are part of the everyday or non-religious part of life.

Frequently when the term “Religious Experience” is used, the normal everyday experiences of life are generally excluded. Scholars prefer to deal with exceptional or particular experiences which can be more easily classified. Religious Experience, then, comes to mean mystical type experiences. However, Lewis<sup>94</sup> challenges this and prefers to include everyday experiences that are interpreted religiously. To exclude the everyday experiences may make it easier to work with the concept of experience, but it does exclude a large part of life and

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<sup>93</sup>HAY D. (1990), p. 98.

many experiences. Consequently, again, to avoid the dangers of exclusion of experiences from the study, it is preferable to use the term “Spiritual Experience.”

Finally, the human element of spiritual experiences can be claimed to be partly physiological. We have already referred to the work of Neurotheology, but it has to be remembered that the pioneering work by James and Hardy was approached from a physiological starting point. This did not negate the place of the spiritual or divine in human experience. Neurotheology claims to be able to isolate the place in the brain where spiritual experiences are processed. The theological discussion from these studies centres on whether the brain produces the spiritual experience, whether it is the receptor of the experiences, or whether it is the interpreter of the experiences. It asks the question of whether spiritual experiences are completely human or whether, like other senses in life, this part of the brain is just another sense organ.

Consequently for some, a spiritual experience would be a wholly human experience. Yandell<sup>95</sup> understands that such experiences do not have to include the “other” but can be a time of greater awareness of the self. In contemporary understanding, this is an appropriate use of the term. However, within the context of this project a spiritual experience will involve the “other” and the self, as two ends of a spectrum, understanding that the extremes would not fulfil the criteria for a spiritual experience, as it has, to some extent to involve both the individual self and the “other”.

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94LEWIS H.D. (1962), p. 110.

95YANDELL K. (1994), pp. 19 - 20.

Recognising that spiritual experiences are primarily individual and personal, then they are also primarily interpreted by the individual in their own contexts. It is understood that the interpretation is part of the experience and that the two cannot be separated. The event and the interpretation make up the experience. They are, then, the individual's encounter with the Divine, the "other" or the supernatural. This is both a supernatural event, and a human encounter, that involves certain emotions and feelings that can be located within the brain. However, they cannot be simply explained physiologically. Being a personal experience, only the experient can understand the experience fully, and while it needs to be articulated and explained and lived out, no-one else can fully share that experience.

This project, exploring the relationship between spiritual experiences and faith, does not want to limit the types of experiences being explored and so has taken the understanding that it is for the individual to decide whether an experience is spiritual or not. It recognises that it will involve the awareness of the supernatural, and that it will be an experience that is interpreted spiritually. Spiritual Experience acknowledges the individuality of the experience. It recognises that it is an experience of the spiritual, supernatural or Transcendent, but at the same time understands that it is a phenomenon that involves the human nature. It also expresses the contrast with religion as an institution and system, as spiritual experiences are often seen to, at best be part of religion or compliment religious activity, and at the extreme to be an alternative to religion.

Having defined the terms "Religion", "Spirituality" and "Spiritual Experience" and explored different terms that can be used to describe the phenomena under study in this project, it has been shown that the term "Spiritual Experience" is the preferred term for use in this study.

The next task is to decide upon a suitable system of classification for spiritual experiences.

This will be constructed after we have examined different options.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **DEVELOPING A SYSTEM: CLASSIFICATION OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES**

### **3. DEVELOPING A SYSTEM: CLASSIFICATION OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES**

#### **3.1. Classifying Spiritual Experiences**

Reviewing the writings and research projects about Spiritual Experience from the various scholars and authorities of research, it becomes apparent that there is no agreed system of classification of these experiences. As different scholars use different bases to determine their systems, it is problematic to find a common ground for the establishment of a system of classification. The reason why the different sources use different systems of classification is that there is little agreement in the discipline about the content and purpose. Therefore, before a system can be chosen or produced, it is necessary to understand how the different scholars are approaching the subject and the basis for their classification.

#### **3.2. Different Approaches to Classification**

Four classic scholars in the field of Spiritual Experiences are James, Otto, Hardy and Maslow, and so we will first summarise these scholars' findings. Following this we will introduce some other works and then attempt to analyse the different systems of classification and make some comparison.

##### ***William James***

Although presenting his findings in Edinburgh, James was North American and lectured in anatomy, physiology and physiological psychology, so his work represents the North



American Academic culture and theology of the late nineteenth century. He spent his life in the USA and was influenced by Jonathan Edwards<sup>1</sup>. The book “The Varieties of Religious Experience”<sup>2</sup> is the collection of twenty lectures presented at Edinburgh as the Gifford Lectures in 1901. Consequently the language is somewhat old now, and due to its format the book needs to be read understanding that the material was originally orally presented.

Coming from the discipline of psychology, James is able to embrace scientific methods as well as philosophical and theological. He starts with a medical analysis of the phenomenon of religion, but also looks at it from the other perspectives. James spends much time on this analysis, concluding that while many disciplines dismiss religion and religious experience<sup>3</sup>, this is a false judgement. Experience is what is concrete in our lives and so it is the building block of life. In this way experiences cannot be ignored but need to be dealt with scientifically<sup>4</sup>.

James continues to state that religion connects the subconscious with the conscious and some may consider the subconscious to be the divine in a person’s experience. However, he does not believe in judging a phenomenon by its source but by its contents and fruit<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, if this is true, it does not diminish the value of it as religious experience. From the experience ideas are formed and codified into religious beliefs (what he also calls over-beliefs) such as “the nature of God.”

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1 The 18th century Puritan divine who took an interest in spiritual experiences during the Great Awakening in New England. He did not use the terms “spiritual” or “religious experience” in his writings, but “religious affections”. However, he can be seen to be one of the first modern American scholars to investigate this phenomenon in a systematic way. For example: SMITH John E. (ed). (1959). *EDWARDS Jonathan - Religious affections*. (The works of Jonathan Edwards: 2). New Haven: Yale University Press.

2 JAMES William (1960). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. London: Fontana. A reprint of the original edition published in 1902.

3 James uses the term “religious experience” and so this is used here in discussing his findings.

James claims that religion needs to focus more on the experiential and less on the cognitive. The intellectual side is to help understand and describe the experiential. Also, he is concerned with personal religion in contrast to institutional religion and so focuses on the individual experience of religion. The basis of religion is considered to be experience<sup>6</sup>. This is experience of the physical and the supernatural realms. The supernatural is considered to be real as it is experienced by people. There are many people who would not be considered religious because they are not part of an institution, but nevertheless have religious experiences. They have a type of latent faith or foundational faith.

The title of the book and the series of lectures indicates that James considered that there are many different types of Religious Experience and he looks at the differences in an attempt to classify them. His classification, may at first sight, seems to be rather arbitrary but he classifies according to the type of phenomena experienced, the content and consequence. As the work was exploratory he was not really producing a classification but looking at some of the types of religious experience that had been recorded. His classification has six sections<sup>7</sup> largely based on the emotional content of the experience. The sections, Happiness, Melancholy and Inner Peace group experiences according to the content, while the sections, Conversion and Saintliness relate to the consequence of the experience. The final section, Mystical, expresses the ineffable, noetic and transcendent, which assumes the experient is passive and so the section consists of different mediums of the experiences.

***Alister Hardy***

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4 JAMES W. (1960), p. 476.

5 JAMES W. (1960), p. 41.

6 JAMES W. (1960), p. 49.

7 See Appendix 1.A., for a fuller list.

Hardy, a biologist by profession, was concerned about the approach to biology that seemed to ignore the sensual and spiritual aspect of nature<sup>8</sup>. While studying flowers he considered it important to include the aspects of smell and beauty in the analysis. He was also interested in Religion and considered that it could not simply be understood or explained by analysis or classification. In Modern times Religion had been approached from an enlightenment perspective and the aspect of experience had not been considered. He was interested in spiritual experiences and so set up the Religious Experience Research Unit in Oxford (RERU), now the Religious Experience Research Centre in Lampeter. Hardy could be considered the pioneer of the work done on Religious Experience in Britain, although his studies start in the 1960's and he acknowledges the work of other authorities both in Britain and more so in the USA.

For him, religion is both institutional and personal. While acknowledging the place and reality of institutional religion, he works with personal religion. Such religion has to be intimately connected with experiences and hence the importance of religious experiences. From the work of the RERU there is an indication that many people have experiences which can be classified as religious.

“Many people possess a deep awareness of a benevolent non-physical power which appears to be partly or wholly beyond, and far greater than, the individual self.”<sup>9</sup>

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8 HARDY Alister. (1979). *The Spiritual Nature of Man: a study of contemporary religious experience*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 7 and 10.

9 HARDY A. (1979), p. 2.

He also concludes that religious experiences can happen to anyone and that they are a “universal” for Humankind, occurring in all religions and among “primitive” and “sophisticated people”<sup>10</sup>. This is also related to his understanding of Religion which he prefers to see as a personal and individual recognition of the “transcendent” or Divine”. He recognises the use of the word in relation to institutions but his research does not concern this.

Hardy has the fullest classification of all and it amounts to classifying every possible aspect of Religious Experience. This includes the manifestation, the content, the place of experience, the duration, the trigger, the source and the consequence. Of the classic scholars, Hardy’s is the most systematic. Recognising that there is no easy all-embracing system of classifying religious experiences Hardy’s system can be understood as a series of classifications. Most experiences will fall into a number of classifications<sup>11</sup>, whichever system is used and so Hardy’s system allows for this by approaching and analysing spiritual experiences from different aspects. Hardy had 12 different sections<sup>12</sup>, but this can possibly be reduced to 6 as follows;

1. Classification by Sense. The experiences are divided into groups according to the main sense involved in the experience: Visual (1)<sup>13</sup>, Auditory (2), Touch (3), Smell (4), Extra-sensory perception (5), Dreams (10).

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<sup>10</sup>HARDY A. (1979), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup>HARDY A. (1979), p. 23.

<sup>12</sup>See Appendix 1.B. for the full list.

<sup>13</sup>These numbers are the labels given to the different groups by Hardy.

2. Classification by Purpose. This relates to the content of the experience as it affects the experient. So includes experiences such as healing, comfort, answered prayer, feelings of love, peace, remorse and the sense of presence: Behavioural changes (6), Cognitive and affective elements (this is the largest section) (7).

3. Classification by Event. Hardy uses the word development (8) and relates the experience to different aspect of a person's development. This is one section of the classification, but has three sub-sections: Development i) within the individual, ii) in relation with others, iii) according to age group.

4. Classification by Source. This divides the experiences according to the initiative of the experience - whether it is initiated by the self or by the "other". This includes the "other" being an evil force. Hardy calls them "Dynamic Patterns" (9).

5. Classification by Trigger (11). The largest section is "natural" triggers but a second section includes artificial triggers such as drugs.

6. Classification by Consequences. The consequences that Hardy is looking for is a change in the life of a person (12).

### ***Rudolf Otto***

Otto is firmly set within the German theological context and had been influenced by it. He is also a product of his experience of the First World War. Otto is a contemporary of Barth and

Bultmann, who were considered the influential theologians at the time. Otto represented a minority opinion<sup>14</sup> and is contrasted with Barth, who considers that God is “totally other” and religion is the human attempt at justification. Otto, however, considers that religion is grounded in the non-rational, and the human has the capacity to experience the Divine<sup>15</sup>. He encountered other religions in his various journeys and came to respect them. However, while acknowledging that all religions are of value and are a response to the experience of the Divine, he saw Christianity as the sole bearer of truth.<sup>16</sup> His understanding of Religion is based on the definition of Franz Reinhold von Frank:

“The Christian experience of regeneration is the basis of Christian doctrine; moreover, this experience points beyond itself to its efficient and sustaining cause, namely, God.”<sup>17</sup>

In emphasising the importance of the non-rational in faith, Almond considers that Otto was following such people as Duns Scotus, Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Meister Eckhart and to some extent Luther. He realised that the enlightenment had become blind to experience and so saw the importance of von Zinzendorf’s development of “piety” and of Schleiermacher’s “living revelation.”<sup>18</sup> From Kant he developed the idea of the concept that knowledge has to be related to experience, and that we can only know things as they appear to us. This is always in the context of time and space which are *a priori*. From Schleiermacher, he took the concept that experience is the means of approaching the universal and this is the basis of religion.<sup>19</sup> This makes the non-rational element essential.

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14ALMOND Philip C. (1984). *Rudolf Otto: an introduction to his philosophical theology*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, p. 4.

15OTTO Rudolf. (1950) *The Idea of the Holy: an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*. (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 4.

16OTTO R. (1950), p. 5.

17ALMOND P. (1984), p. 11.

18ALMOND P. (1984), p. 31.

19ALMOND P. (1984), p. 33.

However, Religion is not just about the non-rational. It is about the interaction between the non-rational and the rational and both of these in the proper balance give good religion.

Compared to the other classic scholars, Otto had the smallest classification of spiritual experiences of all and this was not really a classification. As he took the approach that all religious experiences had a commonality, he looked at this aspect. He considered that the differences in them are related to the differing contexts, cultures and particularly the “Religious Tradition” which informed the actual experience, but more so the interpretation of it. Consequently he considered that all religious experiences had three aspects, but he also separates out a fourth - the “August.”<sup>20</sup> These aspects are: The *Mysterium*<sup>21</sup> which is the otherness of the numen, the transcendence, the majesty. It is seen in awe. The *Tremendum*<sup>22</sup> is the fear of the numen, particularly in respect to its judgement. The *Fascinans*<sup>23</sup> is the attraction for the numen and the numinous and is felt in grace, love, forgiveness. The August is an aspect of the *Mysterium Tremendum*, which has the result of the experient feeling sinful, profane, unworthy.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Abraham Maslow***

Maslow, originally writing in the 1950's and 60's approached the concept of Religious Experience as a philosopher. His defining work is: “Religions, Values and Peak

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20OTTO R. (1950), Ch. 8.

21OTTO R. (1950), Ch. 4.

22OTTO R. (1950), Ch. 5.

23OTTO R. (1950), Ch. 6.

24HAY David (1982). *Exploring Inner Space: is God still possible in the 20th century?* Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 90 considers that there are actually five qualities - mysticism, awfulness, being overpowered, caught up in the energy of God and fascination.

Experiences”, published in 1964,<sup>25</sup> with the purpose of exploring the relationship between the aspects mentioned in the title of the book. It is difficult to know what form of religion Maslow adhered to, but he certainly does not have a great deal of sympathy with religion as an institution. He is also concerned that Science seems to dismiss spiritual experiences, and so part of his work is to indicate that spiritual aspects of life are fully part of the human make-up. Consequently both scientists and theologians should be interested in the phenomenon of spiritual experiences.

For Maslow, Religion, and in particular the Church, is by definition an institution<sup>26</sup> concerned with dogmas, habits, legalism and maintaining conventions. As such it is actually anti-religious. Religion has taken away from the people, the right of the sacred in life and imprisoned it in holy days, rituals, and ceremonies. It recognises and encourages the “foundational” experience, but then largely sees this as complete and finished and discourages people from exploring experiences.<sup>27</sup> However, Maslow considers the role of the Church should be to create a balance between the experiential and the rational. In practice it has rejected the experiential in favour of the rational.

Religions start from a core experience of the founder, prophet or mystic and the religion attempts to translate and recreate this for those who have not had such an experience. This is a difficult task as non-experiencers have little understanding of the concepts.<sup>28</sup> Maslow, then, sees spiritual experiences (he calls them Peak Experiences) as the important aspect of religion, and that they are essentially part of human life. Everyone has peak experiences or, at

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25MASLOW A. (1964). *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences*. New York: Viking Press.

26MASLOW A. (1964), p. viii and p. 16.

27MASLOW A. (1964), p. 13.

28MASLOW A. (1964), Ch. 3.



least they are available to everyone.<sup>29</sup> Being part of the human nature, they are under human control.

Maslow considered that all spiritual experiences are essentially the same, in that they are all similar at the core.<sup>30</sup> He uses the term “Peak Experience” and understands this as a “core-religious” experience or a “transcendent experience.” The apparent differences between the experiences are due to the context and background of the experient, which Maslow describes as “localities and localisms”.<sup>31</sup> This context will include social, religious, educational and cultural background. Therefore, the triggers will also be very different for different people. The peak experiences, are considered to be “natural human peak-experiences” as Maslow considers that religion is a natural part of the human make-up. It is not “supernatural” in this sense. So while he does not dismiss the possibility of the “other” whether it is God or another concept, the experience is located within the human and material world. Consequently Maslow does not classify the peak experiences into different types. For him they would all be an experience of the unified universe which is related to faith. His description of peak experiences<sup>32</sup> includes different aspects of content and consequence of the experiences.

### ***David Hay***

David Hay, also primarily a biologist, is seen by many to have taken up the mantle of Alister Hardy. His research into spiritual experiences was approached from the understanding that the spiritual is part of human nature and, therefore, all people have the potential for spiritual

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29MASLOW A. (1964), p. 29.

30MASLOW A. (1964), p. 28.

31MASLOW A. (1964), p. 20.

32See Appendix 1.C., for a full list.

experiences. This does not, like Maslow, assume that spiritual experiences are simply a human phenomenon with an implied denial of a transcendent Being. Rather, for Hay's work, he understands that all people, whether religious or not have the potential for spiritual experiences. He recognises the importance of the influence of context and culture in understanding and interpreting experiences but also suggests that all spiritual experiences have a "meeting point".<sup>33</sup>

From the quantitative survey that he undertook in the 1970's and from other surveys that influenced Hay, we can find a system for description of spiritual experiences. This is related to the questions that were asked in the survey. This classification based on aspects of the experience has five parts<sup>34</sup>, Triggers, Place of Experiences, Content (such as an awareness of God, the sacred, the dead etc.), Feelings (including peace, joy, fear, love and elation) and Permanent Effects. So the system of classification and description looks at the content of the experience (what the experient was aware of), where the experience took place, what triggered it and its consequences.

### ***Classification Systems of Other Scholars***

Many other scholars have completed work on spiritual experiences and have produced lists of descriptions or classifications. Each of these develop systems in relation to the type of study they were undertaking, and the underlying assumptions about spiritual experiences. A look at some of the other scholars will also indicate the great variety of classifications available.

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<sup>33</sup>HAY D. (1982), p. 95.

<sup>34</sup>See appendix 1.D.

Keith Yandell<sup>35</sup> approaches the subject of spiritual experiences as a philosophical task, and concludes that there are five types of experiences. As such, he considers, that if there are differences in spiritual experiences, then they must all be different and cannot be reduced to an essential unity. In essence there are two types, those that encounter the “other” whether that is the divine or nature, and those that enable a person to explore their deeper inner self. Of the former there are three divisions which he calls “Monotheistic Experience” which is an encounter with God or the Numinous, and “Nature Mysticism”, which is a feeling of awe and oneness with creation, and Moksha experiences, which is the identification of oneself with the “other” or Numinous. There are two divisions in the second type of experience, which are about levels of self awareness. The “Nirvanic Experiences” are feelings of freedom from human desires and needs, and “Kevalic Experiences” which are the feeling of complete liberty from earthly things and finding a deeper level of consciousness. As his terminology indicates he uses examples from different religions to name the classification.

Caroline Franks Davis<sup>36</sup> considers that a religious experience is not as narrowly defined as “an encounter with the Divine”, but not as broad as just a “wonderful experience”. She has a six-fold classification system of Interpretative, Quasi-sensitive, Revelatory, Regenerative, Numinous and Mystic experiences. The Interpretative, Quasi-sensitive and Revelatory groups are all based on different types of medium used for the experience. Interpretation is the use of rationality to claim an experience is spiritual, Quasi-sensitive is the use of the senses in the experience and Revelatory is described as inspiration, insight and sudden conviction. Those falling into the Regenerative and Mysticism groups are classified according

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35YANDELL Keith E. (1993). *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

36FRANKS DAVIS Caroline (1989). *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. She approaches the subject from the study of the philosophy of religion.

to their purpose, such as to bring hope or understanding. Finally the Numinous experiences, described in terms of fear, awe and dread, and the ecstatic experiences (grouped under mysticism) are designated because of the emotional factor involved. Hence Franks Davis, like many others has a multiple system for classification.

Peter Donovan<sup>37</sup> understands that spiritual experiences are a source of information about and understanding of the Divine, an understanding of the Cosmos and that they can lead to faith. He used a multiple system for his classification, even though he only has four types of experiences. The Paranormal group is based on a system of classification by medium, and includes everyday experiences, clairvoyance, and ghosts. The Mystical group has an aspect of medium classification as they are described as non-sensory, but it is primarily a group related to purpose, in that mystical experiences are primarily about knowledge and understanding. The Charismatic group is clearly defined by the consequences of the experiences. The Regenerative group is about conversion, which is described as involving emotion and moral life change, and so has elements of purpose and consequence.

Marghanita Laski<sup>38</sup> uses the term “ecstatic experience”, because she understands that all people can have such experiences, and the term religious implies that a person has a religious background. Therefore, she prefers the term “ecstatic experience”. However, the use of this term restricts the type of experiences that she is dealing with, as she is only working with mystical experiences. She recognises two broad categories of experiences calling them

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37DONOVAN Peter (1972). *Interpreting Religious Experience*. London: Sheldon Press. His work is based on the material held in the archives of the R.E.R.C. (DONOVAN P. (1972), p. 2.)

38LASKI Marghanita (1980). *Everyday Ecstasy: some observations on the possible social effects of major and minor ecstatic experiences in our daily secular lives*. London: Thames and Hudson, and LASKI Marghanita. (1961). *Ecstasy: A study of some secular and religious experiences*. London: The Cresset Press.

“withdrawal” and “intensity” types,<sup>39</sup> but classifies them according to the system of Adamic (via Purgitiva), Noetic (via Illuminata) and Unitive (via Unitiva) experiences. This suggests that she is happy with a classification based on the purpose of the experience. Indeed, she considers that ecstatic experiences should be valued for their results,<sup>40</sup> even though the experiences are intensely personal and that their purpose is to escape the world rather than producing a lasting consequence.<sup>41</sup> In the earlier work Laski also attempts to classify the triggers.<sup>42</sup>

Michael Paffard<sup>43</sup> distinguishes between ecstatic and everyday experiences, and is only concerned with the “mystical” type. He develops a system which is a mixture of medium and purpose groups. So his twelve fold division contains seven groups that are about the purpose of the experience (moments of joy, new understandings of the world, natural experiences of feeling good, “distraction”, illumination, inner freedom and desolation or darkness) and four groups that are determined by the medium (Memories, Nature mysticism, words and music, and Holy places) and one that is about the consequence of the experience (the Unappeased Spirit - that feels a need to seek for more experiences)

Charles Glock<sup>44</sup> defines spiritual experiences as an action, feeling, sensation or perception, that through interpretation is understood to be a communication with the Divine. His fourfold classification is then determined by the purpose of the experience. Revelation is

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39LASKI M. (1961), p. 47.

40LASKI M. (1961), p. 371.

41LASKI M. (1980), p. 137.

42LASKI M. (1961).

43PAFFARD Michael (1976). *The Unattended Moment*. London: SCM. He compares his interest in the subject to a hobby of collecting.

about the giving of knowledge, Confirming is the feeling of the presence of God, Responsive is a mutual awareness of God and Ecstatic is an intimate relationship with God. He also recognises that there are paranormal experiences which may be religious, but all these are considered to be negative experiences.

Finally, Morton Kelsey<sup>45</sup>, concerned for the apparent lack of interest in the Church for spiritual experiences, considers them as distinct from everyday experiences. Such experiences include “negative” experiences, so recognising that the spiritual includes evil and other non-affirming supernatural phenomena. His system is largely a classification according to consequences. It has seven groups as follows: Mysticism (which is the breaking in of the Divine), Dreams and visions, anxiety and depression, memories, fantasies, intuition and extrasensory experiences. However, as can be seen it is not such a simple system. Most of the groups are determined by medium - dreams and visions, anxiety, memories, fantasies, intuition and extra sensory. Mysticism seems to be about purpose.

### **3.3. Comparison of the Scholars**

Maslow and Otto believe that all spiritual experiences (Maslow calls them Peak Experiences) are essentially the same phenomenon. The apparent differences between them, and the variety of descriptions, are due to the context in which the experient is set. The context will include the religious, or non-religious background, the culture, education, worldview of the person; all of which influence the interpretation of a spiritual experience. But while both will

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<sup>44</sup>Quoted and cited by POLOMA Margaret M. (1995). *The Sociological Context of Religious Experience*. In HOOD R.W. (ed), *Handbook of Religious Experience*. Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, p. 169. Glock is a renowned authority on the sociology of religion.

agree upon the essential unity of such experiences and Donovan and Laski<sup>46</sup> may agree with them, they do not agree on the actual nature of the experience. Is it an experience of God, the “other”, the “Cosmos”, the divine or the higher self? Otto understands the object to be the “numen”, while Maslow might speak of the “transcendent experience” in his earlier work and later might understand it as a unity with the universe. However, he considers that spiritual experiences are basically part of the human nature. It is the experience of the human transcending his or her limitations. Consequently Maslow has been the inspiration for many New Age understandings of spirituality. Donovan considers that they are essentially about developing a relationship with the Divine<sup>47</sup>, or coming to terms with the Cosmos. Yandell’s system categorises the level of contact with the numen or with the inner self. While they are based on the phenomenology of spiritual experiences, the classification limits the experiences that can be included in his system of classification. It is also based on concepts from Eastern religions which are not helpful in the Christian context.

Consequently for Otto, Maslow, Yandell and Laski, they prefer to list the essential elements of a spiritual experience. This then becomes an exercise in description of the essence of the phenomenon, and easily becomes a list of criteria for evaluating an experience and judging its authenticity. Otto describes three elements of a religious experience, being the *Mysterium*, the *Tremendum* and the *Fascinans* with a fourth element being the *August*. All of these are aspects of the response to God. Laski has a three fold division, but like Pafford is confining her work to mystical experiences and, therefore, has similar limitations to the work of Otto.

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45KELSEY Morton. (1975). *Encounter with God: a theology of Christian experience* (2nd ed.). Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship Inc. The material from this book was derived from his work with university students.

46LASKI M. (1980).

47DONOVAN P. (1979), p. 72.

Yandell has a five fold system and Maslow has a list of twenty-five but recognises that any one peak experience will only exhibit some of these characteristics.

Other scholars do attempt to make a system of classification, and while there are some similarities, they are all different. James and Hardy were both pioneers in the work on the subject and the authors wish to present the great variety of experiences that they have documented. However, as the lists are drawn up there is a certain systematising of the data. Taking a descriptive approach James groups together experiences into types that suggests that he has mainly used a system of separating them according to the different purposes of the experiences. So they are listed according to which type of emotional consequence they produce. However, it is not as simple as this. He has six broad groups with each containing a number of sub-groups, and in some ways there appears to be an arbitrariness about the grouping. Four of these groups are related to the purpose of the experience, (mystical, happiness, melancholy, inner peace) while two are related to the consequence or outworking of the experience in the life or faith of the experient (conversion and saintliness).

Hardy's list is much lengthier and more complex because it seems that he is willing to approach the listing and classification from different angles. So any one experience could be classified into a number of groups. Although Hardy had 12 categories, I have been able to reduce this to 6 different types being classification by sense, purpose, event, source, trigger and consequences. Hay's system is built on content, setting and trigger; Pafford's is a mixture of purpose and medium; Glock's by purpose; and Laski has a mixture of medium and purpose.



### **3.4. Constructing a Classification System**

It appears that the most comprehensive system for classification is that derived by Hardy. However, because of its size it becomes difficult to work with. Yet its basis is sound as it understands that experiences can be classified according to their description; whether this be the description of the content, the medium, the setting or another aspect of the phenomenon. It also recognises that the different components of an experience are relevant and should be used in the classification. Hay continued with this process and from it developed his questions in the surveys to catalogue the answers in a systematic way. The work of Hardy and Hay form a good basis for a system of classification but it needs some amendments and adjustments for the present project, so we have compiled a five-fold classification system which is suitable for this project.

Working with this system, developed in the light of the results of this project, it seems that there are five main phenomena in a spiritual experience. The components that can be observed by the experient, and to some extent by an observer, are: the setting, the trigger, the medium, the purpose and the consequence. While the experient may not initially segregate such aspects in an experience, due reflection on the event can enable the differentiation of these elements. Recognising that the experience includes not just the event but also the interpretation, then the interpretation is made by the experient primarily, but also by other observers. The description and interpretation of the experience will depend on the ability of the experient to translate the event and the interpretation, and also on the context of the

language and symbols used. So this approach recognises that the experient is the person in the best position to apprehend and describe the experience

The approach also recognises that every experience is unique and different. While they may have components that are similar, they cannot be reduced to a single type with a single essence. All experiences are unique and relate to the person involved who is set in a particular context. Yet it appreciates that experiences can be classified into groups and types. Each experience is reported as involving the encounter of the “self” and the “other” and so has aspects that are both human and supernatural. The experient is always in control of the experience in that she or he is intrinsically part of it. While the experient is often referred to as the subject and the transcendent as the object, there is a mutuality about the encounter. The experient has the ability to allow the experience to take place, or to reject it. Similarly, the experient can act upon the experience, allow it to change and influence life, or can reject it and suppress the consequence.

Such a system takes seriously the context of the spiritual experience, and so this is an important element in building the system. As this project is working in the context of church-going Christians, it is reasonable to assume that in most cases the encounter with the “other” is an encounter with the Divine or a divine being, and so there is a need in the classification to describe the details of this encounter. It is also assumed that there is a religious dimension to the context of the experience, and this is explored as part of the project.

The two most significant aspects of an experience are the purpose and the consequence of it, as these are the core or the essence of the encounter with the supernatural. If the experience is to have any value at all, it is the way in which it will influence a person’s life. Therefore,

James is correct in feeling that the consequence is the judge of an experience. However, it needs to be noted that an experience is what the experient makes it and he or she is free to act upon the experience or not. So the consequence does not always follow from the experience.

The classification system that is used in this project has five components. The “Purpose” of the spiritual experience could be said to be the content. It is the encounter with the Divine or supernatural. That encounter may be described as a time of inner peace, happiness; a sense of awe and wonder; or it may be a time when some knowledge or understanding is gained. Some scholars will use the term “Mystical” for this. However, this term has a long history and is used in different ways by different people, so is probably best avoided.

The “Consequence”, as already stated, is how the experient takes the encounter into his or her life and acts upon it. The consequence may be a new lifestyle, it may be conversion in some form, but generally it will bring about some change.

The “Medium” is the vehicle that is used for the experience. These will include dreams, visions, heightened senses, prayer, and worship, or other people. In fact there is no limit to the medium that can be used.

The “Trigger” is that which initiates the experience. It is usually different to the medium, although they could be coincident, and at times may be the same phenomenon.

The “Setting” is simply the context in which the spiritual experience occurred. This may be a specific place, but it could equally be an action or event.

Using this as the basis for a system of classification, it will be seen that spiritual experiences can be classified according to five different criteria. Each criterion expresses a particular aspect of the spiritual experience. The classification system is descriptive and not judgmental. It classifies according to the five aspects of the spiritual experience and not just one selected aspect which is often the basis of other systems. All aspects are important as they can be an influence in the experience and they also help us to understand how the spiritual experience has affected the person and how it relates to their expressed faith.

This is the system that is used in this research project to analyse, describe and list the spiritual experiences presented. For all of the spiritual experiences described by the participants it has been possible to classify according to the five criteria. Although it needs to be acknowledged that there is not always sufficient information to be certain of the reliability of all the attempts at classification. It is also true, that often the trigger, setting and medium may coincide.

The construction of the questionnaire has an underlying assumption of the classification system, although there are not specific questions related to the five aspects. While questions 2 and 3 relate to the setting, trigger and medium, the answers need to be used in conjunction with the description of the spiritual experience itself. It is felt that the questionnaire would become too complex and technical if separate questions about the five aspects of classification were asked. This would make the questionnaire much longer and in all probability have resulted in even fewer being completed.

Consequently the classification has to be determined through interpretation and analysis of the description, in association with the other questions and the discussion with the participant, recognising that any classification system, however thorough, is always approximate and to some extent arbitrary and artificial. However, it is a useful tool for comparison and analysis of the spiritual experiences. Without such a system, conclusions might be even more elusive. As the questionnaires and reports of spiritual experiences are analysed, we will see how this system works, and how it enables us to bring significant conclusions about the relationship between spiritual experiences and faith.

By examining the classification systems of others, and drawing on their expertise, a suitable system has been designed for this study. This system will be used to analyse the material collected from the case study. However, before we look at the material collected and how it is analysed, we need to look at the method of collection of data used in the project.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **CONSTRUCTING THE CASE STUDY: METHODOLOGY**

## **4. CONSTRUCTING THE CASE STUDY: METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1. Method and Subject**

It is generally recognised that the subject of a research project will be influential in determining the method and process of the research. The subject of this research is spirituality and spiritual experience. The purpose of the project is to gain some theological and missiological insight into the place of spiritual experience in the life and faith of people. Consequently, there are two disciplines that impinge on the process and method of study. The collection of data relies on some aspects of sociology, while the analysis of that material takes a theological approach. <sup>1</sup>

As we have seen, spirituality is a term difficult to define and it will mean different things to different people. However, we are using the term as an understanding of a largely personal and individual expression of faith and a person's relationship with the Divine, the world about them and other people. The understanding for this project is that Spiritual Experience can be an indicator of expressed faith. So the research subject becomes an exploration of the relationship between spiritual experiences, faith and worship. Worship is something that can be observed, if one defines worship as a public event. However, it is much more than that, and involves a private and personal approach to the Divine. This is more difficult to observe. The other aspects of the research, spiritual experience and faith, are clearly very personal aspects of a person's life, and, therefore, subjective. They are difficult if not impossible to observe.

Spiritual experiences, as experiences, cannot be observed. They are reported by the experient but the experience is both an event and an interpretation of the event. These two aspects cannot in reality be separated, although in theory they might be. Some scholars, however, would dispute that they can be distinguished as the experience is as much the interpretation as it is the event. Indeed one might raise the question of whether an experience is complete until it is narrated, that is, represented in a textual form, whether that be oral or written.<sup>2</sup> The process of narrating the text, makes the experience a story, and that story is both an interpretation of the experience and is formed through interpreting the experience. Flick<sup>3</sup> calls this process of narrating, collecting, interpreting and analysing data, “mimesis”. One cannot separate out any one part of the process as more important or the particular work of the research. The whole is involved in the understanding of the phenomena and its influences and consequences.

Consequently the data of the research project is dependent on the experient being both the one who has had the experience and the one who is able to narrate it. The phenomenon, then, that is being explored and analysed is this whole process of event and interpretation. The question is raised as to how this can authentically be heard, interpreted and analysed.

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1 CAMERON Helen et. al., write that the researcher “takes seriously the methodological issues involved in doing theology, and will draw upon other disciplines for methods appropriate to the research in hand.”

CAMERON Helen et. al. (2005). *Studying Local Churches: a handbook*. London: SCM Press, p. 19.

2 CLANDININ D. Jean and CONNELEY F. Michael (1998). *Personal Experience Methods*. In DENZIN N.K. and LINCOLN Y.S. (eds), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Ltd., p. 154.

3 FLICK Olive (2002). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks California: Sage Publications Ltd., p. 33.



Batson and Ventis<sup>4</sup> consider that it is not possible to study religion, faith or spiritual experience from an empirical perspective. The material being studied is not observable, so cannot be objectively assessed. They can only be studied through the descriptions that are given by the subject, which may or may not be accurate or honest. Spiritual experiences as experiences are often dismissed as non-scientific as they are unobservable by an objective observer. Consequently from a scientific perspective can they be studied? A wide spectrum of approaches to this problem have been suggested, from those who argue that experiences can be observed through their consequences to the idea that experiences are unimportant. Hick, acknowledging that experience can be delusionary, nevertheless makes an important point when he says:

“We have to trust our own experience for otherwise we have no basis on which to believe anything about the nature of the universe in which we find ourselves.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet for the purpose of studying experiences the very principle of objective study is inappropriate. It could even be said that the very principle of objective observation is untenable. Observations are always “theory laden” and influenced by the preconceptions of the observer.<sup>6</sup> There is no real possibility of being totally objective; the observer always interacts with the subject to some extent. Yet this does not mean that we can ignore the importance of experiences. Simply the presence of the observer is an interaction that influences the study. Polanyi and others began to recognise this situation some time ago saying: “the scientist’s facts and laws always involve subjective inference and

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4 BATSON C.D. and VENTIS W. L. (1982). *The Religious Experience: a social-psychological perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 17.

5 HICK John (1980). *Mystical Experience as Cognition*. In WOODS R. (ed), *Understanding Mysticism*. London: Athlone Press, p. 434.

6 KAY W. and FRANCIS L. J. (1996). *Drift from the Churches: attitudes toward Christianity during childhood and adolescence*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, p. 163.

interpretation.”<sup>7</sup> The scientific community is now ready to accept that the presence of the observer is a limitation to objectivity. Even the well known, contemporary physicist, Stephen Hawking recognises that the observer cannot separate himself from the observed.

“We and our models are both part of the universe we are describing,” says Hawking, “we are not angels who view the universe from outside.”<sup>8</sup>

With the advent of quantum physics and chaos theory, the limitations of Newtonian theory have been recognised and it is realised that any observation potentially influences the subject. Denzin and Lincoln say that postmodernism recognises that there are no objective observations and all that can occur are accounts and stories, not full understandings of phenomena.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, others would go further and say that the world can only be studied effectively by involvement in it.<sup>10</sup>

Gubrium and Holstein<sup>11</sup>, however, consider that the phenomenon is how the experient understands and tells the story of the experience and how it affects their faith. This can be observed and analysed to some extent. The study can also investigate how the narratives are constructed and how they in turn shape the experience. Therefore, Batson and Ventis consider that phenomena can be studied, even though they are not directly observable, because “they

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7 BATSON C. D. and VENTIS W. L. (1982), p. 20.

8 Quoted in BROOKS Michael (2003). The Impossible Puzzle. *New Scientist*, 5th April 2003, p. 34 - 35. My thanks to B. Burgess for drawing my attention to this article.

9 DENZIN N. K. and LINCOLN Y. S. (1988c). *Entering the Field of Qualitative Research*. In DENZIN N.K. and LINCOLN Y.S. (eds), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: theories and issues*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Ltd., p. 24.

10 This is the basis of much contemporary sociological research, particularly from the constructionist perspective. SHAW Ian F. (1999). *Qualitative Evaluation*. London: Sage Publications, p. 48; SILVERMAN David (2001a). *Interpreting Qualitative Data: methods for analysing talk, text and interaction* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Ltd., p. 95.

11 GUBRIUM Jaber F. and HOLSTEIN James A. (2000). *Analysing Interpretative Practice*. In DENZIN N.K. and LINCOLN Y.S. (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Ltd., p. 489.

leave observable tracks or symptoms.”<sup>12</sup> Kelsey<sup>13</sup> also considers that they can be observed through the consequences of the experience. In this case the consequences are such things as concern, healing and well-being. This not only makes them observable, but also verifiable.

Dealing with feelings, emotions and experiences, one is primarily dealing with subjective phenomena. It is possible for this to be an empirical study, according to Flick<sup>14</sup> who understands that while the “experience” itself is not assessable, the interpretation, given meanings and influences on life derived from the experience are pointers to that experience. Again, Flick<sup>15</sup> concludes that the “empirical data” is the text rather than the elusive “original” experience event.

It can be concluded, therefore, that it is possible to state that the study of spiritual experiences and their influence on faith and worship is both empirical and phenomenological.

#### **4.2. Process**

We have understood that experiences are very personal events which include interpretation and narration. They are phenomena that involve the emotions and feelings as well as cognitive actions.<sup>16</sup> If this is true for experiences in general it is particularly true for spiritual experiences. Experiences which include elements of the supernatural are even less communicable, primarily because of the lack of language available. The normative language

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<sup>12</sup>BATSON C. D. and VENTIS W. L. (1982), p. 23.

<sup>13</sup>KELSEY Morton. (1975). *Encounter With God: a theology of Christian experience*. (2nd ed.). Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship Inc., p. 127.

<sup>14</sup>FLICK O. (2002), p. 17.

<sup>15</sup>FLICK O. (2002), p. 17.

is that of religion, but even this is inadequate. The language of occult and supernatural will be unacceptable to the religious person. Therefore, the narration of spiritual experiences can be a difficult and stressful procedure. Add to this generally accepted understanding of “British reserve” in personal and emotional matters and in all aspects of religion, then the exploration of spiritual experiences becomes more difficult. This then will also be determinative for the process of the investigation.

Clearly public debate on the issue will not necessarily produce honest and clear data. It is recognised that people included in surveys of a personal nature will not feel free to expose their feelings and understandings and will feel under pressure to conform either to the needs of the researcher or the perceived acceptable norms of society. The most reliable way of approaching a clear and honest account of experiences is through developing a working trust between researcher and subject.

### *Questionnaires*

This working relationship can be achieved in a number of ways. First it can be approached through the assurance of anonymity. Self completing questionnaires can be produced that are seen to be abstract, impersonal and general in nature. This research project used the process of questionnaires<sup>17</sup>, which allowed for anonymity and complete confidentiality.

The questionnaires were kept as short as possible, but following the pilot study it was felt necessary to expand the form slightly to include more questions relating to faith and

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16De LAINE Marlene (2000). *Fieldwork, Participation and Practice: ethics and dilemmas in qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Ltd., p. 212.

experience. In the pilot questionnaire, one question was asked about the influence of spiritual experiences in a person's faith and how it related to worship. It was assumed that if this had a large influence, then the doctrinal influence on faith was much less. Through the pilot interviews it was discovered that this was producing inaccurate analyses and so more information was needed. Two more questions were added (9 and 10) to ask the respondent about the influences of doctrine and Scripture on their faith, lifestyle and worship. Also question 7 was changed from asking how the person became a Christian, to the level of involvement and commitment to the local church and its worship. This was felt to be more significant than the original question. To some extent the background of the Christian faith, conversion and upbringing was explored in the interviews.

Most of the questions were a simple multiple choice approach, where respondents could tick appropriate boxes for each question. This gave a relatively easy method of classification. However, the responses are relatively superficial as they are determined by prior categories.<sup>18</sup> For questions 8, 9, 10 and 13 a different format was used. In these questions the respondent was required to rank the level of influence or importance. This method of scaling is not a Likert scale<sup>19</sup>, although it is similar to this method. The Likert scale is normally used to assess a response to a certain statement, to the level of agreement or disagreement with the statement, so the lower part of the scale would be a negative response and the upper part a positive response. This type of analysis was not the purpose of the scaling used. This survey was asking the respondent to assess the levels of influence in their lives from certain

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<sup>17</sup>See appendix 2 for a copy of the questionnaire used in the main study.

<sup>18</sup>BURGESS R.G. (1984). *In the Field: an introduction to field research*. Hemel Hempstead: George, Allen and Unwin, p. 243.

<sup>19</sup>See DIXON B.R., BOUMA G.D., ATKINSON G.B.J. (1987). *A Handbook of Social Science Research: a comprehensive and practical guide for students*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 87; OPPENHEIM A.N. (1992). *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Management*. London: Printer Publishers, p. 195.

phenomena. So this was not an agreement scale but an indicator or influence scale, and it was not asking if it was a negative or a positive influence on faith. In either case the phenomenon influences the faith and it is the level of influence that was being sought. Likert scaling employs a ranking procedure of 1 to 5, or exceptionally 1 to 7.<sup>20</sup> It was felt important to give the respondents a wider range to choose from and so a scale of 0 - 10 was used. 0 indicating no influence and 10 indicating a strong influence. When it came to analysis of the questions, however, it is doubtful if the larger range of 0 - 10 was more accurate than a simpler range of 0 - 5. Because of the limited number of questionnaires returned it is difficult to finally decide if the larger scale will be of benefit in a larger survey.

Three of the respondents in the pilot survey felt that the questionnaire was simple enough to deal with, while only one felt that he was unable to respond. The non-response was due to his inability to answer the first question on spiritual experiences because the term had not been defined. This is a source of interest in the research and it is discussed elsewhere.

## *Discussions*

The second process is that of interviews which bring a greater depth of understanding and exploration of the subject.<sup>21</sup> The technique used could be described as an “unstructured interview”, although to some extent it may be understood as a “semi-structured interview”.

The interviews were approached as a discussion and conversation between the respondent and

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<sup>20</sup>OPPENHEIM A.N. (1992), p. 197.

<sup>21</sup>Philip Richter in his short section about Sociological methodological approaches says, “In qualitative research, a sociologist will prefer to undertake a modest number of extensive, probing interviews, rather than a large-scale ‘number-crunching’ survey. The results will have a richness and depth of understanding, although it may be more difficult to generalise the findings and apply them in other situations.” CAMERON H. et. al. (2005), p. 21.

the researcher, although, clearly, the basis of the discussion was the questionnaire that had been completed by the respondent and the purpose of the discussion was to illuminate and explore the nature of the spiritual experiences. Consequently while the conversation was allowed to follow its own journey, the researcher had an outline of the issues that needed to be discussed. To a large extent the researcher controlled the discussion through taking the initiative when there were hesitations or silences. This is considered necessary or the interview goes “out of control” and becomes of less value.<sup>22</sup> However, the respondent was also free to ask questions and seek clarification from the researcher. In one or two cases it was also clear that the respondent felt happy to take the lead.

The informal nature of the interview in a familiar surrounding had the effect of providing a safer environment for the interview. This approach also helped to deal with the problem of power in the situation, where the researcher is perceived to have the power as an academic and a professional.<sup>23</sup> First of all it was a private discussion, taking place at the location that most suited the respondent. In all cases, except one, this was in their own home. The one exception was when the respondent chose to meet in a church room.

The researcher chose to make the discussion participatory. This method was found valuable by Edrington<sup>24</sup>. The researcher becoming not only a “participant observer” but actually part of the narrating process of events and experiences. So it can be fairly said that the text that

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<sup>22</sup>OPPENHEIM A.N. (1992), p. 66.

<sup>23</sup>HAY David and HUNT Kate (2000). *Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Don't Go To Church*. Nottingham: Nottingham University, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup>EDRINGTON Roger B. (1987). *Everyday Men: living in a climate of unbelief*. Frankfurt: Lang, p. 5.

was finally produced was an open co-operation between respondent and researcher,<sup>25</sup> but directed by the respondent. While this has its potential problems, relating to the influence of the researcher, his bias and the aims of the research project, it has the bonuses of enabling and encouraging the respondent to be more open, and creating a relaxed environment. The researcher, being able to empathise with the respondents through his own experiences, and faith background, could also help to provide the permission to discuss the subject, offer some language that might be suitable for narration and interpretation and show respect for the respondent.<sup>26</sup> This improves the technique where the interviewer is the mediator transforming the responses of the respondent, which often creates a gap of understanding between researcher and respondent.<sup>27</sup>

In return the respondent could respect the researcher, both in terms of his experience and understanding and in terms of his status within the church. This provided an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect that enabled a more honest debate about spiritual experiences. It should be noted that the one interview that did not take place failed, at least in part, because the respondent was unsure of the status of the researcher. Generally, however, the relationship with the participants seemed to be good and the interaction was constructive.

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25FONTANA A. and FREY J. H. (2000). *The Interview: from structured questions to negotiated text*. In DENZIN N.K. and LINCOLN Y.S. (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks California: Sage Publications, p. 663.

26BENNEY Mark and HUGHES Everett.C. (1984). *Of Sociology and the Interview*. In BULMER Martin (ed), *Sociological Research Methods: an introduction* (2nd ed.). London: MacMillan, p. 223.

27BROWN Callum G. (2001). *The Death of Christian Britain: understanding secularism 1800- 2000*. London: Routledge, pp. 115 - 117, where the author discusses the techniques of the 1960's and the value of post-structuralism in the 1990's.



It is generally accepted that people in a survey situation do not interview totally honestly,<sup>28</sup> but flavour their answers with the hope to please the interviewer,<sup>29</sup> or to be seen to be “normal” or in the case of faith to be seen to be orthodox. Therefore, any survey has to consider this seriously if its results are to be authentic. How does the investigator work with this understanding? Clearly it cannot be assumed that people will be totally objective in their answers to questions. There will be many pressures on a person to conform, to be seen to be normal, to suppress feelings and thoughts that are very personal. In the case of faith studies, and in particular spiritual experiences, these are very personal and, therefore, there is a certain reservation in talking about such things. However, when the respondent feels at ease, then it is generally accepted that the information is more reliable.<sup>30</sup>

As the subject of the research is not something that is a general topic of discussion or study it means that people are hesitant to speak about such things from their own perspectives. It was clear from the returned questionnaires that people did not always have a clear understanding of spiritual experiences, and this was confirmed in the discussions. Therefore, there was need for encouragement and help to provide useful answers. Likewise the subject of the discussions are emotionally charged as they reflect lived experiences. Rather than avoid the emotional aspect Silverman considers that this should be encouraged:

“[The emotionalist approach] encourages interviewers to become emotionally involved with respondents and to convey their own feelings to both respondents and readers.”<sup>31</sup>

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28HULL John (1999). Adult Religious Faith: some problems of definition, of research and of education. *Modern Believing*, October 1999, vol. 40:4. CAMERON H. et. al. (2005). p. 21.

29FONTANA A. and FREY J.H. (2000), p. 650.

30BENNEY M. and HUGHES E.C. (1984). p. 219.

31SILVERMAN D. (2001), p. 91.

The discussion method enabled the interviewer to help the subjects to explore the meanings and concepts for themselves and so be able to give a more considered response. Most of the discussions started with the objective of clarifying what the interviewer and the subject understood by spiritual experiences, and also the limitations of the method the project was using. Therefore, for those who found the project to be exploring something relatively new to them they were able to be more confident in their responses. In a similar way the interviewer was able to discuss and follow up statements made, so that they could be clarified if there was any ambiguity or confusion. The act of clarifying statements, of course, brings with it the possibility of suggestion and manipulation by the interviewer, and this has to be considered in the analysis of the project.

The discussion approach has a further positive aspect, in that the interviewer can help the subject to clarify their own thinking. With the right techniques of suggestion and questions, subjects may be helped to look at issues from a different perspective and so be able to understand and articulate more clearly. Spiritual experience, by definition, is not primarily a cognitive process (although this is not excluded in Spiritual Experience) but is about the feelings and emotions. To understand, describe and interpret experiences and to communicate this with others is a difficult task.<sup>32</sup> Taken together with the fact that few people today have the vocabulary and culture to deal with these experiences, then the task of the interviewer is also to help people gain this skill.

Consequently the text that is used for analysis is a “Negotiated Text.” This text works with the expressed experience of the experient as authentic and real, and recognises the ability of

the experient to describe the experience which is as much emotional as it is cognitive. However, the process is also realistic in recognising that there is always an inability to express the experience due to a lack of language and concepts. The input by the researcher, enabling discussion, leads to an agreed interpretation of the experience and an agreed negotiated text. The interviews were recorded, and the transcription of this recording as the negotiated text became the data and the text for analysis.

### ***Observation***

The third aspect of the method is the observation of the relationship between spiritual experience and faith issues. It has to be said that this was considered a minor aspect of the research method, as already stated, because the observation of the phenomena under study is particularly difficult. However, through attendance at worship at the church under study, and through my own observation of similar churches over decades, the theories and the results of the survey appear to synchronise. To authenticate my own observations, the minister of the church was interviewed after being presented with a summary of the findings of the research. His response to the findings, which included his own observations of the congregation, largely confirmed the results, and enabled a refining of the conclusions.

### ***Case Study***

The research project has the potential of being very large and engaging with many groups of people. To be able to make conclusions that could be accepted as general statements for the

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<sup>32</sup>This was one of Edrington's observations in his survey. EDRINGTON R.B. (1987), p. 105. Edrington's survey is discussed in chapter 8.

state of spirituality in Britain today, the sampling procedure would need to ensure that it was representative of the population. The same principle would apply for any project that was more limited in terms of a denomination of the Church. However, this was considered impractical as the research is to some extent pioneering and so the process and method needed to be tested. Consequently after the experience of the pilot study, it was decided to work with a small group. This group was one congregation of the United Reformed Church in Birmingham. Within that congregation the group was self selective as described. Consequently although the method of research included qualitative and quantitative study, this was within the context of a case study. The case study method will provide conclusions about that particular group, and it will be the result of a comparison with other studies that will lead to more general conclusions.

#### **4.3. Validity, Reliability and Credibility**

Validity, reliability and credibility are major issues of a research project that involves some social research methods and is dealing with largely subjective material. Most material produced to advise researchers struggles with these concepts and only suggests ways in which such research can be shown to be credible and reliable. From a narrow scientific perspective, few research projects using social survey methods will meet the required levels of credibility and reliability and so will be deemed to be invalid. However, as stated before, this is not a research project that is constrained by scientific techniques. Being primarily a “Case Study” the questions of validity, credibility and reliability are not related to the generalisation of the research but only if the project itself is consistent and accurate.

## ***Validity***

Validity is usually attained through the process of “triangulation”.<sup>33</sup> This is the process whereby different methods are used to obtain data and the correlation of this data will show the validity of the study. If the different methods produce similar results, then the study is validated. This particular project used four methods. The Quantitative survey, the Qualitative approach through interviews and observation were augmented with a discussion with the minister of the congregation, presenting the general findings of the project. His comments confirmed the findings, but also added some details to the background of the study. In the broader picture these methods did produce similar conclusions, and the interaction of the methods allowed the conclusions to be refined. Therefore, the process and the conclusions of the research can be considered to be valid.

## ***Reliability***

The reliability of the method for the quantitative analysis is basically given because of the use of the standard questionnaire for all participants. The main point of discussion would be how accessible the questions were to the people who initially decided to take part in the survey. That a number of papers were taken but not returned suggests that some people were unable to cope with the questionnaire,<sup>34</sup> although it could simply be that they did not find time to complete it. As these people were unknown it was not possible to determine why the papers were not returned or why the return rate was less than expected. Likewise the so-called

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<sup>33</sup>There are different types of “triangulation”. The one being referred to here, and used in this study, is “investigator triangulation” where different methods are used to obtain data and the results compared and used to moderate the findings. See FLICK O. (2002). p. 226.

<sup>34</sup>This was the case with one participant in the pilot study.

negative responses, where people indicated that they had not had a spiritual experience, could not be followed up because the respondents did not supply their names and contact details. While this could lead to reasonable criticism of the method, the need for anonymity of the people involved was a greater priority. The anonymity agreement also assured the group under study that involvement in the study was completely voluntary. Without this assurance of anonymity and confidentiality it is reasonable to assume that there would have been an even smaller response.

The discussion about reliability will then reside with the analysis of the data. This was undertaken systematically through tabulation of the correlated results and through direct comparison of the answers given. It will be seen from the analysis that rather than looking for absolute conclusions, the material was only able to offer trends in relationships between the variables of faith, experience and the influences on these. The figures used in the tabulations and comparisons are taken directly from the questionnaires and not managed. The group surveyed was not large enough to produce results that could be analysed through statistical methods of averaging or other accepted methods. It is recognised that in some cases, the analysis has to be tentative as the number of people in sub groups was sometimes as low as one. However, the comparison with the pilot study, produced corresponding results for the different age groups and so the analysis, while incomplete can be seen as indicative.

The material from the interviews is accepted as authentic, and therefore, reliable, as the method of the interview allowed an informality, safety and permission to divulge personal information. Accepting the dangers of the interview technique; there are possible influences from the bias of the researcher, the willingness for the respondent to idealise, and perfect his

or her accounts and analysis of the spiritual experiences, and the inherent desire to please and “get things right”; the transcripts of the interviews do indicate that as far as is possible to discern, the narratives and analyses are authentic understandings of the respondents. Therefore, the assumption is that the responses to discussions are authentic representation of the phenomena. It is recognised that Hull<sup>35</sup> feels that because one cannot assume that answers are honest, they have to be sceptically assessed, and that it is preferable to see them as the string in the web, and that the real understanding of the phenomena are in the spaces between the strings. The problem with this is that the researcher has to construct the “holes” and so is, surely, left with less authentic material than the subject provides. This approach also assumes that the researcher has a better understanding of events and phenomena than the experient. Such a stance is seriously challenged by other authors expressing the position that the experient as a cognitive being is capable of understanding and relating his or her experiences authentically.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, through the discussion method of the interview, the researcher is able to offer to develop the thinking of the respondent, draw out further meaning and content of the experiences and offer the respondent his tentative analyses for comment and criticism. Therefore, the method is as reliable as is practical for the research project.

### ***Credibility***

Therefore, with the validity and the reliability assured the research becomes credible. The procedure and method is suitable for the case study and the standardisation of the collection

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<sup>35</sup>HULL J. (1999), p. 43.

<sup>36</sup>CLANDININ D. and CONNELLY F. (1998), p. 151.

of data makes the research and its conclusions acceptable. The credibility of the method and project would be further enhanced by extending the research to other church groups and non-church groups. As stated elsewhere, this would have made the project too large, but it is an essential addition to the research and it is hoped that there will be an opportunity to extend the research and this will comment on its credibility.

#### **4.4. The Field Work**

The first task was to set up a pilot study. This pilot study was undertaken with four people specifically selected from a URC congregation in Birmingham who were known to have had spiritual experiences and represented a range of ages and church backgrounds. They were all known to the researcher and willing to be part of the survey. The relationship between the researcher and the respondents was such that there was honesty in the discussions, with the knowledge of confidentiality. This pilot helped to assess the method and some changes were made as indicated above. The changes to the questionnaire helped to clarify the importance of the different influences on faith and life, and made the analysis less liable to error. The pilot also helped to develop the method of discussion and the skills of the researcher in this process, discovering the need for the discussion to be more focused, so that the necessary information was obtained. The pilot discussions tended to be more general, while the discussions in the Case Study referred more to the questionnaires returned.

The exercise of transcribing the discussions also highlighted the amount of time that was required for the method chosen, and indicated that it would be necessary to use a smaller



rather than larger group for the main study. Consequently the pilot provided a useful learning process, the fruits of which were used in the main study.

The next step was to select one congregation from my own denomination to work with. Having selected the congregation I approached the minister and church secretary to ask if the church would help in the survey. The church was then approached through the Church meeting to find out if they were willing to allow the research to take place and if they were willing to be part of it. The researcher suggested that he would be ready to speak to the church about it if they wished. However, this offer was not taken up. The response was that the church was willing to take part in the survey and complete questionnaires, on the understanding that there was no obligation for people to be part of the survey.

50 questionnaires were delivered to the Church to be distributed to the congregation on Sundays during the period of October and November 2000. Questionnaires were to be returned by the first week of December. Only 17 were returned, although a number more were taken and not returned. The church claims to have a membership of 65 and an average attendance for worship on Sundays of 60 people. Working with these figures, then, one concludes that only 17 out of about 60 people decided to be part of the research. This gives a figure of 28% response to the survey. In statistical terms this could be considered to be a good response, but in actual numbers it is rather disappointing. As the church had been approached and asked to take part it would have been hoped that there would have been a greater response.

In discussions with some of those who returned the questionnaire, it seems that one of the reasons that people did not take a questionnaire, or took one and did not return it was that they did not understand the concept of spiritual experience. One of the common comments in my discussions was that people would have preferred to have had this defined for them. This in itself is an important comment on the subject - that people in the church seem to be unsure of what a spiritual experience is. Likewise a comment to me at a meeting to arrange workshops on spirituality for a church gathering, was that we needed to introduce the subject to people because many may not be aware of the term and many would not know what it means. This suggests that terms and concepts that are used more generally in society may have little usage in the Church.

The lack of response is suggestive that people do not know what is a spiritual experience, or they are confused by it. Another aspect is that people may be unwilling to talk about these things because they are very personal. However, in my discussions this did not really seem to be an issue, although these conversations were with people who elected to discuss their experiences. The poor response may also be due to “survey fatigue.”

The questionnaires invited people to have a discussion with me about their spiritual experience, with the purpose of filling out the details in the questionnaire. Six people responded positively, although one of these later declined. The questionnaires were then followed with discussions with five of the participants. Fortunately those willing to take part covered a broad age range. The material was provisionally analysed before the interviews took place so that some broad theories and ideas could be formulated before the interviews. The interviews would then confirm or develop these ideas.

The discussions with the participants were arranged individually with sufficient time between the interviews to transcribe the discussions so that each interview could be dealt with before the next was undertaken. In this way it was hoped that there would be less confusion when analysing the data. The discussions were transcribed and then analysed.

## **PART 2**

### **Spiritual Experience and Faith: The Case Study**

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **The Significance of Spiritual Experiences: The Group Response**

## **5. The Significance of Spiritual Experiences: The Group Response**

### **5.1. Background**

The core of the research project was the investigation of a local congregation in Birmingham, using questionnaires and interviews, as well as observation. The congregation selected is part of the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom. The URC was formed in 1972 by a union of congregational churches in England and Wales and the Presbyterian Church of England. Subsequently some of the Churches of Christ and the Scottish Congregational Churches have joined the URC. Consequently there are basically three church traditions contributing to the life of the URC and it sees itself as theologically broad, with an emphasis on ecumenism and tolerance of different approaches to church life and worship. This is part of the background of the congregation that formed a case study for the project, and will be explored more fully later.

Although there are many traditions within the URC, each local congregation has its own particular history and background, and this has continued to be influential in the way that the congregation expresses its life and worship. The congregation of the case study is a union of two formerly Congregational churches. The “congregational ecclesiology” is still clearly important to them. Further, the church has been influenced by the members who have immigrated from the Caribbean. Although they are a minority of the congregation, they form a significant part of it.

Set within the inner city, in an area of deprivation and of mixed ethnicity, the church has been involved in social and community work, and sees this as part of its ethos. Many of the members do not live within the locality of the church. Some of them have family or personal roots in the area, but have moved out into newer suburbs, while others who live out of the area have chosen to be part of the congregation. Those who do live within the locality do so out of choice or through economic necessity. Consequently the congregation provides a diverse group for study, and as will be seen, a variety of expressions of faith and spiritual experiences. Both this diversity and the commonality of church tradition is expressed in the questionnaires and interviews.

The information collected has been analysed in two parts. The questionnaires were used as the primary material to look for general trends among the congregation, giving the possibility of comparison between those who have reported spiritual experiences and those who have not. This analysis is set within the context of the congregation as a whole and to a limited extent within the context of the URC. From this we draw some conclusions about the congregation and its understanding of the place of spiritual experiences in the life and the worship of the church.

The questionnaires together with the interviews provide the basis for a deeper analysis of the spiritual experiences reported and how these relate to the way that individuals express their faith. This analysis is primarily within the individual's context. From this we draw some conclusions about the relationship between spiritual experiences and expressed faith.

The seventeen questionnaires returned form the core of the case study. Of these, nine respondents stated that they had had spiritual experiences, and all said that they had had more than one (7 = occasional, 2 = many), six said that they had not had spiritual experiences and two did not answer the question. These two responses will need to be classified as “uncertain responses”, and in the analysis placed with the “negative responses” as they do not contain reports of spiritual experiences. This uncertainty is probably related to the very concept of the research and the questionnaire, as Spiritual Experience was not defined, nor were examples given. This approach was a considered decision following the pilot study, that concluded that a definition or examples might restrict the understanding of spiritual experiences. Hence people had to define the term for themselves and make their own decision as to whether they had had spiritual experiences or not<sup>1</sup>.

## **5.2. Classifying the Incomplete Questionnaires**

One of these incomplete responses (*Ra*)<sup>2</sup> did answer questions 5 - 12. Question 8 asks how much spiritual experiences have influenced different aspects of life, and the respondent answered this question. The assumption from this is that the person (the respondent did not give age, gender or other personal details) did have some understanding of spiritual experiences, and that they had influenced the person’s life in three ways: faith (7), lifestyle (8)

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<sup>1</sup>Hay and Hunt followed a similar procedure in the survey of 2000, as it was more important to understand the views of the people about life experiences than to define a theoretical position. HAY David and HUNT Kate (2000). *Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Don’t Go to Church*. Nottingham: University of Nottingham, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup>The names of all the respondents in the study have been changed to preserve their anonymity. Although those involved in the discussions gave permission for the material to be used, it was still felt preferable to maintain the anonymity as a means of confidentiality. The names given to the respondents give an indication of the gender but no other details.



and relationship with others (8)<sup>3</sup>. The factor of 7 or 8, I would interpret as strong influence on the person. So the question needs to be raised, “If the person has not had any spiritual experiences, how have they influenced the person’s faith, lifestyle and relationship with others?” The person did not answer question 13, which asks about the relation between worship and spiritual experiences, so the assumption may be that s/he does not consider that worship involves spiritual experience and, therefore, has not encountered spiritual experiences in worship. The assumption must be that the spiritual experiences that have influenced her/him are those of other people, whom s/he has met, discussed with or read about. It could be that Scripture has influenced her/him, and the encounter with spiritual experiences is in the Scriptures, but question 10 was incompletely answered and it only indicated that scripture had strongly influenced her/his understanding of God.

The general level of unanswered questions from this paper will lead to the conclusion that the person did not feel happy with the questionnaire in some way, either not understanding the idea of spiritual experiences, or not understanding the questions, or the way in which they should be answered. However, the answers to question 8 do suggest that the person has had some connection with spiritual experiences but is not willing to admit to it. It is tempting to classify this response as someone who has had spiritual experiences, but there is insufficient information to conclude this, so it will need to be classified as an “uncertain” response.

The second incomplete response (*Penelope*) did not answer any of the questions about spiritual experiences. The question needed to be asked here is whether she was unclear about the concept of spiritual experiences, or unhappy with the lack of definition or unable to

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<sup>3</sup>The values given for the relative influences are grouped for convenience into three groups: values 1 - 3 are described as weak influence; 4 - 6 as significant influence and 7 - 10 as strong influence.

understand the questionnaire. In the response to question 11, “What is important for you about worship?” she marked all the different possibilities except that it is a spiritual experience. However, she briefly annotated her answers and an interesting annotation is that for her worship is “Listening to God.” Yet she understands listening to God to take place through the scriptures. This, therefore, adds some clarity to her approach to spiritual experience. I would suggest that she is unhappy with an understanding of God that allows the Divine to be intimately related to people. She is willing to accept that God can speak through the scriptures, but not in a more direct form. Yet, for her, worship is “meeting with God”. So how does this meeting take place? It has to be at a distance, and certainly not through the emotions or experiential side of life. God is met in worship through the rituals, the liturgy and the scriptures. This is also reflected in the answers to questions 9 and 10 (question 8 was not answered), so that the scriptures and the teachings and traditions of the Church have a significant influence on the respondent’s life, faith, understanding of God and the world, and her lifestyle. Being a person who considers herself happy with the traditional approach to worship (question 12) and describing herself as “English (old fashioned)” this all adds together to suggest that the person is happy with the Protestant/Reformed tradition that emphasises the importance of the intellect in understanding and expressing faith, and has marginalised the experiential side of life and faith. Therefore, the conclusion for this response is that because she did not answer question 2, the response must be classified as an “uncertain” response.

### 5.3. General Analysis

Fifteen questionnaires were completed and returned and two returned incomplete. From the analysis above we will classify the two incomplete questionnaires as negative responses. As such a simple analysis concludes that nine people have reported to having had spiritual experiences and 8 people claim not to have done so. In percentages, 53% have had spiritual experiences and 47% have not. If this is indicative of the congregation as a whole, then it appears that about half of the congregation have had experiences which they have classified as spiritual while half have not. However, this figure may be exaggerated as it is more likely that people who claim to have had spiritual experiences will take part in the survey, than those who have not.

#### *Positive Responses (Group 1<sup>4</sup>)*

Of those who have had spiritual experiences, two stated that they have had “many” and seven responded as having had occasional experiences. As these terms have not been defined, but have been left to the individuals to interpret, I take this to mean that all have had a number of experiences that they classify as spiritual, but that two have had more experiences or have had them more frequently. Those who claim occasional experiences would fall into the category of people who consider that spiritual experiences are not part of the normal experiences of life, but would be seen to be extraordinary. They are, therefore, special events, or events that break into the normal routine or experience of life. Those who claim many experiences would probably fall into the category of people who consider that spiritual experiences are

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<sup>4</sup>Group 1 includes those who have acknowledged having had spiritual experiences. Group 2 will be those who have not.

much more part of normal life. They would possibly have an understanding of the supernatural that allows it to be more part of everyday life. While the spiritual experiences may be special occasions they are not so much a breaking into the everyday life, but more of a time when the awareness of the supernatural is greater. One respondent (*Mike*) feels that the spiritual is in all aspects of life. He considers that his spiritual experiences can and do occur anywhere and at any time. There are no particular occasions for this. Another (*Carrie*) was unable to define or describe her experiences on the form, but was more specific in the occasions and contexts that would bring about such experiences. In this case the classification may be more appropriately “occasional” than “many”. One other person (*Betty*) was unable to describe her experiences but could indicate the triggers.

One person (*Mike*) claimed to be able to have a spiritual experience in any and all situations, so there was no particular situation where a spiritual experience would occur. Of the other eight respondents, the most common places for a spiritual experience were at home (6)<sup>5</sup> and in Church (6), while being with other people was the next common place (5). Four people claimed to have had spiritual experiences while alone. From this it would be concluded that of those in group 1, spiritual experiences occur when there are other people present. This may be in a public place, such as in church or it may be in the home. The four who were alone for experiences were most likely to be at home. The questionnaire did not ask if the experience was a shared experience or an individual one, and from this question it cannot be determined. However, from the information given, it will be seen that for the sample as a whole, the place is not greatly important. Interestingly enough, though, with the exception of *Mike*, none considered that being in the countryside was a trigger for an experience.

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<sup>5</sup>The figures refer to the number of people who included this category on the questionnaire. The details are to be found in Appendix 3.

As we move to the next question (question 3) we can become a little more confident in delineating the importance of context. Seven people had experiences when they were at prayer. This could be communal prayer or private prayer, and, therefore again, does not, initially, lead us to any conclusion as to whether the experiences were individual or communal. However, knowing the general background of the respondents and the type of church that they are attending, it is most likely that the prayer indicated was in a private or individual setting and so the experience was personal and individual. Even if this had taken place in church, or among other people, it was most likely a personal experience. This is supported by the fact that six people (five the same as above) also considered that thinking about life was important. Although again this could be a communal activity, it is most likely that it was a personal and individual event. The next most popular settings are when people are at worship (5) and when they are thinking about God, religion, etc. (5). To take these together - prayer, worship, thinking about life, and thinking about God, it suggests that the most likely time for a person to have a spiritual experience is when they are in a “religious” situation. That is a situation that is conducive to encouraging the spiritual side of life. Only two people were at work when they had a spiritual experience and the same two when they were relaxing. Consequently the members of this group are most likely to have a spiritual experience at a time and place when the circumstances are constructed to encourage it. The people are already prepared and in the right frame of mind to deal with a spiritual experience, and in that sense it is less of a “breaking in” than it might be in other circumstances. Therefore, the study suggests that a time of religious activity is the most likely time for an experience to occur.<sup>6</sup>

When the answers to question 13 (How much does the church worship involve spiritual experiences?) are analysed the conclusions are less secure. For the description of the relationship between worship and spiritual experiences is much more varied. Seven considered that the worship at church involves spiritual experiences significantly (4 - 7) while two considered that it did not in any way (0). The same seven also felt that worship encouraged experience, significantly to a lot, while the same two considered that it did not encourage them at all (0). This suggests that communal worship is important for many of them for spiritual experiences, and while the experiences might be individual the atmosphere of worship is important. The worship at the church is itself a spiritual experience for five of the respondents, and one would consider it only marginally so (2). For the five who indicated that they had had spiritual experiences while at worship, this might suggest that the experience was because of the worship. Alternatively as some have shown that they had experiences while alone, then personal and private worship may be a setting, while communal worship is not. This supports the earlier conclusion that worship is important for spiritual experiences for many people, but clearly for some people it acts in completely the opposite way.<sup>7</sup> The Church setting is significant for 66% of the respondents, and worship for 55% of them which may mean that for about 40% it is not. Worship could encourage spiritual experiences, primarily because of the environment that it provided, but it certainly was not the place where spiritual experiences would be discussed or shared.

Question 11 asked “What is important for you about worship?” Eight of the nine respondents said that prayer is important, that being with others was important and that thinking about

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<sup>6</sup>This was also the conclusion from the pilot study.

<sup>7</sup>The three participants in the pilot study who reported spiritual experiences all had a critical approach to worship, and yet reported that worship, though generally not formal worship, was significant for spiritual experiences.

God is important. These were the only factors that eight acknowledged. However, Holy Communion and “thinking about life” received a score of 7 meaning that these are significant for the group as a whole. Thinking about life was important for five people and the hymns and music in worship for six. This helps to underscore the conclusions so far, that worship is significant for spiritual experiences, although it is not the worship itself, but rather that it provides the atmosphere to trigger spiritual experiences. Worship enables the person to be in the right frame of mind, which is encouraged by prayer and by being with people of the same mind and having the same purpose. Music and hymns are an important part of the worship for most people, yet only one person said that a spiritual experience had occurred when listening to music. Therefore, one concludes that it is not the hymn or music per se that enables spiritual experiences but that being part of the worship, it makes an important contribution to the overall atmosphere. Being with other people who are worshipping also develops the right atmosphere. This may lead to a heightened awareness of the Divine or spiritual, whether consciously or not. However, generally the group does not go to worship expecting to have an experience of the Divine, or an extraordinary experience of any sort. Five people go to worship to listen to God, while only three people go with the expectation to meet God, and only two to have a spiritual experience. This correlates with the answers to question 13 where we concluded that worship does provide the atmosphere that might trigger a spiritual experience, but worship itself is not considered by most to be a spiritual experience, nor do most people go to worship expecting to meet God or have an extraordinary experience.

So we need to ask the question: why do people not expect to have spiritual experiences at Church, and do not expect to encounter God in a personal and individual way or even

communally? Acknowledging that some have experienced the spiritual while at worship, there is still obviously no expectation that it will happen again, and certainly not on a regular basis. Question 12 helps to elucidate this in some ways. Asked how they would describe the worship in the church that they attend, eight respondents classified it as “traditional”. This was the only classification that the group would agree on. Three people said it was also socially aware, and four people said it was “free”, though two said it was both “free” and “formal”.

These two terms may seem to be contradictory, but need not be so. The term “free” may have different meanings but it probably is being used in the formal sense of the term “free” in that it is being used in an ecclesiological sense and refers to the worship style of the “Free Churches” and, therefore, does not use a fixed liturgy. However, this does not stop the worship being formal. It could also indicate that the worship varies from time to time, or that the morning worship is more formal and the evening worship more informal. This is actually the case, as evening worship normally takes place in a small room and not in the chapel. Therefore, the answers taken together, will indicate that the worship style of the church is traditionally Free Church, or Reformed, and so I would interpret that all the respondents are actually describing the worship as “traditional”.

Hymn singing is also an important part of the tradition and more people thought that this was important. Congregational singing is one of the few ways that Reformed worship allows the congregation to take part in the worship in any active way, and is a way in which the individual can express his or her faith, and often in a more emotional way. Yet I repeat that this is not seen by most to be a trigger for spiritual experience. Indeed the very format of the



Reformed worship is cognitive and directed more to the intellect, and discourages the involvement of emotion and the sharing of experiences.

Questions 8, 9 and 10 on the questionnaire were included to try to establish a greater understanding of the importance of spiritual experiences in the lives and faith of people and its relative importance compared to the doctrines (teachings and traditions) of the church and the place of Scripture. These questions were not completed in full by all the participants, but there is sufficient information to get some guidance as to people's understandings. In general Spiritual Experience is significant for all the people, and it has significantly influenced their understanding of God, the world, their worship style and their lifestyle. But the most influence has been on their faith and relationship with others. Looking at the averages Spiritual Experience has influenced the understanding of God significantly (6.9); their faith strongly (8); the understanding of the world strongly (7.2); lifestyle significantly (5.9) and their relationship with others, strongly (7.8). Worship and the type of church that the group prefers has been influenced by their spiritual experiences significantly (6 and 5.5 respectively).

Summarising the influence of the teachings and traditions of the church it can be seen that the understanding of God was influenced strongly (7.4); their faith strongly (7); the understanding of the world significantly (6.7); lifestyle significantly (6.9) and their relationship with others strongly (8). Worship and the type of church that the group prefers has been influenced by the doctrines of the Church strongly (6.9 each).

To summarise, respondents' understanding of God was strongly (7.4) influenced by the Scriptures; their faith strongly (7.6); the understanding of the world significantly (6.2);

lifestyle significantly (6.6) and their relationship with others, strongly (7.4). Worship and the type of church that the group prefers has been influenced by the doctrines of the Church significantly (6 and 4.5 respectively).

Summarisation tabulated for comparison:

**Table 1**

	Spiritual Experience	Doctrine	Scripture
Understanding of God	6.9	7.4	7.4
Faith	8	7	7.6
Understanding of world	7.2	6.7	6.2
Worship	6	6.9	6
Type of Church	5.5	6.9	4.5
Lifestyle	5.9	6.9	6.6
Relationships	8	7.8	7.4

**Comparison of Average Results for Questions 8, 9 and 10 for Group 1<sup>8</sup>**

It would be unrealistic to draw too many conclusions from the comparison above as the figures are generally not significantly different. The influence of Scripture, the teachings and traditions of the Church, and spiritual experiences are all significantly to strongly influential on the group as a whole. The two areas where there does seem to be a marked difference is in the influence of these factors on lifestyle and the type of Church that the people have chosen to attend. In the case of the latter, clearly the teachings and traditions of the church are intimately part of the church and so strongly influence where they worship. The influence of spiritual experiences is much lower for this category, so, one might conclude from this that the people do not feel that they have had a revelation that has led them to a particular church or that their experiences have much to say about ecclesiology. Likewise the influence of

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<sup>8</sup>Question 8: "How much have your spiritual experiences influenced you?" Question 9: "How much have the teachings and traditions of the Church influenced you?" Question 10: "How much has Scripture influenced you?"

Scripture is even lower, and so it might be concluded that the group feel that there is little in the Bible about church structure or worship.

One might assume that the lifestyle of the people has been shaped by teachings and scripture, and to a lesser extent by spiritual experience. What does this say about the connection between experiences and lifestyle? Do their spiritual experiences have little bearing on lifestyle? If the answer to either of these questions is “yes”, then one could assume that there is a compartmentalisation of life, so that the spiritual does not have a great deal of connection with lifestyle. In contrast, however, all three categories, of Spiritual Experience, Scripture and the teachings of the Church, have a strong influence on people’s relationships with others and to a slightly lesser extent the understanding of God and their faith, and slightly less, the understanding of the world.

### ***Negative Responses (Group 2<sup>9</sup>)***

Six people returned forms that stated that they had not had any spiritual experiences. Consequently in all these forms questions two and three were not answered. However, the rest of the questionnaire was completed by most of the group. The table below summarises the results of questions 8, 9 and 10.

**Table 2**

	Spiritual Experience	Doctrine	Scripture
Understanding of God	5.8	7.8	7.4
Faith	5.5	7.6	6.8
Understanding of world	5	7.3	5.8
Worship	5	9	7.3
Type of Church	5.5	8.7	7.3
Lifestyle	4	7	7.3
Relationships	8	8	7.4

**Comparison of Average Results for Questions 8, 9 and 10 for Group 2**

From table 2 it will be seen that as a group they have acknowledged that all three factors have been an influence on them. It is interesting to note that four of the respondents answered question 8 about the influences of spiritual experiences. One does have to ask the question, however, that if there has been influence from spiritual experiences, whose experiences were these? Are the respondents, here, understanding the term Spiritual Experience in a different way to that in questions one to three? They may represent other people's experiences, the experiences expressed in Scripture, or that worship itself is an experience and, therefore, a spiritual experience. When we come to a comparison of the two groups we may be able to approach some answer to this question.

The most important influence that Spiritual Experience has had on this group is with relationships with other people. As this is an experience orientated activity, this may not be surprising. For all the other categories, however, the influence of spiritual experiences has been about the same - a significant influence (4 - 5.8). However, when we look at the teaching and traditions of the church, we see that the influence is much greater than that of Spiritual Experiences in all categories. The influence on all the categories of life and faith is

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<sup>9</sup>See footnote 4.

strong (7 - 9). Lifestyle has been the least influenced, and the type of worship and the type of church the group prefers has been most influenced by the teaching and traditions of the church. We might conclude from this that these people assign more importance to church tradition than to experience, and that tradition is important, particularly in worship. The influence of Scripture follows a similar pattern, but is not quite as strong as that of the teachings and doctrines of the church. Scripture influences all aspects equally, although faith is a little lower and their understanding of the world, the least. However, because there is very little between these figures (ranging from 5.8 - 7.4) it would be wrong to draw too much from this, except to say that Scripture influences all aspects of life and faith strongly, except for understanding of the world, which it influences significantly.

From this we may make a general conclusion that the people in this group put more of an emphasis on the teachings and doctrines of the church and scripture than they do on spiritual experience, and probably experience in general. In other words this is a group that focuses on the more cognitive side of faith and worship, and not so much on the emotional and experiential.

When we turn to the answers to questions 11, 12 and 13, however, this does not necessarily stand to be true. The two most important aspects of worship for the group are being with others and hymns and music. The first of these is a relational part of worship, suggesting that the worshipping community is most important for them. This may be for a number of reasons, but it is most probably not an intellectual consideration, as worship does not usually involve the community sharing ideas. It is probably more for companionship and fellowship. Hymns and music may be considered to be an emotional or experiential side of worship, but

they could as easily be an intellectual side. Poetry and music, art in general, can be both emotive and an intellectual stimulus.

It is only when we go further down the list that we come to the more intellectual and cognitive aspects of worship. Thinking about God is joint fifth with teaching and preaching and thinking about life is sixth. This does not indicate a great concern or interest for the cognitive aspect of worship. Rather what we see as important are the more communal aspects of worship - being with others, hymns and music, prayer and Holy Communion. Worship, then for this group centres on the community. The activities associated more with Spiritual Experience, listening to God and meeting with God, were at the bottom of the list, with Spiritual Experience, itself.

To confirm this conclusion, the answers to question 12 (How would you describe the worship in your church?) indicate that the intellectual side of faith is not emphasised (2) but the social awareness is (5). Social awareness perhaps indicates a concern for community and community values. Four of the six respondents classify the worship as traditional, and so agree with the other group. Finally the answers to question 13 (How much does church worship involve Spiritual Experiences?), the group have put a very low value on this (1 - 3.5), suggesting that the worship has little or no place for spiritual experiences. Only two in the group actually felt that it had any place in worship, at all, while it is significant that two of the group do feel that worship encourages spiritual experience.

### ***Comparison of the Two Groups***

To put these results into some sort of context it is worth comparing the results from the two groups. A comparison of results has been tabulated in Table 3. From this comparison we can see that the influence on group 2 of spiritual experiences is less than the influence of Scripture and the teachings and traditions of the church, in all areas except relationships. This would be a reasonable statement as the respondents did not have any personal spiritual experiences. There may be a clue in the answers to the influences on worship. In this question the people who have not had spiritual experiences feel that spiritual experience is only slightly less influential on their understanding of worship than those who have had experiences (5/6). One assumes, therefore, that they are referring to other people's experiences. These may be expressed in different ways in worship, for example through the hymns, through the sermon and possibly through specific events in the life of the church.

**Table 3**

	Spiritual Experience		Doctrine		Scripture	
	Group 2	Group 1	Group 2	Group 1	Group 2	Group 1
Understanding of God	5.8	6.9	7.8	7.4	7.4	7.4
Faith	5.5	8	7.6	7	6.8	7.6
Understanding of world	5	7.2	7.3	6.7	5.8	6.2
Worship	5	6	9	6.9	7.3	6
Type of Church	5.5	5.5	8.7	6.9	7.3	4.5
Lifestyle	4	5.9	7	6.9	7.3	6.6
Relationships	8	8	8	7.8	7.4	7.4

**Comparison of Average Results for Questions 8, 9 and 10 for Groups 1 and 2**

However, looking at the answers to question 13 and comparing the two groups of respondents we arrive at the conclusion that worship, for those who have had spiritual experiences, is

more of a spiritual experience. With the exception of the question “Does worship encourage spiritual experiences?” the average “score” is much less for those who have not had spiritual experiences. Worship for the non-experiencers is not about spiritual experience, while for those who have had spiritual experiences they may expect to find this in worship also.

**Table 4**

	Group 2	Group 1
Involves	1	4.6
Encourages	3.5	4.6
Expresses	1.3	4.3
Is a Spiritual Experience	1.3	5

**Comparison of Results for Question 13<sup>10</sup>**

The exception in the table is that both groups have a much closer feeling that worship encourages spiritual experiences. This may support the conclusion above that worship may make reference to the spiritual experiences of others.

Taken together, for Group 1, spiritual experiences and Scripture are more influential on all aspects of life and faith, except for the choice of worship and church. For Group 2, the teachings and traditions of the church are more influential. The exception to this is the influence on lifestyle. For Group 2, Scripture and the church’s teachings and traditions are more influential than Spiritual Experience.

It is also noticeable that the influence of the teachings and traditions of the church is greater for those who have not had spiritual experiences, compared to those who have. Again this may reasonably reflect the position that if experience is not so much part of a person’s



spiritual life, then there will be more of an influence from teaching and the traditions. It may also support the perception that there is a conflict between the experiential and the cognitive in people's faith and worship. The worship at the church is seen to be more encouraging for the cognitive aspect of faith than for the experiential aspect of faith. The differing influence of Scripture on the two groups is not so easily analysed. The influence of Scripture on worship, the type of Church chosen and lifestyle is greater for the non-experients, the influence on the understanding of God and relationships is the same, but the influence on faith and the understanding of the world is less. Does Scripture have a greater influence where spiritual experience is important? This is seen in faith and the understanding of the world, but not in terms of the church, worship or lifestyle.

Comparing the analysis of the worship at the church, both groups will agree with the description of "traditional" (67%, 89%)<sup>11</sup>, and about a third of each group considers it to be intellectual. We have already discussed briefly the concept of the description of "traditional" and so we can conclude that both groups understand the worship to be that of the non-conformist and free church tradition. The major difference in the two groups is that 83% of the non-experients consider that the worship is "socially aware", while only 33% of the other group think this. This may also be an indicator of the difference between the two groups. Does this suggest that the non-experients are more concerned for the social teaching and orientation of the Christian faith and worship, while those who have had a number of spiritual experiences are more concerned with the "mystical" aspects of faith?

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<sup>10</sup>Question 13: "How much does worship involve spiritual experiences?"

<sup>11</sup>There will be a slight discrepancy in the percentage figures as one group has six respondents and the other group has nine respondents.

The results of the survey do give some suggestions as to the differences between the two groups, and, therefore, the possible influence of Spiritual Experience on the life, faith and worship of people. If the survey is correct and can be extrapolated to general principles, one might conclude that people who have acknowledged that they have had a number of spiritual experiences, are more likely to look for this in worship, and allow it to inform their faith and understanding of life. The influence of the teaching and the doctrine of the church will be less. Those who have not acknowledged the spiritual experiences in their life, are more influenced by the teachings and doctrines of the Church, and are more likely to be concerned for the social implications of faith.

In terms of worship, the two groups agree that prayer (83%, 89%) and meeting with others (100%, 89%) are two of the most important aspects of worship. The other most important aspect for the non-experients is hymns and music (100%) while the other group lists, thinking about God (89%), thinking about life (78%) and Holy Communion (78%). About half of the non-experients also find thinking about God and Holy Communion important (50%, and 67% respectively), while two thirds of the experients find hymns and music important (67%) and half of them have decided that “listening to God” is important in worship (56%). About half of each group listed teaching and preaching (50%, 45%). The other significant difference is that 33% of the experients’ group listed “meeting with God” as important in worship and 22% felt that worship is a spiritual experience.

**Table 5**

Importance	Non-experients (Group 2)	Experients (Group 1)
1	Being with others	Prayer
2	Hymns and Music	Being with others
3	Prayer	Thinking about God
4	Holy Communion	Holy Communion
5	Thinking about God	Thinking about life
6	Teaching and Preaching	Hymns and Music
7	Thinking about life	Listening to God
8	Listening to God	Teaching and Preaching
9	Meeting God	Meeting God
10		Spiritual Experience

**Aspects of Worship, in Order of Importance for Each Group<sup>12</sup>**

Clearly the two groups make similar statements about their perception of worship, but the emphases are different. Those who have had spiritual experiences, emphasise the importance of prayer, being with others, thinking about God, Holy Communion and thinking about life, as the top five aspects of worship in order of importance. The non-experients list as the top six in order of importance: being with others, hymns and music, prayer, Holy Communion and thinking about God and teaching and preaching<sup>13</sup>. A minority of both groups list meeting God as important, while a few of the experients list Spiritual Experience.

In conclusion, we see that while there are some differences in emphasis, both groups generally describe the worship that they attend in a similar way, and also look for similar things in worship. The differences may be due to the spiritual experiences that Group 1 has had, and this in itself may be related to both experience and personality.

<sup>12</sup>This refers to the responses to question 11: "What is important for you about worship?"

<sup>13</sup>Thinking about God and teaching and preaching are joint fifth, both having a response rate of 50%.

#### 5.4. Analysis According to Age Groups

The respondents were divided into three age groups - under 40's, 40 to 65, and over 65. The rationale for this division is that the divisions are related to the social changes that have taken place in Britain over the last century. These are the broad divisions that are generally used by sociologists and others when collecting data, surveys and censuses, and analysing them. The under 40's represent the youngest generation, being those born from 1960, and most likely to be influenced by the post-modern concepts. The 40 - 65 group are those more likely to be influenced by "modern" thinking, being largely "post-war" people (being born between 1935 and 1960), and the oldest group are those who were born before 1935 and, therefore, more influenced by the pre-war concepts and the effects of the two world wars.<sup>14</sup>

When we analyse the survey sheets returned by people who have not had spiritual experiences, we are only able to differentiate two age groups. The youngest group, the under 40's is not represented. No deductions can really be made from an absence of data, but it may be significant that we have no "negative" responses from the youngest group. Firstly, it needs to be noted that as a group this is one of the smallest sections of the church congregation. The URC as a whole, is an "elderly" church with the majority of members over 50 years of age. Therefore, it is always more likely that there will be a larger response from older groups, because they are numerically greater.

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<sup>14</sup>These categories are derived from the work of sociologists such as COUPLAND Douglas. (1992). *"Generation X"*. London: Abacus, who understands that significant changes have taken place between the different generations. The categories fit approximately the groups defined as "pre-war" born before 1945, the

A further difficulty arises with the analysis of this group, because the group of people over 65 (2c) did not all answer the questions 8, 9, and 10. In fact only one of the three in this group answered question 8 and only two of the three answered questions 9 and 10. Because of these limitations, we will summarise the findings and only make a few tentative conclusions.<sup>15</sup>

In comparing the responses of the two groups, the experients and non-experients, according to age groups, we are only able to compare the two older groups. It is unfortunate that we have no data for the under 40's negative group (2a) to make a comparison, but we are able to deal with the other groups.

The 40 - 65 age groups show a marked variation in the way that different areas of religion have influenced them. As would be expected, Spiritual Experience has been more influential for the positive group (1b) than the negative group (2b); this is true for all aspects of faith and life, with the exception of the type of church the person prefers. Spiritual experience is more important, although only marginally so, for the negative group (2b) giving a value of 4.5 compared to a value of 4. This may reflect the earlier analysis that the negative group is able to relate experiences to the rituals and liturgy of the church. The other influences on the people, the doctrines of the church and the Scriptures are seen to be more influential for the negative group than the positive group, with the exception of Understanding the world. For church teachings and traditions the figures range for the negative group from 6.5 - 8.7, compared to 5 - 7.7 for the positive group. Likewise the values for the influence of Scripture are 5 - 8, compared to 3.7 - 7.3. There is not a great deal of difference but there is sufficient to show a trend. The greatest discrepancy is again related to the type of church that the

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"Babyboomers" born between 1945 and 1960, and the "Busters" born after 1960. The latest generation, born after 1980 are not represented in the case study.

person prefers with the negative group (2b) indicating a value of 8 for Church teaching and tradition compared to 5 for the positive group, and for Scripture the values are 7 and 3.7.

This all adds together to conclude that for the age group 40 - 65 spiritual experiences do make a difference to faith and life. In the light of their spiritual experience the influence of the Church and the Scriptures is less. The figures also show that for those in this age group who have had spiritual experiences there is a different approach to church. In all cases their choice of church is less influenced by any of the factors. The survey does not give information as to why this is the case, but clearly for people in this age group who have had spiritual experiences, there is a different relationship with the church, and to some extent with worship.

When we turn to the comparisons of the data on worship we find some indicators of the different approach to, and understanding of, worship. For both groups 1b and 2b, prayer, being with others and hymns and music are important. However, preaching and teaching is important for the negative group, but not for the positive group. Those who have had spiritual experiences, also feel that Holy Communion, thinking about God and thinking about life are important. In this age group, then, we have an interesting situation; the cognitive aspect of faith that is important for the negative group is preaching and teaching, while for the positive group it is expressed in terms of thinking about God and life. This suggests that worship is a more personal and individual activity for the positive group. Perhaps during worship they wish to reflect more personally on their own life and experiences, while the negative group are happier to hear someone speak about life and faith. The positive group in

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15A full list of tables of comparison can be found in Appendix 3.

including Holy Communion in the list seems to contradict earlier conclusions, and suggest that Communion as a spiritual experience is something they can relate to easily.

In terms of the description of the church, both groups agree that it is traditional, although the negative group also describe it as socially aware. Finally in terms of the way that they understand worship to include spiritual experiences, those who have had spiritual experiences are much more positive than those who have not. However, both agree in equal amounts, that the worship encourages spiritual experiences.

Turning to the oldest Group, the over 65's, we see that spiritual experiences are important for those who have had them and they do influence their life and faith strongly (7 - 8.7), while for the negative group it is only significantly (5 - 8), although the data is incomplete. The trend continues when examining the influence of the teachings and traditions of the Church and the influence of Scripture, although it is more marked in the former. The main exceptions to this trend are the values put on the way respondents worship and the type of church they prefer. In this case, the influence of the teachings and traditions of the Church is much stronger for the negative group. Indeed this is the only occasion that we find an average of 10 (although it needs to be noted that the incomplete nature of the data does affect the averages). The influence of Scripture on the type of church is the same for groups 1c and 2c, but for the way they worship it is slightly stronger for 2c. This, then, gives us a similar pattern to the one discovered for the 40 - 65 age group.

It is more difficult to compare the two groups, when we look at questions 11 and 12, concerning worship. All in the negative group agree that, being with others, Holy

Communion and hymns and music are important. There is no agreement in the positive group. However, looking at the trends, there is probably a large amount of agreement between the two groups, emphasising prayer, being with others, Holy Communion, and hymns and music, while the positive group will also include, thinking about God, thinking about life and listening to God. In other words they include the aspects that we might rightly associate with personal spiritual experience - a more intimate relationship with the Divine. In terms of the description of the church there is a great difference. The negative group, although not fully agreeing, would describe it as socially aware, while the positive group will describe it as traditional. The comparison of question 13, is perhaps the most marked of all, for when the respondents say how much they feel that worship involves Spiritual Experience, group 2c find no place for spiritual experiences in worship at all (all values are 0), while the group 1c find a much greater place (5 - 9).

What general conclusions do we derive from the data for the different age groups? The data indicates that there is a similar influence on the two age groups from Spiritual Experience, the Church and Scripture, in that, all these factors are more influential for those who have had spiritual experiences, in all aspects of life and faith except the influence on the way they worship and the type of Church that they choose. So clearly, in this respect, age does not matter. We may then conclude that the difference between the groups is not due to age, but due to spiritual experiences. However, the importance of worship does differ both according to age and according to whether a person has had spiritual experiences.



## 5.5. Summary and Conclusions

The questionnaire survey has provided us with some indicators and trends concerning the influence of spiritual experiences on life and faith for a particular group of people attending a specific church in an inner city suburb of Birmingham. This group is a mix of people of different ages and of different ethnic backgrounds - although the two major groups in the congregation are white-British and black-Caribbean. The ages of the people responding to the survey have ranged from 35 to 85.

Approximately 28% of the congregation took part in the survey and of these 53% admitted to having had spiritual experiences. For these people a spiritual experience has not been so much a “Breaking in of the Divine” but more of a heightened awareness and relationship to the Divine. However, this analysis has not dealt with the details of the spiritual experiences, but rather the influence they have had on life and work.<sup>16</sup> The details and analysis of the spiritual experiences reported will be dealt with as part of the analysis of the interviews that were the follow-up of the survey. The settings for spiritual experiences have been analysed briefly and it appears that when the people are in a religious setting or context, they are more likely to have a spiritual experience. Spiritual experiences have been important for those who have experienced them, and they have strongly influenced their understanding of life and faith, but they also acknowledge the importance of the teachings and traditions of the church and the importance of Scripture. So this group indicates that their faith and life have been influenced as much, if not more, by these factors than spiritual experiences. The major exception to this is their choice of church and worship.

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<sup>16</sup>The participants in the pilot study all said that the spiritual experiences were significant in their life and faith (P1 recording values of 9 and 10; P2 - 7 and 8; P3 - 7 and 9 respectively.)

Those who have not had spiritual experiences put a greater importance on the teachings and traditions of the church and Scripture than they do on Spiritual Experience, and they are possibly more concerned with the cognitive aspect of faith than the experiential. When we compare the two groups, we find that the teachings and traditions of the Church are perhaps the most important influences on the life and faith of those who have not had spiritual experiences, while all three factors are important for those who have had spiritual experiences. The Age group analysis shows some variation between the age groups. For the oldest group, all factors of Spiritual Experience, teaching and traditions of the Church and Scripture are strong influences upon them, while for the other two groups this is much more variable.

The two groups, generally, expect the same sort of things from worship, and describe the worship they attend as “traditional”. However, there are different emphases on what is required in worship; those who have not had spiritual experiences, consider the more liturgical and communal aspects of worship as more important, while those who have had spiritual experiences have a greater emphasis on the meeting with God and reflecting upon the Divine and life. The Age group analysis shows that the younger group perhaps, prefers a more cognitive approach to worship, while the older groups emphasise the fellowship and community of worship, together with the liturgy. When we look at the cognitive side of worship in general, it appears that those who have had spiritual experiences prefer reflection and thought, which suggests a more individual approach, while those who have not had spiritual experiences prefer teaching and preaching. Finally those who have not had spiritual experiences feel there is no place in worship for these either to be included or encouraged, while those who have had spiritual experiences, feel that worship does involve these.

From the general trends we now turn to investigate the significance of the spiritual experiences for the individual. This will help us to understand spiritual experiences in their own particular contexts.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES: THE INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES**

## **6. THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES: THE INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES**

### **6.1. Introduction**

The questionnaires were helpful in giving details about the place of spiritual experiences in worship, as the format allowed for comparison of issues. However, the findings need to be set within the wider context of the individual. Those who volunteered were engaged in discussion about their spiritual experiences and how these fitted with other aspects of their faith. These discussions centred around the spiritual experiences reported in the questionnaire and so these form the core of the analysis.

In each case, firstly, the spiritual experiences are analysed and understood in general ways and also in terms of their setting, trigger, medium, purpose, and consequences. These are tabulated in Table 6.<sup>1</sup> Then follows some indications of how each individual feels about, and interprets, their experiences, faith and understanding of God and the church and how they all relate together.

The following section of the thesis contains the analysis of these discussions<sup>2</sup>, together with conclusions that have been drawn.

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<sup>1</sup> Also, as a comparison, and for information Appendix 5 gives a list of how these same spiritual experiences might be classified using the different systems devised by some of the scholars.

<sup>2</sup> The transcripts of the discussions are kept in an archive by John Burgess.

## 6.2. Interpretation and Analysis: Annabel

*Annabel*<sup>3</sup>, a single woman in her mid thirties, was born in Britain, trained as a nurse and continues to work in the health sector. She is a relative newcomer to the Birmingham church, although she has been associated with the URC all of her life. She reported four spiritual experiences, which occurred at different times in her life.

### *The Spiritual Experiences*

Having trained as a nurse and worked in coronary care (32)<sup>4</sup> *Annabel* is used to encountering death as part of her work. Yet she recognised that she was afraid of death, “death was a fear for me” (32) and was not happy with simplistic understandings of death as “going to a better place” (32). Being a member of the healing and medical professions, one can understand that healing, health and death were part of her normal daily life. This was a large part of her experience of life and, therefore, one can assume that she is concerned about these things. Two of her experiences relate to these issues. The first of the four experiences related, that of the answered prayer for healing for a friend who had had a cycling accident (A.1.)<sup>5</sup>, came when she was 14, before she was a nurse and she believed that prayer would be answered and that the friend would be healed.

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3 The names of all the respondents in the study have been changed to preserve their anonymity. Although these involved in the discussions gave permission for the material to be used, it was still felt preferable to maintain the anonymity as a means of confidentiality. The names given to the respondents give an indication of the gender but no other details.

4 References in parenthesis refer to the statement in the transcript of the interview.

5 The full script of the spiritual experiences related are found in Appendix 4. The reference system denotes the person (e.g. A = *Annabel*) and the particular experience (number 1.)

The experience of the presence of the grandmother (A.3.) tells how, while on a retreat, she suddenly encountered a smell of flour that made her feel an overwhelming presence of her recently deceased grandmother. The experience relates to her concern for death and that she is not prepared to accept simple explanations of death. The death of her grandmother was the first time she encountered the death of someone close to her. It was not part of her work or profession but was an event in her personal life. This is an experience that is key to her understanding of life, death and faith. It was a confirmation of her understanding of death, and an assurance of her faith. It was also an answer to her question of what had happened to her grandmother. Although she was reluctant to accept the simple explanation that in death a person goes to a “better place”, the experience did assure her that there is life after death and that she could have a continuing relationship with her grandmother.

The experience was real and permanent, even though it could be dismissed by the explanation that she may not have really felt the presence of her grandmother, but that rather it was just the association with the smell of flour. This explanation did not negate it for her since she understands the “smell of flour” as part of the experience. It was clearly the trigger for the experience, but it seems that it was more than that. There was a mystical element to the smell, in that she felt her grandmother was in the smell. The smell and the presence went together, so that her memories were brought back to her.<sup>6</sup> The experience was also related to a particular time and context. The time was when she had the opportunity to reflect upon death and, in particular, the death of her grandmother. These things were uppermost in her mind and concerns, and, therefore, the trigger was particularly effective as she was in a

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<sup>6</sup> The experience could be classified as a “memory experience,” as defined by KELSEY Morton (1975). *Encounter with God: a theology of Christian experience*. Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, and PAFFARD M. (1976). *The Unattended Moment*. London: SCM.

receptive mood. Here we possibly have a situation where the setting makes the person more open to a spiritual experience.

It is worth noting here that the association of smell with the spiritual experience may represent the idea that the spiritual experience involves all of the senses. Certainly in this case it did, and the experience was triggered by the sense of smell. Mark Fox<sup>7</sup> considers that all the senses may be involved in such experiences, to give a total experience. So classifying this experience, one discerns that the setting is the retreat week; the trigger is the smell of flour which could also be the medium, although there is the aspect of memory here; the purpose of the experience is feeling the presence of the dead relative and the consequence is the assurance of faith.

The “Catholic” upbringing (42) of the experient has an important association with the spiritual experiences, for this background is one which accepts and expects miracles and prayers to be answered. It could be considered as a “simple” approach to faith. Two of the experiences related to answered prayer. The first is that of her childhood experience of healing for a friend (A.1.) and the second, that of the lost medal (A.2.) In both cases the setting is a response to another person’s need and anguish. In case one, this is the experience of the feeling of contentment in the situation.<sup>8</sup> While the prayer was for the other person, the experience was very much about the person who prayed. She felt satisfaction and contentment through the experience. There is also a sense in which she gained some knowledge, as she “knew” that the friend would be all right. The answered prayer experience

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<sup>7</sup> FOX Mark (2001). *Is There a Common Core to Religious Experience*. - a paper presented to the Alister Hardy Society, 10th November 2001.



is probably more to do with the experient than the person who needed to be healed. In fact one could say that it is a healing experience in two ways. In the first case, we assume that the person who had the cycling accident was healed. If he had not been healed or recovered from his injuries then the prayer would probably not have been understood as a spiritual experience. The story is related in a positive way and as answered prayer. However, there is a second aspect to the healing; the experient was also healed. She had been concerned and anxious about her friend and this anxiety was dealt with in the prayer and worship context. She is healed from anxiety, and possibly from fear and uncertainty about the situation. From the experience she gained a feeling of contentment and well-being. This assured her of the friend's recovery, but it is also an experience of an active God, and so she is reassured about her belief in God, and in a God who will answer prayer. So this experience is one that is about faith and assurance, about knowledge or enlightenment, and about healing. The purpose is answered prayer, the consequence is assurance and healing for the experient and her friend, the setting is the church service, the medium the prayer, and the trigger is her concern for her friend.

The second experience of answered prayer is the case of the lost medal (A.2.). This is the story of a friend who, in breaking a leg in a large field, found she had lost a precious Papal medal. After persuading her friends to pray together they quickly and miraculously found the medal. This experience seems to be much more related to the experient's concern for her friend. In this case we are told that it was her friend who was "distracted". The medal had particular associations and memories, but also it was seen as a talisman, and its loss would

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<sup>8</sup> It could then be described as a "Regenerative Experience", as defined by FRANKS DAVIS Caroline (1989). *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, and DONOVAN Peter (1979). *Interpreting Religious Experience*. London: Sheldon Press.

somehow be detrimental to the person. Perhaps also there was a concern that the accident and the loss of the medal were associated. However, on analysis of the report of the experience, it is to be noted that the experience is in the context of answered prayer, and it has also been associated with the matter of faithfulness in one's religion. There is an element here that the experient wants to prove that her faith is important and that it is justified. She has faith in God who will answer prayer and if God answers this prayer she will be vindicated in her faith among her friends who do not believe. So again there are two elements involved here. The first is the concern for the friend, and that she will have her mind put at ease as she goes off to hospital. The girls give their assurance that they will search for the medal, although they do not really think that they will find it and perhaps have no intention of looking - it is approached as an impossible task. Yet they are prepared to give the friend an assurance as this is possibly seen as part of her healing process.

However, for the experient, this is not enough. She needs to prove her faith and her friendship. Her faith is in a God who will help, and this is vindicated. The medal is found and so she is given assurance. She has the assurance of her faith, that God exists, that God answers prayer and that God will give help in the everyday events. Also, she is able to use this event as a means of evangelism among her friends. We do not know how the friends responded, or how they explained the finding of the medal. They may have dismissed it or they may have felt it was an important experience, but they must have been impressed by her faith. The one friend who did respond positively we are told became a Christian. So for this one friend, at least, this experience became a conversion experience, as she was shown the power of prayer. The consequence is faith, conversion and justification, while the purpose is answered prayer. As with the previous experience, the medium is prayer and the trigger is the

concern for the friend and the lost medal. But this time it could be said that the setting is in a hostile environment.

This spiritual experience has a number of aspects. It is about faith and belief in the power of God. It is also a conversion experience. It could be described as a miracle and a sign. It certainly informs or confirms the experient's understanding of God as one who is present when needed. "He is grabbable" (74) and ready to respond to a particular need.

The fourth spiritual experience is the informal worship (A.4.). This took place when the minister was sick, so the small congregation conducted the worship together, picking favourite hymns and saying why they had chosen them. It was felt to be a particularly enlightening and beautiful event. This experience is triggered by the sharing and fellowship of the people at worship. There was a special feeling among the congregation, and this is explained by the fact that "the congregation were giving of themselves and I just absorbed all that" (114). The high point of the experience is when two men sing a hymn together somewhat spontaneously. The description from the experient is "I was just blown away by it really, and I just thought it was just beautiful" (122). So the experience is one of "beauty" and this beauty is found both in hearing the men sing and in the sense of fellowship and sharing that was going on. By speaking about their favourite hymns the people were sharing something of themselves. This is both about their own personalities and about their faith. It is very personal, and something that is not normally experienced in worship. It is also described as a time of witness.

The experient says nothing about God in this experience, but it is a spiritual experience. God enters into the experience mainly through the words and actions of the other people. This, then, is a different type of experience to the others. This is not an answer to prayer, because the experient is not looking for God to act or intervene in any way. This is a totally unexpected experience that comes upon the person. So like the experience of the grandmother, it is possibly a response to a need. She feels that her faith is different to everybody else, and she has had problems with the church in the past, because she has not found it meeting her needs. However, this experience proved to her, that she is accepted as part of the congregation, and that the acceptance is simply because she is who she is. She concludes this because each of the people in the service are invited to share something of themselves, without judgement, and all are accepted by the others present. In the interview it is clear that the people in the congregation are ordinary people. They are not good singers or readers, but that they are willing to share together and do their best. This is highlighted in the spiritual experience. So in this way it is an experience that gives her assurance and acceptance, in this case, not by God, but by other people. The experience is the beauty of acceptance and fellowship.<sup>9</sup> Clearly the setting is a church service, and the medium and trigger is the singing. However, the purpose is the awareness of a close fellowship or relationship between the people, with the consequence that the experient feels accepted.

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<sup>9</sup> It also displays aspects of holiness and so could be said to be a “charismatic” experience, as defined by DONOVAN P. (1979), or as a “Via Unitiva” experience as it is about the development of relationships, as

## *Faith*

The faith of *Annabel* is a personal faith which is reflective rather than active. She would not consider herself “evangelical” or “theological” but neither would she consider herself “anti-evangelical”.

“I just like wanted to embrace my faith but at the same time could not cope with any kind of evangelical.” (44)

Her rejection of evangelicalism is partly due to her church background and upbringing. She had both Protestant and Roman Catholic influences in her life as a child. Both of these aspects were anti-evangelical in nature. The Catholic influence, mainly from her grandmother, gave her an expectation of God, who would respond to needs, but not one that was immanent in daily life. God was presented as transcendent. This aspect of her faith she describes as “simple Irish Catholic faith” (42). Later in life this was reinforced by her reading, which made her think that it was better not to look too deeply into something, because that leads to an analysis and the loss of the essence and mystery (42). So God is someone not to be investigated much, but just trusted to be there when needed. The other aspect of her Christian upbringing that is important is that her father was from the Reformed tradition. So the combination of Reformed and Catholic developed a sense of guilt and the feeling that she is unworthy to be in the presence of God, such that God would not want to be close to her.

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defined by LASKI Marghanita (1980). *Everyday Ecstasy: some observations on the possible social effects of minor and major ecstatic experiences in our daily secular lives*. London: Thames and Hudson.

She also has the inability to deal with the type and style of preaching and teaching that goes along with the evangelical expression of the faith. She understands evangelicalism as narrow, proclaiming an exclusivism for Christianity, and an insistence on a particular lifestyle and means of expressing the faith.

“I don’t believe that Christianity is the only way, that you need to be ‘born again ...’” (48)

She is unable to conform to the understanding that true spirituality and lifestyle is one that fits the pattern of an instant conversion, through the recognition of sin and repentance. This sort of teaching she considers to be a “carrot and stick” approach to conversion. This focuses on the sins and wrongs in a person’s life to persuade them to avoid hell by accepting Christ into their lives - a concept that she does not think is appropriate. She describes this as the “Billy Graham” style of Christianity (50). *Annabel* is pluralistic and inclusive in her understanding, describing her faith as “multifaith”. This may be due to her own exploration of the Christian faith, but it is also an influence from her other grandmother who she quoted as saying “there are many ways up a mountain” (56).

The centrality of her faith is the teachings of Christ, and she is happy to focus on the Gospel stories. She accepts the basic idea of Christ as the Son of God, but is unable to accept the exclusiveness of salvation through Christ alone. Her faith in Christ is good for her, but she does not feel that it must be imposed on others, and they must be free to find their own way to God.

“... if it meant that I had to turn around to my neighbour and say that because you are a non-Christian we are going to be living in different rooms in his house, that to me is repulsive and so I could never say that.” (70)

Indeed, she would not want other people to have the same faith as her. The anti-evangelicalism extends to the sense that she expects all people to have a different understanding and approach to faith, whether this is the Christian faith or another faith.

“I have been brought up in Birmingham, in a multicultural society, how on earth could I be evangelical.” (100)

And that faith is something that is individual and personal, not something that should be imposed on others:

“I wanted to just live my faith.” (52)

“It has still got that ‘for me, I know it is right for me.’” (60)

However, her understanding can lead to an isolationism in faith, and it is because of this that she feels she needs the fellowship of other believers. This fellowship is not based on the conformity of belief, but simply upon the acceptance of each other as they are, with their differences and uniqueness. When she attended a charismatic church she found the fellowship and the joy very helpful and encouraging, but other aspects of the church were difficult for her.

Although she does not feel that Christianity is superior to other religions, she would want to feel that there is something different about being a Christian. She would want to feel that her lifestyle indicates that she is a follower of Christ. She is not an evangelical Christian, and she is not overt in her faith, but she would want to feel that she influences others by her life and faith. As a follower of the teachings of Jesus, these teachings should influence the way she lives and her relationship with other people. However, she noted that others did not always see that she is different even if they know she is a Christian. This is illustrated by the words

of her Liverpudlian friend, who considered it to be a compliment to say of her, “Oh, *Annabel’s* a Christian, but don’t worry because you would never know it” (84). She was unhappy about this and also felt it was a challenge to her. The event of the lost medal would suggest that she does have a desire to express her faith and show that it is effective and real.

Her understanding of her faith and its place in her life and relationship with others is supported by the answers in the questionnaire that indicate that the teachings of the Church and Scripture are the main influences on her lifestyle, and the teachings of the Church is the major influence on her relationships with others.

Although she has had many important spiritual experiences, she feels that these are very personal, and have helped her at times, particularly when she was in need of God’s help. However, she is ambivalent about how much they have influenced her faith and understanding of what it means to be a Christian. In the discussion she answered that the main influences on her faith are the teachings of Christ in the Gospels.

“To me my faith is that if I can follow Christ’s words and be like how he treated people, how he was, I don’t think I am too far wrong ...” (70)

But in the questionnaire she indicated that her experiences are equally important. So the influence of the Scriptures is strong but the influence of the teachings of the Church less so. She considers the teachings of the church as important, even though she does not always agree with them. Indeed it was the teachings of the Charismatic churches that drove her away from them. The teaching and preaching that she encounters in her present church is not always something that she agrees with but finds them helpful and challenging.



## *God*

So *Annabel* is a follower of the teachings of Jesus and to some extent the teachings of the Church, although she does not agree with the teaching of the exclusive nature of the salvation of Christ. She clearly believes in an afterlife, and her understanding is based on the evidence of the Christian Scriptures. But what of her understanding of God?

She is partially influenced by the teachings and traditions of the church, and in particular the influence of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. She summaries these as the Roman Catholic is “quite open to say ‘I have asked God for this’ or ‘I have asked for strength’ and is quite open about it” (74). It is from this tradition that she takes the understanding that God is available to help her.

“He is next to me and when he needs to be there he is grabbable, but the thought that he is within me is a wee bit weird, because I just don’t feel that I am worthy enough of it. And I do know that he must be there because I rely on him so much, but I don’t know why I can’t think of him within me. But he is grabbable and will always be there and maybe he is grabbing on to me.” (74)

Therefore, for her, God is more transcendent than immanent. He is “out there” but is available when needed for help in times of distress, uncertainty and crisis. She finds it hard to understand God as intimate and rejects the Pauline concept of “Christ in us”.

“I couldn’t get me head around the whole thing that Jesus lives within your heart, that to me was - I really couldn’t get my head around it. He wouldn’t come and live with me because I wasn’t worthy of him.” (74)

That she expresses her Christianity as being a follower of Jesus with emphasis on the Gospels, is also an expression of this understanding of God. She says that she finds it hard to

follow the Pauline tradition in the scriptures, yet her feelings of guilt and unworthiness are a strong influence on her understanding of God. She did not take Holy Communion for a long time because of these feelings.

When asked, she emphatically rejected the use of the term “relationship” when referring to God (74). For her, God is not a being with whom you develop a relationship, if you understand that in terms of something more intimate and personal. Her perception of God is more “austere” (76), that would involve fear rather than love. This is illustrated by the feeling that she has of unworthiness, so that she would not dare approach God through communion. “I can’t even touch a crumb - I am not worthy” (76). Yet the feeling that God is “there” is very strong, and that he is on demand when needed. While she has a strong feeling of unworthiness, she does not feel that God will reject her. She seems to have an assurance that she will go to “heaven” and not be turned away by God. Either she understands God as forgiving, or she feels that the actions of life are irrelevant to an afterlife. That she believes people of all faiths will be together in heaven, perhaps suggests that entrance into the afterlife is not dependent on faith, religion and lifestyle. God, then, must be beyond this type of action, so is not understood in terms of judgement. Yet it still leaves the question, “Why does she feel unworthy?”

The understanding of God has been influenced by her religious background and the teachings of Scripture, particularly the stories of Jesus in the Gospels, but it has clearly been reinforced by her spiritual experiences. While the questionnaire suggests that the Scriptures are the greatest influence on her understanding of God, from the discussions, I would suggest that

she underestimates the influence of her spiritual experiences and probably overestimates the influence of Scripture, in this matter.

There seems to be some confusion in her understanding of God. She rejects the evangelical teaching, because it emphasises so much the aspects of sin and the need to repent, and yet at the same time her concept of God is strongly influenced by her own feeling of guilt and unworthiness. God is not described in terms of judgement, but neither in terms of love. We fall back to the understanding that God is available, and, therefore, something like a commodity to be used when needed, and you do not have a relationship with a commodity.

### ***The Church***

*Annabel* has had a variable relationship with the Church. Throughout her childhood and teenage years she was part of a church fellowship, and attended a Roman Catholic School (74). We have already seen how she was influenced by both the Roman Catholic and the Reformed Church traditions. However, it appears that she attended a United Reformed Church for much of her childhood and teenage years. After a period of non-attendance she returned to the URC by going to a different congregation. In the discussion it was noted that the URC she first attended was described as staid and austere - a posh environment which may reflect her perception of its Presbyterian roots (102). While the people were not unfriendly, and she felt she would always be welcome there, she was not particularly happy with the ecclesiology and the worship.

The church she now attends is a URC but comes from the Congregational tradition, and is less formal. Her description of the worship style is that it is more informal and flexible. She briefly described an incident when a couple did not turn up for a infant baptism, and this did not cause any difficulty for the congregation or minister (106). Indeed it seemed that it was just a normal course of events. *Annabel* normally attends the evening worship, which is informal and does not take place in the chapel, providing a more intimate arrangement, for the fewer people who attend. The fourth spiritual experience shared related to one of these worship times. Although the description of this experience is not the pattern of a normal time of worship, it nevertheless illustrates the informality of the setting.

In contrast to her understanding of God, her understanding of the church is that it is about fellowship and relationships. It is a place where she wants to feel accepted, for whoever she is, and for whatever she believes. “Being with others” is an important part of worship for her according to the questionnaire. She has found a church that fits this need, but at the same time is not an intrusive fellowship, so that she can “just live my faith” and be allowed to do so because, “I know it is right for me”. The people in the fellowship are important to her, but what is the relationship that she has with them? I suspect that it is similar to that which she has with God. They are there because she needs them and they do not interfere with her life, uninvited.

Her attendance at church is firstly as an escape from the world, and the issues that she has to face each week (104). Finding that her work is demanding, she is anxious about it as Monday morning approaches. So a Sunday evening worship is good for her, as it enables her to focus on something other than her anxieties and concerns about work. It can also be a time for

learning, particularly as the Scriptures are expounded, and a time to be challenged with ideas that are new and different. Church, then, is an opportunity for her to be taken out of herself, and so in this way it might be described as a spiritual experience. The answers in the questionnaire confirm all this. However, the questionnaire indicates that generally, *Annabel* does not expect worship to be a spiritual experience. The exception to this was the event described, and it was noted that this happened between the time that the questionnaire was completed and the time of the discussion. Had the questionnaire been completed after the event of the men singing, the respondent may have given a higher value to this question. Yet, clearly from the questionnaire, she feels that the worship she attends does involve and encourage spiritual experiences.

Church, then, seems to have two main aspects. Firstly, there is the intellectual side, to be taught and challenged, particularly with the exposition of the Scriptures. This helps to prepare her for the week ahead. Secondly, it is to be with other people, who share together, but very much from their differences. While she says that it involves spiritual experiences, when this actually happened, she was surprised and it was a memorable occasion. This particular experience was more an experience about other people, than about God. Therefore, it could be concluded that *Annabel* does not go to church to encounter God, or have a relationship with him at any time, and this is true for times of worship.

### ***Faith, Worship and Spiritual Experiences***

*Annabel* is a person who has had a number of spiritual experiences, and these experiences have been important for her. Of the four related, two are about answered prayer, and two give

assurance. Indeed we have seen that all have an aspect of assurance and strengthening of faith and belief. But what is the relationship between these spiritual experiences and the person's faith and worship?

Whatever *Annabel* says about her background and Christian upbringing, and however important this is to her understanding of God, her spiritual experiences must be influential also. They have helped to confirm or mould her understanding of God, although it may be that her experiences of God have been shaped by her background. It is interesting to note that she considered her faith background as informed by her Catholic grandmother who showed that you can call upon God and expect miracles to happen. *Annabel* has done this and experienced this. Are the experiences dependant on her prior understanding of what Spiritual Experience is? Whatever is the case there is a clear connection between her understanding of God and her spiritual experiences. Most other aspects of her faith and understanding of God, however, are more clearly linked with the teachings of the Church and her understanding of the Scriptures. So that for her, faith is something to be lived out according to the example of the Jesus of the Gospels.

It is difficult to describe the relationship between the spiritual experiences and worship. We have concluded that the style of worship that she prefers is partly due to her Christian upbringing, in that she is not happy with evangelical teaching. She explained that she could be content with a "happy, clappy" worship, if it did not go along with a more conservative theology. She also moved away from the worship style of her childhood, and has found a greater rapport with something less formal and more intimate. The one spiritual experience that relates to worship took place during worship, or more correctly, was an act of worship,

but it cannot be said that the spiritual experiences have in any way influenced the way that she worships. It may be that they have influenced to some extent the choice of church that she has made, but it is more likely that this is also due to her Christian background and her multi-faith understanding.

So what do we conclude in this case? The spiritual experiences and understanding of God are clearly connected, but there seems to be little other influence on her lifestyle and daily expression of faith from these experiences. They are important for her, as an individual but how much do they impinge on her understanding of faith and life?

### **6.3. Interpretation and Analysis: Carrie**

*Carrie* was born and brought up in the Caribbean and moved to Britain as a young woman. She is now in her early seventies and a widow. Her closest relatives are a niece and nephew as she had no children of her own. Although she has been attending the Birmingham church for only the past six years, she grew up in a Christian family. *Carrie* described two spiritual experiences, one of which was very dramatic for her.

#### ***The Spiritual Experience***

The respondent had been associated with the church all of her life, but she found it difficult to complete the questionnaire because she was unsure of the concept and definition of a spiritual

experience. She would have been happier if there had been greater direction in the questionnaire. Clearly the term was something that was new to her, however, when asked if she had ever felt God very close, she readily responded and spoke of her spiritual experience, which was very important to her.

The experience (C.1.) was of a dream in which an angel visited her to tell her that she should, “Do your best”. At the time she was nursing her terminally ill husband and was concerned that she was not doing enough for him. The experience was described as a “dream”, but the dream had such a sense of reality about it that the respondent implied that it might not have been a dream, but a visitation. The visitation was described in terms of a “figure in like a white robe”. The brief description is sufficient to suggest that the figure was an angel, although *Carrie* was not prepared to acknowledge this. Her hesitation in accepting that the visitor was an angel was that she was unworthy of such a visitor.

“I am not worthy that the Lord would send his angel to appear to me.” (16)

Likewise, one suspects that the visitation of an angel is outside of the normality of the religious tradition that she is familiar with. Such visitations may be recounted in the Scriptures, but these stories are perceived as being associated with special people, such as Mary. They are not occurrences that would be expected today. The way that this is dealt with is not to deny that such things might occur but rather to speak about the unworthiness of the person being visited. *Carrie* has a simple but profound faith. She is a person who describes herself as “uneducated” in comparison to most other people and considers herself as “unimportant”. Although the matter was not discussed, one wonders if the denial of such a visitation has anything to do with her Caribbean upbringing, where such occurrences may have been discredited by the church as “pentecostal” or “pagan”.



Alternatively, *Carrie* does believe that she has seen an angel but that she feels it would not be acceptable to many other people to say so. In particular it might not be acceptable to the church or to the minister of the church. In the later part of the discussions she showed much concern about what the minister might think about her having books and prayers that were from a different tradition of the Christian Church. She felt that she must uphold the traditions and expression of faith found in her own particular church and not offend the minister.

“...my Goddaughter send all these books and to be honest I do look through them because they are the Word of God. They are God’s Word. So I have got them all over the place. I have got some behind here, I have got some in my bedroom, I have got them all over. But I put them away because I don’t want my minister to come here and see ... ahhhh {laughter} She told me she was going to write a prayer and give me to put over my door. I said ‘No! I’m not putting your prayer over my door when my minister come and see the prayer over...’” (49)

Yet she clearly is interested in broader ideas and expressions of the Christian faith. To admit to this however, would be seen as disloyal to her own church. Hence instead of saying that she has seen an angel she says “I had to say it was a dream”. So as she describes the experience as a dream, we conclude that the medium of the spiritual experience is dream. She said that she woke up and looked around because she was frightened. The fear was due to the clarity and reality of the dream that she had. She would not have been surprised to have seen a person in the room even though she knew that nobody could have got into the flat because, as usual, she had locked up the home (11). The fact that she expresses this as part of her description of the spiritual experience, again suggests that she is convincing herself that it must have been a dream and could not really have been the visitation of an angel, even

though that is a strong possibility. Nobody could have come into the flat, so her experience was either of a supernatural being or a dream, and she chooses the latter as the description.<sup>10</sup>

The medium is the dream but the purpose is the communication of a message. This message is one of comfort and assurance, to give her hope and courage in her particular situation. The background to the situation is that she is very concerned for her husband, who was dying. She was concerned for him and for herself. From the discussion it is implied that she was finding it difficult to cope with the situation and was not sure what she needed to do and whether what she was doing was good. The spiritual experience gave her the assurance and guidance that she needed. This came simply as the message “Do your best” (11). She interpreted that as a statement of confidence in her ability and actions. The consequence of the experience is this assurance. After the experience she felt she was doing the right things for her husband. But more than that, she knew that whatever she did, provided it was done in the best way, would be acceptable. She learnt from the experience that God only expects her to do what she is able to do with her own abilities and resources and that no more is expected. This message of comfort and assurance, was also an assurance that God had heard her in her distress and that she had been accepted by God, even, as she perceived, as an unimportant person with little education and abilities. She was accepted even for her simple faith.

After the experience, the feeling of wellbeing and comfort was enduring.<sup>11</sup> It endured, not only for the particular time surrounding her husband’s death, but for the future when she

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<sup>10</sup>The experience is, at least in part, a paranormal one, according to DONOVAN P. (1979), or a “quasi-sensory” one according to FRANKS DAVIS C. (1989), while Hay might describe it as an experience of the presence of the sacred HAY David (1990). *Religious Experience Today: studying the facts*. London: Mowbray.

<sup>11</sup>The experience is a “regenerative” one, according to the classifications of FRANKS DAVIS C. (1989), and DONOVAN P. (1979); “comforting”, according to the classification of GLOCK Charles Y. and STARK Rodney

would be on her own. She would be able to cope without her husband and God would look after her. The feeling of “lightness” was one of protection and assurance, so that she should never have to be scared while on her own in the house, during the day or at night. Because she had done her best for her husband, she had a clear conscience and God would honour her faith and protect her. This means she has nothing to fear.

“So I don't feel scared because there is nothing to be scared of. Like if I was horrible to him - I didn't give him tea in the morning, I didn't look after him and rub his pressure areas - his heel and his elbows, then I would have been scared because I would have thought, ‘Oh dear, I could have done more for my husband, I didn't look after him.’ But no way - I really did my best. He came first. So he is gone. I am happy in a sense so that I am free. I can go and come and I know I did my best for him so I've got that feeling to be nice about that.”  
(24)

It was also an answer to prayer, because her daily prayer throughout this period was “Lord, what to do - to do with him?” and the answer that she received was “Do your best”. The answered prayer gave her the confidence to continue to do whatever she could for her husband, and not have to try to do things that she could not do. Her faith was rewarded.<sup>12</sup>

Although the spiritual experience was a dream and involved a “figure” giving her a message, she firmly interpreted the experience and the message as coming from God. It could have originated from no other source, because she did not believe in any other supernatural being. This was instilled in her from childhood and she could not hold any other position.

“That is what my mother taught us, she say, ‘If you are going to church, if you believe in God, believe in God. If you don't believe in God and believe in Satanic work, or whatever, hold to that side.’” (47)

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(1965). *Religion and Society in Tension*. Chicago: Rand McNally and Co.; and “Illuminative”, according to the classification of LASKI M. (1980).

Also her interpretation is in keeping with her understanding of God and how she normally experiences God. God is close to her and she prays and talks with God daily. Although she does not describe these times as spiritual experiences, they are part of her personal spirituality, and the spirituality of the home environment.

“I always feel the Lord is here. Even if I am in just in the kitchen I feel that the Lord is with me because everything is working out nicely for me. I am happy because I can do as I want. I go when I want. If I want anything I can get it. So that is a lot to thank the Lord for. I do thank God. I thank him every day and all day. At night when I go to sleep I ask the Lord to be with me, take me through the night and wake me with the morning light and what else can I do? I do realise that the Lord is there. I talk to him all the time”. (40)

So, in summary, the trigger for the experience is her anxiety about her husband and her ability to look after him, the medium is the dream (or visitation), the purpose is the words of assurance, and the consequence is a contentment in life. The setting is in the home environment.

This spirituality is also expressed in the church environment. While *Carrie* feels that God is near her at home, she would also expect to meet him at church worship. The church setting is also the place for spiritual experiences (53). The questionnaire strongly indicated that this was her expectation. These experiences of God are more emotional and they are related to particular aspects of the worship. The first is prayer. As at home, when she is in prayer at church she feels the assurance of God. The prayer makes her feel good and gives her strength for the future. The hymns are another trigger for a spiritual experience, although it is the music more than the words. They recall the past and the memories of the family and of her own faith commitment. But in general the Sunday worship is important for her because it is

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12FRANKS DAVIS C. (1989). would call this a revelatory experience.

an experience that makes her feel “nice and relaxed.”<sup>13</sup> The trigger for the experience is the worship, which is also the setting; the medium is the hymns; the purpose is assurance and the consequence is contentment.

### ***Faith***

*Carrie*, an elderly widow, has lived in Britain for most of her life. She was born and grew up in the Caribbean, and these early years had a strong influence on the way that she perceives life, and on the priorities in her life. Her childhood included a very strong Christian influence, centred on the life of the local church. Although she has been part of the church all her life and a regular attender at worship, she does not have a great deal of confidence in her ability to express her faith, or to reflect theologically. Her faith is a simple faith, but she also feels it is important not to stray outside of the faith and teaching that she has received through her particular church tradition.

Growing up in Jamaica in the 1930's and 1940's *Carrie* had what was probably considered a normal Christian upbringing, although today, it may be considered rather strict. She describes how she was made to go to church every Sunday morning, and that they sang hymns at home each Sunday evening. Although this was demanded, *Carrie* seems to have been happy following this routine and did not find it a chore. Indeed as she looks back on this time it was a period of security and happiness, which is influential for the present. Singing hymns at home every Sunday evening indicates that the Christian faith was an

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<sup>13</sup>These experiences would be described as “Revisited Memories”, according to the classifications of KELSEY M. (1975), and PAFFARD Michael (1976), and “Romantic Emotions” (PAFFARD M. (1976).) as well as “Regenerative” (FRANKS DAVIS C. (1989).) and “Illuminative” (LASKI M. (1980).).

important part of family life. This is also illustrated by the way *Carrie* refers to the words of her mother to remain faithful to God.

“So I said to her that my mother taught that there is one God, ruler of heaven and earth. But I said nowadays it looks like everybody serving a different God. But that is the impression I am getting now.” (42)

“That is what my mother taught us, she say, ‘if you are going to church, if you believe in God, believe in God. If you don’t believe in God and believe in Satanic work, or whatever, hold that side. And that is that. I have been taught about the Lord. My father was religious, so was my mother and they were really good parents.’” (47)

These words of her mother are still important over 60 years later and are significant in the way that she exercises her faith.

Faith is something that is learned in the home, particularly through the influence of the parents. *Carrie* has a deep respect for her parents and considers them good examples of religious people, and this religion controlled the way they brought up their children. Faith is, in this sense, a natural part of her life. However, it is also something that is chosen. A person can chose to believe in God or not to believe. *Carrie* grew up in a Christian home, and yet on the questionnaire she indicated that she had been a Christian for 20 years. This refers to the time of real commitment, when she made a positive decision to be confirmed. She chose to be a Christian and to believe in God, but she was not forced into this. So faith is not automatic but requires a positive decision and attitude towards God.

It is also something that is very personal. She has a personal belief in God, which is not dependent on being part of the church, but which has come through her own experience in day to day situations. She commits every day to God, looking for divine help and guidance

and feels that she receives answers to these prayers. Her spirituality is expressed in the routine of each day. She considers that her faith demands that she live a good life and that she should be good to other people. If this is achieved then she will not be punished by God. But if a person does not live a good life, then divine judgement and punishment should be expected. This aspect of her faith is dramatically affirmed in the spiritual experience of the dream. The confirmation that “to do your best” is all that is required, reflects this very concept of faith, as both belief in God and doing good.

Hymnology plays an important role in her life and faith as she associates hymns with memories and commitment. They are also the trigger to emotional responses.

“And what I have noticed now, since I’ve lost my husband, if when I went to church one evening we sung ‘the day thou gavest Lord is ended’ that was always my father’s closing hymn. And the last time I went to church in the evening the tears were down my face because it brought back memories. So things like that makes me cry. On the day that I was confirmed we sang ‘O Jesus I have promised to serve thee to the end’, and that makes me cry as well. And I felt really nice that day”. (31)

How much of the hymns importance is in the words, is debatable, because it is very much the tunes that provide the emotional reaction.

“Well if we sing it in the ancient tune, make me cry. But if we sing it in the new bouncy tune I don’t cry. I don’t know why, but as I say if we sing it in the ancient tune I do cry. And I felt really nice that day. So when we sing it in the old tune it brings back the memory of that day. And if I don’t cry at the beginning I cry at the end. But if we sing it in the modern tune I don’t cry”. (31)

Yet it is difficult to dissociate the words from the music. The two elements of hymns and songs are intimately linked so that the music often brings to memory the words. There is also a clear link between events and the hymns. She links “The day thou gavest Lord, is ended”

with her father and her husband, who are both dead. This hymn is both an evening hymn and a funeral hymn. Therefore, the words will be relevant to the memories and the re-experiencing of those memories in emotion. Likewise the other song mentioned, “O Jesus, I have promised” is clearly associated with commitment to God and was sung at her confirmation service. The music and the words bring to memory that service and also the need for commitment and for faith. Both songs cited are reminders of faith and opportunities for renewal of faith.

The way in which *Carrie* discussed the issues indicates that she has a day to day faith. It is a faith that has been learnt through her childhood, which no doubt included instruction in the church, but perhaps owes more to the influence and example of her parents and to her own experiences. Her faith is in God, and the belief in an after-life, understanding that she can pray for her husband to “rest in peace” (33). Central to her faith is the life of the church, and she considers it important to be regularly attending public worship.

The questionnaire indicates that her faith has been strongly influenced by spiritual experiences, Scripture and the traditions and teachings of the Church. Although little was said in the discussions about the teaching of the Church and the place of Scripture, as these are very important for her, it is reasonable to assume that they are strongly influential. The discussion focused mainly on the spiritual experiences although, as will be seen below, the discussion on her understanding of the church is also important.



## *God*

God is a strong reality in every aspect of life. *Carrie* feels that she has good communication with God, and that it is a very personal relationship. God is very close to her throughout all aspects of her life; being available to her at all times and in all situations. She speaks of God being close to her in particular times of need or crisis, such as the death of her husband, but also that he is nearby all the time.

“I always feel the Lord is here. Even if I am in just in the kitchen I feel that the Lord is with me because everything is working out nicely for me”. (40)

The main reason she believes in the closeness of God, is that her life is working out well. She does not have any real difficulties or problems. She would not consider herself rich but she is satisfied with the life that she has. Therefore, there is a sense in which she feels that God has rewarded her for her good life. The reward is a comfortable life, and also that God is near her, looking after her. The reward is due to her constancy in her faith; that she has been faithful to God and to the Church and that she has lived a good moral life. This lifestyle is not one that is to be taken for granted, but one that needs constant help and determination. Her prayers each Sunday are that God will help her to maintain her moral standards. Once, while in church, a lady asked her what she prayed for at the beginning and end of each act of worship. Part of the response was:

“And she said ‘What else?’ I said ‘I ask the Lord to keep my hands from picking and stealing.’ She said ‘You what?’ ‘Yes’, I said, ‘I ask the Lord to keep my hands from picking and stealing and my tongue from evil speaking, from lying and from slandering people.’ She said, ‘That’s what you say?’ I said ‘You see me there like that, I am praying to the Lord, which I really do.’” (33)

And she believes that she has been able to keep to the standards that God requires of her.

“But ah, my parents be punish for anything, if you did anything wrong but ... I have never been a wicked person, I have always tried to be good to people, be good to myself and here I am 73. And I am fine - thank God”. (47)

Because God is the “ruler of heaven and earth”, God is able to punish as well as reward. Her lifestyle has been rewarded by God, but it is also dependent on God. She relies upon him to enable her to maintain this type of life. God is only able to do so, however, because she is willing to rely upon him and to include him in her daily life. She relies upon God to look after her, so her prayers are often prayers for protection:

“At night when I go to sleep I ask the Lord to be with me, take me through the night and wake me with the morning light and what else can I do? I do realise that the Lord is there”. (40)

However, this faith in God’s protection is modified by what might be called common sense. She prays for protection at night, possibly because she is unable to protect herself while she is asleep. During the waking hours, there is a difference and she will do all she can to protect herself. But, she will not go out at night because it is considered unsafe to do so, and she will lock herself into her home.

Part of her relationship with God is one of thanksgiving. She thanks God for his help and also for his protection.

“I said, ‘I thank the Lord for a nice day. I ask the Lord to take me home and be with me.’” (33)

“I feel it is nice to want to thank the Lord for everything, and I’ve got so much to thank the Lord for, because I could have been gone and died, but I thank the Lord for my life. I thank him for everything. I really have a lot to thank the Lord for. Every day I get up - I don't remember when I have not thanked the Lord”. (36)

“So that is a lot to thank the Lord for. I do thank God. I thank him every day and all day”. (40)

Consequently prayer is part of that daily routine. The prayer that she speaks of is not a formal or formalised prayer, but a simple talking with God. It is communicating with someone who feels real and able to hear and respond. The concept of God’s presence is such that she will speak aloud to him. She speaks of God as being in the same room as her.

“And here [in the house] if somebody come at my door and they hear me talking, they say ‘somebody’s there’. But I really pray aloud sometimes. I say ‘Lord, I pray, please let my husband rest in peace.’ That is what I pray. Sometimes when I cry when it gets too much and I just try to make myself happy”. (33)

Of course, because she lives alone, she is able to act in this way without embarrassment to herself or to other people, and possibly also because she is on her own, feeling that God is personally with her in the house becomes an important aid to living.

Her faithfulness to God is seen in her constant prayer and reading of the Bible, but also in her regular attendance at worship. This is as important to her, as her private times with God. The worship setting is a place where she expects to meet God, because that is a place where God is to be found (59).

From the discussion it appears that her understanding of God is influenced mainly by her upbringing and her own spiritual experiences. God appears to be very real to her, and is truly immanent. She has a very personal relationship with him, that has developed over the years as she has both come to rely upon him and feel that he has helped and protected her. This is

confirmed in the questionnaire, where her understanding of God is very strongly influenced by her spiritual experiences, Scripture and the teachings and traditions of the Church.

The relationship is an intimate one, but it is also, to some extent, conditional. The condition is her faithfulness in the lifestyle that she leads and in her regular communication, primarily through prayer. So the relationship can be summarised as one dependent on faith and morality that is appropriate to her situation (“Do your best”) and then God will respond with help and protection.

### ***The Church***

From an early age, as well as the example of faith in the family, the church has been important to her. Her regular attendance at church has been an essential outworking of her spirituality and, perhaps, the most important is the act of worship itself, within which the hymns and prayers play a major part.

“But as I said we had to go to church on Sundays - really had to go, whether you wanted to or not. And I used to love going and I still do love going and I will always love going till my life ends.” (36)

The questionnaire shows that the church has been a very strong influence on her understanding of God, her faith, her lifestyle and the way that she relates to other people. We have already looked at how her faith and lifestyle are inter linked, and these are, surely, a consequence of the teaching of the church. It is understandable from the age and background of the respondent that the teaching has focused on morality as an aspect of faith, and that faith

is lived out in good moral conduct. Therefore, in this aspect alone the church is very important for her.

She is also concerned that she should be seen to be faithful to the church which she attends. This is an expression of her faith. She certainly does not feel that her church is the only true church, and is willing to encourage people of any church. This is shown in the way she speaks about her nephew. She is proud of her nephew, even though she does not really agree with the fact that he does not go to one church regularly.

“He goes to different churches, and he enjoys going to different churches because he gets different experiences from different churches. And I said to him you must hold with one church so that if you are sick or you die you will know who is your minister. But that is his way of serving God - to go to different churches. But I don’t go to different churches, I like mine.” (41)

Likewise she is ready to admit that she could learn things from other churches. Yet there is a certain amount of wanting to “live and let live” in terms of church attendance. While she is very accepting of other people having different ways of expressing their faith and attending different churches, she is happy with her own church. Faithfulness to her church was expressed in two principal ways.

First, as we have already discussed, it is faithfulness to her minister. Second, her faithfulness is seen in the attitude that she takes with her Goddaughter. There was a long discussion on the problem that she has with her Goddaughter not wanting to go to church with her. She finds her attitude not only strange but disturbing. *Carrie* is willing to accept people wanting to go to different churches, but she finds her Goddaughter’s exclusiveness and intolerance unacceptable.

“.. she said that there was nothing in anybody’s church to entice her.” (42)

There is the underlying implication that *Carrie*’s church is not good enough or indeed not authentic, because the church does not preach the true “Word of God” (42). For *Carrie* the church that she attends does preach the Word and she feels that it is faithful to the Scriptures.

Her faithfulness is, one suspects, a feeling of a duty that is part of her faith, but it is also very clear that she enjoys her church and the worship style suits her needs very well. She did not speak of the church as a place of fellowship with other people, although she did say that it was an opportunity to “get a break from being at home” (35). So there is an aspect where she must value the company of the other worshippers. She did speak of it as the place where God can be found. This is confirmed in the questionnaire, where she indicated that the important aspects of worship are “thinking about God” and “listening to God”. Indeed she would expect to find God in church worship and was a little surprised when I suggested that not everybody would think that was the case. God is present for her in church and the presence is felt particularly in the hymns, music and prayers. Therefore, worship is the place of spiritual experiences, although these are mainly emotional experiences that relate to memories.

Finally, worship is a way in which she can serve God, and so would conform to the idea that worship is service.

“I am doing what I know is right. Go to church. I like my church. I serve my God and that’s it.” (49)

She expressed her love of church and the worship that she attends as she says that she could always do with more.

“So I really enjoy my service and I don’t go just for go sake, I go because I really enjoy it. And I must be honest, sometimes I could do with another half an hour.” (35)

### ***Faith, Worship and Spiritual Experiences***

The faith, worship and spiritual experiences of *Carrie* are clearly related to each other. Being brought up in the Christian faith with regular attendance at worship, it would be difficult to separate out different aspects of faith. Her faith is expressed in very practical ways. There is the moral dimension to faith - to behave well and to be honest. There is the spiritual dimension in that she feels it is important to be in daily communication with God and to read her scriptures. This is particularly expressed in her regular attendance at church worship. She sees this as both a “duty and a delight”. Her relationship with God is expressed in the way that she feels she must do her best, according to her ability to be faithful to God, and in return he will be faithful to her, to protect her and comfort her. Her spirituality then is seen in the importance of doing her best and living a good life, and in the importance of being constantly reminded of the presence and purposes of God. God is real in that she is able to constantly communicate with him and is also expressed in worship, particularly through hymns, music and prayers.

The spiritual experiences that she has had conform to her understanding of faith, God and the church. They have either been influential in the development of her theology or have been in conformity with it. They are of importance to her, and they sustain her, but it would be true to say that she would not isolate them from the other aspects of her faith. Spiritual experiences are one of a number of strongly influential aspects of her faith and life.

#### **6.4. Interpretation and Analysis: Eric**

*Eric* could be described as a middle aged, middle class professional married man with a family. He has been strongly influenced by the “liberal free church” expression of faith and morality, as he has attended the Birmingham church since his childhood. The spiritual experiences that he describes are all related to his involvement in the life of the church.

##### ***The Spiritual Experiences***

*Eric* started the discussion with expressing his difficulty in knowing what is a spiritual experience. He indicated that he struggled with this when looking at the questionnaire, mainly because he did not know how to categorise experiences. Important questions for him are “What makes an experience a spiritual experience?” and “How do you quantify such things as experiences?” There are many aspects of life that are related to spiritual issues and all these could be spiritual experiences, but there would need to be a clear set of “pigeon holes” in which to put these. However, this very task of categorising is one that he considers difficult if not impossible to do.

“There are so many things that you do experience that you can’t categorise.  
There isn't really pigeon holes for them.” (43)

However, he does describe some experiences which he calls spiritual and so seems to come to the understanding that a spiritual experience might be “when we get an answer to something” (8). The first two examples of his spiritual experiences come into this category. The story about preparing Junior Church lessons (E.1.) and the story about preparing for the Boy’s Brigade meeting (E.2.) are very similar. *Eric* was needing some help and guidance in



preparing for the meetings. He was unsure what to do, but believed that by the time of the meeting he would be inspired with the right lesson or programme. He considered that “‘something’ was always there to give me strength and guidance.” Although he does not mention that the inspiration comes from God, there is the implication that it is not a human cognitive action but rather something that impinges from outside. Therefore, it would be perceived as supernatural and, in this context, divine.

The experience could be understood to be a low level illuminatory experience. The aspect of illumination is considered to be part of spiritual experiences and particularly, conversion experiences. Although this experience is not a conversion experience, there is the aspect that the experient is in a crisis situation and that he is unable to deal with the issue. Therefore, he stopped trying to deal with it but the subconscious continues working and eventually provides an answer.<sup>14</sup> The event may be described as an “Answer to Prayer”<sup>15</sup> even if the prayer was not explicit. Also, there is little doubt that it is an “Interpretative Experience”<sup>16</sup> as the person sees it as a spiritual experience in retrospect. In both of these examples, the purpose of the experience is inspiration and the consequence is the confidence and ability given. They are triggered by the concern and lack of insight. The medium could be said to be an unexpressed prayer.

Although it was said that the experiences were supernatural, the respondent would not be very happy to explain such experiences as supernatural. He comes much more from a background that understands divine intervention as enabling people to act in a divine way.

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<sup>14</sup>Momen includes such concepts as illumination through the subconscious as part of the religious conversion experience. MOMEN Moojan (1999). *The Phenomenon of Religion: a thematic approach*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, p. 99.

The example he used was of understanding the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand.

The miracle here is that people shared what they had. He equated it with a “faith tea.”

“For instance the story of the feeding of five thousand is like the faith teas as they used to call them. So I think in some instances there are that God wanted it to happen - it was the miracle of giving - wasn't it?” (41)

The natural human response would be for each person to keep what they had for themselves.

In this way some people would have food to eat while others would not. The miracle is understood as the miracle of change in people initiated by divine action in Jesus's example so that people shared their food with each other and nobody went hungry. This would also be a spiritual experience because the five thousand people would have learnt something new that day, and been challenged and changed by what they had experienced. Another way of expressing this type of spiritual experience is that the people were influenced spiritually in their actions. The definition of spiritual in this case would be “something that is not a natural human response” and, because it is not natural, it is divinely initiated.

However, the action itself is not necessarily something that is unnatural. The sharing of food is a human action, the spiritual aspect of it is that it is done in a particular situation. Spiritual action is not considered to be supernatural action. This is further illustrated by the discussion on what is important in the Christian life. The respondent clearly felt that good action towards other people was the criteria for this. Somebody who does good is acting spiritually.

“You mentioned that aspect of the old lady next door needing assistance, now if it occurred at twenty to eleven on a Sunday morning both those things are there, aren't they? You can get in your car and go to church and be recharged or the old lady next door has fell down the stairs and needs your help in a big way, what do you do?” (56)

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<sup>15</sup>Hay would classify it in this way HAY D. (1990).

<sup>16</sup>Cf. FRANKS DAVIS C. (1989).

“Yes, I mean that I must confess that there is probably only one answer and I would give the old lady assistance. It could be maybe, challenging from that, the fact that you’ve been able to help”. (58)

In this example the action, which is considered to be spiritual, may lead to a spiritual experience, if one considers that to be challenged in one’s life is a spiritual experience. Divine intervention to change a person’s attitude or understanding is supernatural action. The action of the person so inspired is spiritual action but not a supernatural action.

The third spiritual experience (E.3.) described by *Eric* highlights this idea of being challenged to new thoughts and ideas. He tells how he found a certain preacher very inspiring because he could explain the Bible passage with extempore preaching. Preaching can be considered a spiritual experience. In this case we are thinking of it as a spiritual experience for the listener. The preacher from Wales had a particular effect on his hearers. There was something special about his preaching and approach to worship. It was Bible based and centred on the exposition of a text. With this approach he would not have been unique. However, there was also the special aspect of his preaching, and which seemed to have turned it into a spiritual experience, is that “ he would lean across and he used to challenge us”. He had the ability to speak from the text and this was considered to be through special inspiration. Although *Eric* does not say specifically, it is implied that this is divine inspiration. Clearly there is an aspect of the experience that is “charismatic”<sup>17</sup> as the preacher is seen to be particularly skilled and holy. So this example has two aspects to it. The first is that he is inspired in the preaching and the second that he is able to challenge people with his words. So again we come to find that the idea of a spiritual experience is that it is something that is inspired but also might challenge new thinking or new ways of living,

or give a new understanding about faith. So it is about communication from the divine, through human beings or activities.

“There is a time on a Sunday morning service when you hear a reading and the exposition tells you something that you didn’t know about. Is that a spiritual experience? The preacher has a special way about him and that impresses you.” (8)

This process of communication can also be through the Bible. But again there is a need for a human agent. In the third spiritual experience (E.3.) described, it is stated that the Preacher can communicate the Bible “as alive today” (8). A communication about spiritual matters can also be a definition of a spiritual experience.

*Eric* does, however, consider that worship itself could be a spiritual experience. When he has been to worship and has come away feeling uplifted or renewed (recharged) for the next week then that is “some sort of spiritual experience, but under what heading - I’m not sure” (43). In the setting of worship, then, spiritual experiences will be triggered by a person or a reading, the medium is the communication, with the purpose of giving inspiration resulting in a consequence of challenge to the experient.

The concept of a spiritual experience for *Eric* is something that happens in the normal order of things, such as preparing for a lesson, a Sunday service, or the needs of other people, through which one feels that there is a divine intervention. It should also include a challenge to new understandings and new ways of life. The spiritual experience, then, is something that you need to be able to see either at the time or by reflecting upon the experience at a later time. It is an everyday experience that is interpreted as spiritual. The inspiration given when

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17DONOVAN P. (1979).

there is the need to prepare lessons could simply be described as “suddenly having a good idea”, but this is not the case. It is seen as help from the divine. Likewise the challenge to new understandings and ways of life is not simply dismissed as a good idea.

This concept, that the spiritual experience comes out of what are often ordinary daily experiences, is reinforced by the attitude of *Eric* to conversion and mystical experiences. Clearly he has not had any of these experiences, and while he acknowledges that people have admitted to such things, he finds them difficult to comprehend.

“I confess that I am sceptical about all this turning to God and finding the way to go. I have a question mark, you know. I know it happens, when reading the Bible, about Paul and all the rest of it - but does it happen? Possibly for some people - they choose to adopt and want to hang it on something.” (16)

With this understanding of a spiritual experience, there are no particular triggers for the experiences. *Eric* acknowledges that spiritual experiences can come at any time and any place. While, clearly, the experience of the preacher is likely to be in the context of church worship, the setting of the church is not important. The experiences of inspiration are related to particular concerns and these can occur anywhere.

### ***Faith***

*Eric* is in his late fifties and says he has been a Christian all of his life, having attended church for fifty years. As well as being a Christian he is also a keen churchgoer and describes himself as a nonconformist and, in particular, a Congregationalist. What is important to him about this type of church is that it allows a person to have a free mind (2). He does not feel that faith is something that is prescribed by the Church or the Bible. Rather he understands

that it is something each person needs to work out for themselves. He believes that God does not dictate the style or content of faith but rather lets each person determine their own.

“You have only got to read or listen to parts of the Bible to realise that that is the situation. I don’t think he [God] set out to say ‘this is what you will do!’ I think it should be approached in your way.” (2)

Consequently this would suggest that he is tolerant of the diversity of Christianity, allowing that different church traditions suit different people. The Congregationalist tradition suits him.

*Eric* does not speak of any conversion experience, and so it appears that growing up in the church was what brought him to faith. His whole background to life is one that has been continually associated with the Church and, therefore, one of faith. Faith is part of his context of life, and one that is assumed always to be there. Indeed he finds it difficult to understand the concept of a conversion experience.

While he acknowledges the place of preaching to challenge and stimulate faith, he finds that reading the Bible is less productive. Yet, in the questionnaire he considers that the influence of the Scriptures is as important as the teaching of the Church and his experiences. He feels that he cannot see things in the Bible that others can, and so it is not so revelatory for him. But he admires those people who can interpret and understand the Bible in different ways, and make it meaningful for them. So what helps his faith develop and where is this faith expressed? The answer is clearly that faith is related to people. Meeting and experiencing people is the most important aspect of his faith (23). Faith is related to “goodness” and it involves looking for the “good” in other people. It is, in this respect, a faith in others. To

have faith is to be able to see “good” all around. But the problem with this for *Eric* is that this is not restricted to Christians. Others can see something good in other people.

“One of the things that I mentioned to you is this business of seeing something good in an other guy, but one who has nothing to do with the church can see tremendous good in others - they make a difference - that's the phrase. Then I don't think you need to be a Christian to help others. When the people you see the good in are Christians, then you tend to think ‘Yeah.’” (49)

Likewise from this statement we discover that faith is also about helping others. The discussion about whether to go to church or help the person next door (56 - 62), also indicates that this is an important element of faith, which is confirmed by the answers in the questionnaire. Such an understanding of faith, however, is very inclusive, and acknowledges that people of other Religions and none may exhibit these attributes.

While *Eric* does not claim to have had any conversion experience as such, he does understand that faith is encouraged by “inspiration” experiences. These are important for him and, in the absence of any other definition or category, become spiritual experiences. These spiritual experiences are important for faith. They encourage him in his faith, because they enable him to carry out actions associated with faith. In the questionnaire he considered that these experiences have influenced his faith significantly and also how he relates to other people. However, the influence of spiritual experiences on his faith in all aspects assessed by the questionnaire is very similar to the influence from the teachings and traditions of the Church, and only slightly higher than the influence of Scripture. He describes this as faith that is “a bit middle of the road” (21).

Faith is very active. The way that faith is expressed is through one's relationship with other people. Consequently it is more important to help the "lady next door" than to attend worship, if the choice has to be made. Taking this as the essence of faith, then, a person can have faith without overtly expressing belief in God, or in Christ. Non-practising Christians can have such faith, and people of other religions can have this faith. Faith is also about one's attitude to others. A person of faith will look for the good in other people (44) and so this understanding of faith does not necessarily have anything to do with the church. Yet *Eric* recognises that there is something special about seeing that the person who does good is a Christian (49).

### ***God***

Throughout the discussion there was very little reference to God. As *Eric* considers that he has been a Christian all his life, and has not had a particular experience of God, then he understands God to be part of the normal aspects of life. God exists. God is important, but God does not seem to be real in a personal way. Indeed he seems reluctant to think of a personal relationship with God.

"I confess that I am sceptical about all this turning to God and finding the way" (16)

In a similar way he does not expect to hear God speaking to him. When he considered what might constitute a spiritual experience, he considered that it might be hearing God speaking.

"I thought is there a defining situation - is there a situation that you are looking for when I go and sit in a particular chair in a room and know that God is



going to talk to me there about a problem that I have got or something else?”  
(14)

But this has not been part of his life and he has not encountered God in this way. The closest that *Eric* has come to this type of experience is when he has received inspiration. Therefore, he would accept that God is encountered through inspiring people in particular situations of need. This is the only concept of God communicating directly with him.

However, God can be known and understood through the Scriptures and through worship. In particular the role of preaching and teaching is important for this. This is the prime means of understanding God and God's purposes. For *Eric*, God is more of a theoretical and abstract concept and is known and understood mainly through the cognitive process. This does not make God any less real, but it does emphasise the transcendent nature of God over the immanent aspect of his being. God is immanent in that he inspires and guides either directly or through other people. Yet this is not so much seen as God intervening in the world, or revealing himself in an experiential way. Rather it is through reflection upon actions, and through helping the thought processes when needed. God, then, is again understood through the cognitive process.

God is seen in other people, in the sense that goodness is an attribute of God, and this goodness can be seen in other people. To take goodness as the measure of a person's faith, rather than a confession of belief, is to understand that God can work through anyone, whether of faith or no faith, and, therefore, the understanding of God active in the world is a very broad one and is related to an inclusive concept of faith. However, broad this idea is, there are limitations as to how God is seen to act. The limitation is to be sceptical about

spiritual experiences that involve a direct communication with the Divine. While there is a grudging acknowledgement that some people have claimed to have had Damascus Road Experiences (16, 21), they are not really part of his understanding or experience of God. By not being willing to accept the miraculous, he does not feel that God intervenes in the world or the natural order in this way.

God is part of worship and is revealed through worship in an indirect way. The action of God is to help the worshipper to be “recharged” for the next week. Encountering God in worship is not through experience, nor through the liturgy, but because God is the focus of worship. And in Christian worship the focus is primarily on Jesus Christ.

“The thing going through it [worship] is Jesus Christ, you are singing hymns through him, you are addressing him through prayers, you are listening to him through the word, whichever text is chosen.” (41)

It is as though God becomes the ideology that informs the worshipper’s life. Consequently God may not even be apparent during worship, but his place can be discerned when reflecting upon the event, because this is the reflection on the ideology of life. The relationship with God is not personal but ideological and cognitive.

### ***The Church***

The church is understood in different ways. Although the word is not used in this way in the discussions, it is clear that first of all the term “church” can be used to describe all Christians. *Eric* recognises that there are many who call themselves Christians but do not go to church. These he calls “non-practising Christians” and “non-church Christians” (4).

“The other thing that I was thinking is the test is: Why do non practising Christians, people whom might even call themselves Christians but don't set foot in the church from year to the next, but in the end the first thing they do is bring their children into church to be ‘done’ or Christened. So there is obviously still something there at that level and it would be interesting to know what the statistics are of what we describe as non-church Christians, who still bring the children to have them christened. There is probably twice as many who still have their children christened as there are church attenders.”  
(4)

So you cannot equate the church with those who go to church. The second understanding of church is that it is the gathering of the local Christians as *Eric* is strongly influenced in this understanding by his allegiance to Congregational principles.

The third understanding is the place of public worship, although private worship can take place anywhere. The worship, involving hymns, prayers and preaching, is primarily a time to reflect and be renewed. It is in the exposition of the word, above all, that the worshipper can find out about God, come to understand his purposes more, and be influenced by God. It is an opportunity to get back to the fundamentals of Christianity. God is not found directly in worship, but through the medium and means of the liturgy.

When asked, in the discussion, what is the most important part of worship, *Eric* responded that it is the sermon. However, on the questionnaire this was not indicated as important. Rather thinking about God, and life, and listening to God were three of the important things. This relates to the understanding of the purpose of worship, that it is to be re-energised by God. This is done through reflection and imagination (41). The sermon can aid this process but often it can hinder it. Interestingly as the discussion continued it appeared that *Eric* found the hymns and singing the most interesting part of the worship. This helps him to be

renewed. While the words of the hymns will point him to God, and help him to think about theology, it would also be true to say that they are part of the liturgy that is most likely to reach the emotions and be an experiential aspect of worship. Only in this respect is *Eric* willing to think of worship in terms of a spiritual experience.

“It is like Sunday - whether you regard Sunday as the start of the week or the finish - the uplift at the end or the uplift at the start. So in fact if you could quantify something like that as some sort of spiritual experience, but under what heading - I’m not sure.” (43)

The responses to the questionnaire indicate that *Eric* feels that worship can involve and encourage spiritual experiences, but that it is not a spiritual experience itself. Understanding the concept of spiritual experience expressed throughout the discussion, then, the responses can be understood to indicate that the worship encourages the worshipper into a faith in action that will enable the person to see the goodness of God around him or her.

### ***Faith, Worship and Spiritual Experiences***

*Eric* describes his church as free and traditional, understanding these terms in an ecclesiastical sense. This also seems to represent his faith and spirituality. The faith that he expresses would fall into the category of liberal Protestantism, and one that was encouraged particularly in the 1960’s Britain. Being in his late 50’s it would be reasonable to assume that the 1960’s was an important and influential period in his life. This would represent his early adult life and during this period of his life he spent much time on church activities. The Boys Brigade was an important part of these activities. Faith is something that is active. Worship is part of this activism, and regular attendance at worship is essential for guidance and renewal of faith. However, worship must take second place to the needs of other people. In

one sense this represents a spirituality that puts others first and the individual second, and, at the same time, says that God is served more through the needs of others than through worship, as worship is not so much about God but about oneself. His spirituality reflects this understanding of faith, as it centres on two aspects. The first is that the nature of God can be seen in other people and reinforced in oneself as one meets others and helps them, and second, that the understanding of the nature of God is largely a cognitive process. The cognitive process is mainly through reflection on the scriptures and preaching, but also through the interaction with others.

This spirituality does not involve supernatural experiences, as it is believed that God is not immanent in any real way, is not encountered through visions or personal encounters, and does not intervene in the world in any way that can be considered supernatural or miraculous. This spirituality, reflecting a liberal faith, does acknowledge the place of spiritual experiences, but they are defined and understood as times of inspiration. God is the inspirer and this is an important concept for spirituality.

### **6.5. Interpretation and Analysis: Felicity**

*Felicity*, a married woman in her late fifties described herself as “White-English”. She has had a career in the social services in Britain, and is currently working as a counsellor. She has also been very active in the church, holding different offices over the years. *Felicity* reported three spiritual experiences, which were very different.

### *The Spiritual Experiences*

The spiritual experiences were only briefly described in the questionnaire with one line summaries, but *Felicity* expanded these in the discussions. The first experience was related to a time of crisis associated with the death of her parents, which had been a difficult time for the experient (F.1.). The death of her father had resulted in the necessity for her to look after her invalid mother, which had been difficult for her and had generated a great deal of anger. The experience occurred in church, which she describes as:

“I just went to pieces because of a particular piece of music that triggered that ... and a particular hymn.” (61)

The experience was an emptying of built up emotions.

“I was so angry... I was so angry with her, not him... I was so angry about everything and how it dominated my life and how helpless my mother was... we had a very difficult relationship.” (61)

The experience took place a few months after the death of her father and was triggered by a particular piece of music that she associated with him. The actual experience is described as “I just went to pieces” (61) and then expanded as:

“And it was like when you pull the plug out of a sink, everything rushes out. And then you can fill it up again.” (61)

From this description the experience is one of release from the crisis that had surrounded the woman’s life. Within the context of the worship she was able to deal with the death of her father and also to start to deal with the anger that this had generated. From the experience she was able to face the situation and move on in her life. *Felicity* analysed the experience as one that was “about emotion, personal emotion, feeling out of control” (61).

*Felicity* is a counsellor by training and, therefore, is well acquainted with the issues that were concerning her. She was also able to understand what the experience was all about. Her counselling training had not been from a Christian or faith perspective and she had not exercised her skills from a faith perspective. Therefore, it would have been more natural for her to describe this experience in counselling or psychological terms and concepts. It could have been described as a time of “coming to terms with ...” (18), however, she chose to call this experience a spiritual experience.

“I definitely felt that was a spiritual experience, no doubt about that.” (61)

The main aspect of the experience was that she could feel a change taking place. So the time of “going to pieces” was not just a time of emotional collapse, but it was a time of taking apart and rebuilding. The outcome of the experience was a positive and creative one. She says it involved a “sense of openness, a sense of completeness, a sense of resolution” (69), which would be reasonable descriptions from a social work perspective. But these descriptions are incomplete. There was much more to the experience than that, even if it included these aspects. The consequence of the experience was that it was able to help her understand the crisis she had been in. But as she says it was more than this, and the extra dimension was the presence she felt; the awareness of “something around me”, one that she is happy to describe as a personal presence. In the description of the event she includes the place of other people, but clearly she is not referring to this when she describes the feeling of a personal presence with her. However, it is interesting to note that she does not want to describe this presence as the presence of a person nor does she name this presence. She does not call it Divine and would be hesitant to claim that God was present.

“I hesitate to say that there is somebody there but something happened around me.” (63)

Clearly the experience was not considered to be “internal” and so was not just the imagination or in the mind. It was not described as psychological. There was a physical element to the experience and this is understood in terms of a presence around the person. That the experient is unable to define this presence is in some ways surprising because she is a professed and practising Christian and the experience took place in church worship. She has a lifelong history of being associated with the church and, therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that she should have sufficient concepts and language to be able to describe the experience. It might be assumed that with her religious background she would describe it in religious terms. However, she does not do so.

The experience took place in church in a worship context. It was that setting that accommodated the trigger to the experience. Indeed the setting of worship may well have been part of the trigger, for while it is claimed that it was a particular piece of music and a hymn that brought on the spiritual experience, the worship must have been part of it. The event was also associated with other people. It was obviously a personal and individual experience and the other people in the congregation did not share in the experience. They were involved in supporting her and showed sympathy and understanding, but they did not share the experience. Yet it is also true that the people of the congregation contributed to the experience. Their response to her need at the time for comfort and understanding added another dimension. This may have been the medium. The actions of the people were important to her and she would describe these actions as “the hand of God”. Indeed the only time that God is mentioned is when she perceives that God is working through other people.



While talking about her understanding of what a spiritual experience is, she described it as “an awareness of the nearness of God” (28), but it seems that this is normally associated with the actions of people:

“Now, when I see some interaction between us, between me and other people,  
I see the hand of God in that.” (32)

Therefore, while she does not describe the involvement of other people in her experience in church as the action of God, and she does not claim that she felt the presence of God, she would be open to the possibility that this was true.

This experience, considered as a spiritual experience, is triggered by a piece of music in the worship setting, and the memory of her father. It has the consequence of bringing comfort, understanding and well-being. There is a sense of a physical presence which was not named, but was clearly supernatural and may be divine. This purpose was achieved by the medium of worship and other people.<sup>18</sup>

The second experience (F.2.) is one that takes place in the work setting, because she says that she could see “the hand of God in it” (133) and she says that it was a “very spiritual experience for many people” (133). It briefly tells the story of a discussion at work, about the subject of abortion, which continued all day. It was a challenging and stimulating discussion. Yet, logically for *Felicity* this should not be a spiritual experience. Her definition of Spiritual Experience includes the aspect that to be spiritual it should be associated with the church.

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<sup>18</sup>It could be classified as a “Revisitation of Memories”, according to PAFFORD M. (1976), or “Regenerative” as it made a change in her life, according to DONOVAN P. (1979).

“It may well be that what I have looked at, and thought of as spiritual experience, had it not been in the church, had I been at work and with somebody else I would have regarded it as a different experience, probably.”  
(22)

This statement suggests that her understanding of a spiritual experience is what others may just call an experience. In this sense the spiritual aspect is more about interpretation and setting than anything inherent in the experience. Therefore, to feel “a presence” is not necessarily spiritual. Likewise to have a feeling of contentment and well-being may be an everyday experience. It becomes a spiritual experience if this happens within a spiritual or religious setting such as church worship.

Another reason why the second experience is considered spiritual is because the discussion in which it is set is moral and spiritual. The concept of “spiritual” in this example is not that it involves a supernatural aspect or presence in any form but rather that it is about spiritual things. This then could be seen to fit, at least to some extent, the definition that *Felicity* has made. It is a spiritual experience because it is about spiritual things. It is also a spiritual experience because it is perceived that “the hand of God is in it”.

There is nothing supernatural about this experience. It is something that comes out of an everyday setting. The discussion was about abortion, which was a topical and significant issue at the time. The narrator of the story of the discussion considers that this is a spiritual as well as a moral issue. The spiritual experience was one that could be described as shared, as many of those involved in the event were looking at something that was spiritual or religious in nature. How each person perceived it and whether they understood it to be

spiritual we do not know, but the analysis of the event states that it was a spiritual event for many.

“But that was a very spiritual experience for many people because for the first time many people looked at this issue and really thought it through.” (133)

However, the perception of the experience as spiritual, may simply be the feeling of the experient who is projecting her ideas and conclusions on to others. She says:

“Now that was a most fantastic experience to me, and I could easily see the hand of God in that, although there wasn’t much religion around, if you like.” (133)

This does highlight an aspect of her understanding of spiritual experiences, as involving other people, for the questionnaire reveals that her spiritual experiences have happened when she has been with other people. She has never encountered a spiritual experience when she has been on her own. This would actually be impossible for her, with the understanding that she holds.

So, we return to the idea that the experience is described as spiritual because it is seen that God is involved. One assumes that the involvement of God is not through making his presence felt in any physical or psychological way, but through the discussion itself taking place. We do not know whether it is understood that God motivated the discussion, initiated it, directed it or controlled it, but only that “the hand of God was in it”. It is, therefore, a case that the Divine is somehow involved in the discussion, and the proof for this is put forward as “because for the first time people looked at that issue and really thought it through”. The discussion was a serious one, in which many people took part, and it became an in-depth

analysis of the issue. The story of the event suggests that this was not a normal situation, and that the work colleagues were normally rather superficial in their breaktime discussions.

The experience relates mainly to the person at the centre of the debates and discussions. He is described as an atheist, but someone who could initiate a challenge and a stimulating debate. Was it a case that he was seen as the agent of God and, therefore, the trigger for the spiritual experience, or was the subject under discussion the trigger? The medium, in this case, is the discussion itself and the purpose of the experience is seeing the working of God in ordinary things.

As we analyse this spiritual experience, we can conclude that it was less personal than the previous one and that there was no feeling of the presence of the supernatural. The experience made the person feel good, but in a very different way to the experience in church, for God could be seen at work in the situation and the consequence was the well-being of the experient. So it could be concluded that it was an experience that confirmed, for the experient, that God was active, and this may well be related to the fact that the person at the centre of the events was an atheist. The trigger and the experience were that other people were influenced by something, perhaps, in a spiritual way. Hay<sup>19</sup> might describe it as an experience that includes the “Presence of God”.

The third experience described was not, according to the experient’s definitions, in a church setting. The concept of church being the local church at worship, or the local church building. This experience (F.3.) took place at Villa Park during the “Mission England

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19HAY D. (1990).

Campaign” of 1984. This was an experience of worship and was particularly associated with music. Being a member of the large choir, she felt uplifted by the music. She clearly had a very good feeling about the singing and it was an emotional experience.<sup>20</sup> However, she is undecided as to whether it was a spiritual experience or not.

“But it isn’t necessarily a spiritual experience. I could of easily said it was a spiritual experience.” (115)

And she agreed that it would be a spiritual experience if you were “spiritually minded”. So the definition of a spiritual experience from this example is that it is an experience that you interpret spiritually.<sup>21</sup> But we can still, tentatively, conclude that the setting was worship, the trigger and the medium the choir, and the purpose was high emotion leading to a feeling of well-being.

### ***Faith***

*Felicity* has had a long association with the Church and was brought up in the Christian faith. In the questionnaire she stated that she had been a Christian most of her life, and at times was very involved in the life of the church.

She understands her spirituality to be determined by the church, for she is unable to separate the two, saying that, “I do equate my spirituality with being in the church” (32). Being a church member, and committed to her church, is the way in which she expresses her faith. This would not be an uncommon view for older members of churches in the Congregational

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<sup>20</sup>Therefore, it was “Regenerative” according to the classification of FRANKS DAVIS C. (1989), and “Romantic Emotional” according to the classification of PAFFORD M. (1976).

tradition. Spirituality is, for many of them, a new word and would not have been something they were greatly familiar with. Rather, speaking of living out one's faith would have been more acceptable. Faith, then, for *Felicity* is something that is intimately connected with the church. Her understanding of church in this context is the people, the congregation. Her faith is lived out and formed by the people of the church

“... the biggest impacts have been made on me by other people, many of whom I would definitely regard as spiritual people.” (32)

Her concept of the church as central to the faith does not mean that she has a high view of it. The church is made up of spiritual people, but also fallible ones. People may be influential but they can also be very difficult. The church, as a place to live out faith, is also about living it out in an institution and community that “can be the most frustrating, irritating, demanding place ever”(38). Rather than diminishing the importance of church, this actually highlights it.

Perhaps, because she has grown up in the church and, therefore, has not had a time in her life when she has not believed, she does not accept the concept of conversion that demands an experience and an instant response. While she found aspects of the Mission England Campaign at Villa Park “really uplifting” (115) other parts “were interesting but did not touch me in the slightest” (119). The one example of an interesting event that did not “touch” her is the content of Billy Graham's sermons. She could recognise his power as a preacher, and that God could and did use him, but she could not agree with his emphasis on the need to accept Christ, there and then. Her interpretation of this theology is that unless a person responds immediately to the challenge to faith they will not be “accepted”, presumably accepted by God.

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21Cf. FRANKS DAVIS C. (1989).

The questionnaire reveals that her faith has been strongly influenced by her experiences and by the Bible, but much less so by the teachings and traditions of the church. As she feels that the sermons are not important for her, one may conclude that her faith will be influenced more by experience. This includes spiritual experiences, but also largely the experience of other people and their lives. However, to say that the Bible is strongly influential is interesting, in the light of her theory of Scripture. Scripture is not seen as necessarily the “Word of God” but human interpretation and ways of explaining truths.

“I am not sure what I think about Scripture, in a lot of ways. I mean there are lots of elements within the Bible when I think, ‘Well, you know, this is Man’s way of explaining something’. I know it would be sacrilege to say it, but I don’t always see it as the Word of God, I see it as the word of Man, interpreting something.” (100)

*Felicity* seems to be a person who has a practical type of faith that is lived out in life, and believes that faith and God can be seen in the way people interact with each other.

## ***God***

Another reason why the church is so important to her is due to her understanding of it being tied up with her understanding of God. God works through the church, as indeed God works through many, and possibly any, situation. In particular it appears that she believes that God works through people, and she commonly expresses this as, “I can see God’s hand in it”. From the discussion there is nothing to suggest that *Felicity* has had a spiritual experience of God. She does not expect to encounter God, except through the actions of others, interpersonal communication and relationships. Church and worship are not places for

meeting God or indeed listening to God, according her completed questionnaire. However, it is a place to be thinking about God. This suggests that her understanding of God, and her approach to God is cerebral. God is understood through the scriptures and through reflection upon them. Therefore, *Felicity* seems to fit the model of the rational Protestant.

Other answers to the questionnaire suggest that the Bible is the most important influence on her understanding of God, with the teachings and the doctrines of the Church also influential. Yet, she does not feel that teaching and preaching are important for her in worship. Therefore, one concludes that the influence is more the traditions of the Church. The traditions of the Church that she attends includes the legacy of Protestant liberalism and also the emphasis on the social Gospel. The description of the experience fits clearly with this type of theology. The place of experiences in her understanding of God is much lower (significant rather than strong). Her understanding, then, comes from Scripture and the traditions of the Church. These are more influential than her experiences, which, as we have seen have led her to expect God to act in situations through other people. Understanding the Scriptures as more likely to be “Man’s way of explaining something” rather than the “Word of God”, her knowledge of God from the Bible is more about how people have seen God working in the world. This is consistent with her spiritual experiences.

Clearly God is at work in the world, but through the agents of people. God can be seen or found in any and every situation, so there must be a concept of God’s providence and guidance. This is illustrated in the contents of the spiritual experiences. God is seen at work in people of faith, whether Christian or other, but there is an uncertainty that God will work through people of no faith (51). The second spiritual experience is, in fact, an illustration that



God works through a situation that was initiated by an atheist, and she clearly discerned the “hand of God” in this. Therefore, ultimately she must feel that God is free to act where and when he will. Does this then mean that, while she understands that God is immanent, this does not mean that he is easy to discern, and that he is seen in his actions rather than in a personal relationship? There appears to be no understanding of God in terms of personal or individual relationship, and both in the discussion and the questionnaire there was no indication that she felt that this was part of her faith.

### ***The Church***

Being a member of the Congregational church, and then the URC, for most of her life, it is clear that church is important for her, and a significant part of her life. It has been involved in her life formation, and strongly influential in the development of her faith and the understanding of that faith. As already mentioned, her relationship with the church is to be strongly committed, rather than being a “fringe” member. Attendance at worship is very regular, being a weekly worshipper, so is an important part of her life.

The denomination that she attends is one that she has grown up with and one that she finds most appropriate for her.

“It is the place I feel most at home I suppose.” (40)

Drawing on the Congregational tradition, the church is one that is centred on the people of the congregation. This is very important for her, and is the type of ecclesiology that she prefers. While recognising that it can also be very frustrating, because it both highlights the

saintliness of people and the difficulties of working with different temperaments and personalities, she accepts this as the reality of church. Therefore, it seems that she recognises the church as a very human institution and community. However, in this interaction of people, both positive and negative, she is able to see God at work.

“Now, when I see some interaction between us, between me and other people,  
I see the hand of God in that.” (32)

This again reflects upon her concept of God and her theology that seems to be centred on the social and community aspects of life and faith. The church is primarily the people, and, therefore, God works through them, and God is seen in the interaction between people. Interaction and relationships are key to her understanding of the church, and this is what the church is built upon. Yet she does not seem to feel that this is true of her relationship with God, and indeed one must ask, “What is her understanding of the relationship between God and the church?”

Church is the place to worship God, and by this *Felicity* seems to define the church as the local gathering of Christians. She did not perceive that the meeting in Villa Park was “church” nor worship. Two of the important things about worship are being with others and celebrating Communion. The discussions did not explore the meaning of communion, so it is not possible to say whether this is important in terms of relating to God or to other people, although the church tradition would hold that both are true. So the “people” factor is part of the reason she attends worship. But other factors include prayer, thinking about God and one’s life, and music and hymns, but not preaching and teaching. She expressed in the discussion that she was influenced by other people. This suggests that the intellectual aspect of worship, not related to the preaching, must be either a personal and individual reflection, or that being in the presence of others, she is able to reflect on God. How much these

answers to the questions are related to the experience in church and how people responded is difficult to assess, but it is possible that this is a factor

She describes the worship as intellectual, traditional and socially aware. This correlates with much of what has been explored in terms of her faith, and also her professional and social background. She is a person who is involved with other people in her work, and is, therefore, very socially concerned. Her faith and her worship reflect this. Worship is seen as involving spiritual experiences. The answers to all the parts of question 13<sup>22</sup> were given a value of 5, which means that all have a significance in worship. So worship does involve and encourage spiritual experiences. This has been the case for the respondent, as she relates one of her spiritual experiences as taking place during worship. This was not found to be an embarrassment to the congregation, and indeed it appears that they responded promptly to her need and experience at that time (75). Therefore, from this experience she finds that worship is open to such things. But the openness is more a response to the immediate need and supporting people who encountered difficulties or “crises” that might be described as spiritual experiences, rather than being open to a spiritual experience in church. It is expressed as the element of friendship in a congregation.

“They would be very supportive, whatever the issue. And even people who maybe don’t understand what it is about or may be judgmental about somebody’s situation would not hesitate to offer help.” (79)

However, it is not something that would be considered part of the normal weekly worship. Indeed, her understanding of the congregation is that the people would find the expression of

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<sup>22</sup>Question 13 read, “How much does the church worship involve spiritual experiences?”

emotions and feelings as “very scary” (12) and so do not share feelings and experiences in worship.

“I have done a lot of counselling with people, much more used to talking about feelings in that setting than I ever have in church.” (10)

Although this may happen occasionally, the respondent referred to a Christmas Carol Service and a recent service where people shared their thoughts about hymns, generally the people are not the “emotional” type and do not look for this in worship.

“They are people who would rather die than clap, you know, to a hymn, and that is absolutely right. They are very practical people who will do what they can in the way that they can do it but they are not into personal testimonies, praying unless they are asked to.” (83)

The church, then, provides the means for expressing spirituality, both through its worship and also its traditions and teaching, which enables a person to live a particular lifestyle. It is also the place of spiritual experiences, although these are not limited to the church environment. But most of all, it is the place of people who are ready to respond to a need, and in this way provide spiritual experiences.

### ***Faith, Worship and Spiritual Experiences***

*Felicity* is a person who would be happy with the definition of a spiritual experience as an experience that one interprets spiritually. The experiences that she has shared are all related to other people, and her main understanding is that one can see God at work in others. However, the one major spiritual experience of her life was at a crisis point when she felt both an inner change and felt an outer presence of “somebody”. She has not really explained

or understood the physical aspects of this experience, although she has analysed the internal nature and the consequences of the experience. That this experience took place in worship is significant and has either reinforced or helped to formulate her understanding that spiritual experiences are experiences associated with worship and church. However, she realises that there are exceptions to this.

While spiritual experiences have influenced her faith, understanding of God and the way she worships, the influence of the Bible and the traditions of the Church are slightly stronger. Therefore, it must be concluded that spiritual experiences are not considered to be central to faith and worship and one may ask whether they are actually seen to be essential or even important. Faith and Worship, for *Felicity*, is much more to do with relationships with other people, than to do with a meeting with, a seeking for, or developing relationship with God. She has a very practical faith and a very pragmatic approach to spiritual experiences. Faith is something that informs experiences, such that the believer will be able to see God at work in the world, and in other people, and in relationships. A spiritual experience is something that is special, but it comes out of normal human activity. It is something that reveals God in the world, and that God works in the world through human agencies. God is not seen to break into the world, or reveal himself in a dramatic way, but rather in the workings of human society and community. This is the important experience to have and through faith it will be seen to be a spiritual experience.

## **6.6. Interpretation and Analysis: Mike**

*Mike* is a man in his late fifties, with a wife and family. He was born in Birmingham and has been associated with the church all his life. He says that he has been a Christian since his birth, as he was baptised as a child in one of the churches that joined to form the present church which he still attends. Although he has experienced different denominations of the Church, he feels strongly that the Congregational tradition is important. His self description as a white professional and a Congregationalist is appropriate. *Mike* considered that everything could be a spiritual experience, but gave five specific examples.

### ***The Spiritual Experiences***

As indicated in the questionnaire, and later during the discussions, while *Mike* claimed to have has many experiences, he felt unable to describe any of these on the questionnaire. However, he felt unable to describe any of these experiences on the questionnaire. His problem was that he needed a definition of Spiritual Experience, to be able to decide which of his experiences would fit the criteria needed for the investigations of the project. This indicates that the experient has a very inclusive understanding of the concept of spiritual experiences, but felt that his understanding may be much broader than that required by the questionnaire. At the fullest level he was able to say that life was so full of experiences that to try to make a distinction between them and classify some as spiritual while others were not, was very difficult. Indeed one might infer that life itself is a spiritual experience, so that anything associated with life and death can be spiritual.

“I have been with people when they have been born and with people when they have died and they are spiritual experiences. You can’t get away from it.” (18)

The questionnaire indicates that he was able to say that he had had many experiences in every place and any situation, and while these were for him spiritual in nature, he was unwilling or unable to describe the actual events. Throughout the interview he also referred to many spiritual experiences, yet again only gave a few descriptions.

However, he did not feel that his experiences were supernatural or mystical. His life had not included these things.

“I have not felt being visited upon or anything like that, but I have felt very privileged on occasions.” (22)

When presented with some possible definitions of spiritual experiences which included the experience of meeting an angel, he was emphatic that this was not his understanding or experience. Spiritual Experience, for him, would not include the supernatural, visions, or “dramatic encounters” (28) of any sort. There are no “Damascus Road Experiences” for this person. However, he would describe his spiritual experiences as “dynamic”. They had made a great impression upon him, but possibly in a numinous way<sup>23</sup>, producing a sense of inner elation. Consequently the dynamic nature of the experiences are expressed in terms of wonder and awe. The concluding words of the spiritual experience of seeing the White Cliffs of Dover from an aeroplane are (M.2.):

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<sup>23</sup>Numinous according to FRANKS DAVIS C. (1989), but also as an experience of awe, fear, intense holiness. For DONOVAN P. (1979), it might be described as mystical. For Otto it is part of the definition of a spiritual experience (OTTO Rudolf (1950). *The Idea of the Holy: an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*. (2nd ed.). London: Oxford University Press.)

“But it was just so lovely and so wonderful that you felt like ... I would describe that very much as a spiritual experience. It is a realisation. I have been lucky in life that I have been able to look at things, if you like, from a great height. You look at it and you can’t fail to be in awe of what takes place, over what there is.” (14)

This sense of awe and wonder is what holds all the spiritual experiences together, and these experiences are experiences of faith.

The experience of the White Cliffs of Dover represents a feeling of wonder and awe at the natural world. It was a setting in which contrast plays an important part. The experient had been snow bound in Holland and needed to return back to Britain. The weather is described as “lousy” when he eventually gets a flight back to the UK. The weather was overcast, possibly foggy, and so nothing could be seen outside of the aeroplane. However, as the flight approached the south coast of Britain the weather cleared for a while and the passengers looked down on the chalk cliffs which were bathed in sunlight. His mood changes and he has an experience of wonder. This is triggered partly by his mood as well as the actual sight. He said that the sight was so “lovely and wonderful that you felt like ... I would describe that as very much a spiritual experience.” The sight is the medium that provides the experience. That was an experience of wonder. Clearly the actual situation was important. He had seen the cliffs many times before but on that occasion there was something special about them. This time he saw them in a different way, and the sight made a great impression on him. He describes this experience as spiritual because of the way it had affected him and there is also the implication that the other passengers in the plane had been affected in a similar way. They all made the effort to look at the sight, although we do not know if they had felt the same as *Mike*.



To see the natural beauty of the cliffs in the sunlight was described as “lovely”, where the word is used in a very deep sense, not as a throw-away word. The sight had the quality of loveliness, which he considers is a Christian concept. Therefore, it would include the aspect of love.

While this experience might be classified as a nature experience<sup>24</sup>, he does not seem to find the presence of the divine in the sight, or a feeling of being one with the universe. Therefore, it is not an experience of unity. Rather he remembers the experience as a feeling of wonder, beauty and awe. It is also true to say that he saw, or felt, something that he had never known before, even though he had seen the sight many times. It is a spiritual experience in that he has seen a spiritual aspect of the world around him, for the view from the aeroplane was not described in a physical way, but in the terms of spirituality. Certainly the experience made him feel good,<sup>25</sup> and so the consequence is the “feel good factor” and thankfulness.<sup>26</sup>

This feeling of goodness and well-being seems to be something that is common to all the experiences that *Mike* related. He particularly associates spiritual experiences with churches. The three experiences associated with church buildings (M.3.a, b, c.) all present spiritual experiences as a feeling of wonder, which is triggered in different ways. It might be the building itself, but more likely it is the history or associations with the place. They are impressive for him in their different ways. It was the building itself at the Church of the Sacré Coeur in Paris, the history attached to Park Street Congregational Church in Boston, USA, and the associations some churches have with events or situations. The importance of

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<sup>24</sup>Or Nature Mysticism according to PAFFARD M. (1976).

<sup>25</sup>It could be said to be a “regenerative” experience as defined by FRANKS DAVIS C. (1989), but not according to Donovan’s definition (DONOVAN P. (1979).)

the Cathedral in Nigeria is the association with the events of the Biafran war, and again the Church of the Sacré Coeur is impressive because it is such an international place. *Mike* cannot but fail to be impressed with all these places and I would suggest that he feels there is a mystical quality about them. If we are to analyse these places that he mentions, then we may find that he associates them with different situations of humanity. Boston with the struggle for freedom, Nigeria with the suffering of ethnic cleansing and Paris with the unity of people from all over the world in Christian worship. He is able to see, in the situations around him, a spiritual aspect. Therefore, although he would not use the term “mystical” for these experiences, they have this aspect.<sup>27</sup> The setting is the same as the medium and the experience ends with a profound sense of well-being.

The experience in the City Temple in London is of a slightly different nature, as this relates less to the building and more to the event that was taking place. In this case he remembers the preaching that drew him close to the presence of God. Although the association is with the preaching, as he was on his honeymoon we can also assume that the experience of his marriage, and the thoughts and emotions that are associated with this, were contributory to the experience. Through the events of the day his emotions, both physical and spiritual, must have been heightened, and so he was more receptive to the experience of feeling the presence of God. Although he does not describe this as the presence of God, saying only, “that was pretty close”, the implication is that this was what he was feeling. Through this worship, and in particular through the sermon, he could feel the divine. This was similar to the experience

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<sup>26</sup>Also because the experience was related to the contrast between the cloudy weather, and the brightness of the sight, LASKI M. (1980), would categorise it as “via Purgative” and possibly it had romantic aspects.

<sup>27</sup>LASKI M. (1980), and PAFFARD M. (1976), but as a sense of the “Presence of the Sacred” according to the classification of HAY D. (1990), or as “Numinous” by FRANKS DAVIS C. (1989).

he had at the Sacré Coeur. So the wonder that he feels he also associates with the nearness of the divine.

It may even be that this is the association with all the experiences that he recalls. The sense of wonder and awe is a mystical experience which he associates with the nearness of God. He does not feel these experiences are dramatic, but much more part of life and everyday events. Indeed he is able to say

“... but I don’t think a day goes by without finding something that is of spiritual importance.” (12)

“I mean we could ramble on all night. For me it happens on a daily basis. It doesn’t happen in a dynamic way - it may happen in a dynamic way but it doesn’t happen in a dramatic way.” (26)

Experiencing the Shroud in Turin Cathedral was an important event, which he describes as dynamic. However, we do not know what was dynamic about it. It could be a sense of history, or of mystery, or of the wonder of the presence of God in Jesus Christ.

The other spiritual experience mentioned is the Sunday Evening Worship (M.1.); although there are two parts to this. The first is that during this act of informal worship the subject chose a hymn to sing and to talk about. The hymn was of great significance for him and was a version of Psalm 84 which is a reflection of the presence of God. The psalm has the association of experiencing God in different places. Church buildings are often described as the “dwelling places of God” and so there is a clear association with some of the events that he described in church buildings. Second, the hymn enabled him to speak of another occasion that he considers a spiritual experience. This was a time in the country when the spiritual nature of the occasion gave him an assurance of his faith. Both the aspect of being

in the countryside and that he and his friend were lost, was the trigger for his friend to express his understanding that a person can have faith. The whole event is described as a spiritual experience so it is complex. It was, therefore, not so much being in the countryside, or the fact that they were lost, but that these things conspired to encourage a profound statement by the friend. In that situation he could understand why *Mike* could have faith in God. So the friend must have had a spiritual experience and revelation, and *Mike* had one as well. It was not a shared experience, in that they both experienced the same thing, but they both had experiences. The friend found that faith was a real thing for people, and *Mike* had a confirmation and encouragement of his faith.<sup>28</sup> Fitting this into our classification system: the purpose is emotion and revisited memory; the consequence is a conviction of faith and well-being; while the setting, trigger and medium are the worship, hymns and psalms, and memory, respectively.

The things that trigger experiences are clearly very varied and the respondent states that these can be anything. In the experiences described, there is an association with church buildings and the church setting, primarily the worship. When describing the feelings aroused in the churches in the USA, Nigeria, and Paris, the association is with worship as well as with the general context of the church. There is clearly an association with history and people. The stories of Yorkshire and Dover have the associations with the natural world. These have been triggers for the experiences, but these are only examples. What is true for all of them, with the possible exception of Yorkshire, is that they have been very personal triggers. It has been about personal moods and reflections. It was the connections with history in the USA and Nigeria that were important, but this was a connection that spoke personally to him. Yet

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<sup>28</sup>There is a “Romantic Emotional” aspect to the experience, but also, clearly, an element of “Revisitation of

while these buildings have been triggers, he also acknowledges that the buildings can also limit the experience (20).

In Yorkshire it was the words of his friend that spoke deeply to him. In no cases is there evidence that the experience of the presence of God was felt by any other people. While others may have looked at the white cliffs of Dover, we do not know if there was anything other than an appreciation of the beauty of the sight.

The experiences described are spiritual experiences for *Mike* because he has interpreted them in this way.<sup>29</sup> In this sense there is an important cognitive process involved in the experience. It is above all the interpretation of the event that makes them spiritual, for there is no concept of the involvement of the supernatural.

“I was able to describe several things that had reminded me through life, in terms of what I have drawn out of that particular experience.” (12)

They could be described as revelatory, particularly the event in Yorkshire, where he felt the experience made him aware of why he had faith, but the experiences do not appear to have any noetic purpose. The revelation is only the feeling of spiritual uplift or the feeling of the presence of God. *Mike*, denying any mystical or supernatural events in his life, understands these experiences as spiritual, because they speak to that part of his nature that he would describe as spiritual or religious. It is through reflection on the events that he can see their purpose and content.

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Memories” (PAFFARD M. (1976), and KELSEY M. (1975)).

<sup>29</sup>LEWIS H.D. (1959). *Our Experience of God*. London: George Allen and Unwin., considers that this is the only authentic understanding of spiritual experiences. They are physical experiences interpreted spiritually. Also cf. LASKI M. (1980).

## ***Faith***

The faith of the subject is an essential part of his life (32 - 34). He was brought up in the Christian faith and within the Congregational tradition. In general terms this has encouraged a liberal style of faith which is very tolerant of other's beliefs, both Christian and non-Christian. When confronted with the narrow attitudes of some Roman Catholic nuns and Priests, he can only reflect that "this is nuts - this is absolutely nuts" (46). He claims to have experienced different Christian traditions. Some of these would be acceptable to him, but some he finds unsuitable. He does not consider himself an "evangelical" and, while he can accept the different traditions including Pentecostalism, they would not be his choice of style of faith. He considers that the Christian faith holds the truth and that other religions are possibly "wrong" but he is willing to be persuaded otherwise.

"Whilst I am tempted to think them wrong, I have got to give them the benefit of the doubt." (32)

He could, therefore, be labelled as a pluralist. He believes that any person can be an agent of God, accepting people of other faiths and religions as part of the "ministry of all believers" (32).

This openness to people of other faiths is also an openness to speak about his faith and discuss religion with other people. The examples that he gave include discussions with a "Rasta" (42), Jews, Muslim and Sikh associates (32), and strangers on aeroplanes (48). However, it was interesting that in the whole of the interview he spoke little about the content of his faith. God was only mentioned once and Jesus Christ was not mentioned at all.

The overall impression is that the faith is a somewhat abstract and cognitive process. It is something that he can easily discuss, in theoretical terms, but how personal is it? There is a personal side to his faith in that he speaks of being spiritually moved by different experiences, mainly associated with church buildings. These experiences, being of a numinous nature rather than revelatory, suggest that his faith is of a more general nature and not specified by creeds and statements. Faith, for *Mike*, is very much a way of life; something that is lived out, discovered through other people. Faith is about getting alongside others and sharing with them in the joys and difficulties of life. It is being personable and a friend.

“I think it is to do with laughing with people and crying with them and doing whatever they want, basically.” (46)

Faith also involves worship. In this way it is dynamic for him. The questionnaire indicates that his faith is very strongly influenced by his spiritual experiences and the teachings and traditions of the Church (both registered as 10). The place of Scripture is less important and influential.

## ***God***

As we have already mentioned, *Mike* only used the word “God” once in the whole interview, and this was part of the expression “Word of God”, referring to the reading of Scripture in church worship. Therefore, it is difficult to attempt to analyse his understanding of God. When he marvels at the wonders of creation, either the cliffs of Dover or the Yorkshire moors, does he relate this wonder to the God of creation?

When asked if he had experienced the presence of “God or the Divine” he answered with the description of his experience at the City Temple.

“The night before we went on the grand tour we went to church at the City Temple, in London. I can’t remember who the preacher was. But that was pretty close. I felt pretty close in the Sacré Coeur in Paris which I find very different. There are many churches ... I have to say they are mainly confined to buildings. We went to Turin, many years ago, and went to see a copy of the Turin shroud and I found that to be pretty dynamic.” (20)

In using the term “pretty close” one can assume that he was feeling the presence of the divine, or that the particular experience was the closest he had come to it. Therefore, there was an understanding that one could feel the presence of God, but it would not have been a revelation but a general feeling, possibly involving the emotions. God, therefore, can be perceived as immanent, but in general God is presented more as a concept and one suspects that the transcendent nature of God is far more prominent in his faith than God’s immanence.

God is worshipped and God is served in the world. It is not only Christians who are the instruments of God, but anybody can fulfil that role. What, then, is the relationship with God, and how does God act in the world? These issues were not explored in the discussions. In the questionnaire he indicated that his understanding of God was influenced very strongly by his own experiences and the teachings and traditions of the Church, and less so by Scripture. Therefore, one can assume that his understanding of God is one that fits in with a more liberal faith, and this is consistent with the analysis of his faith and his understanding of the church.



## *The Church*

The church is very important for *Mike* and has always been a part of his life. He describes himself as having been a Christian for 57 years, and tells how his parents were regular church-goers, and that he was taken to church as a baby.

The Congregational tradition is also very important to him. He considers that this is the type of church that he is happy with, mainly because of its polity. He believes in the ministry of all believers (32) and considers that the Congregational tradition preserves this in the fullest way. Yet it is notable that he admits to not taking on the full responsibilities that this requires. Central to the polity of the Congregational tradition in England, is the “church meeting”, where members exercise their rights to decision making. He absents himself from this because he considers that they are frustrating.

“Yes the congregational tradition, for me, is still important. I am not a URC person really. I believe very strongly. I don’t go to church meetings because I find them frustrating. But I do feel very strongly about the congregational tradition. I have seen this here in the UK and I’ve been involved in the congregational tradition in the US. When I am working over there I go to the local congregational church.” (34)

One interprets, then, that he believes in the tradition because of its ideal, but he finds that in the local church it is not working as it should. Therefore, while he holds firmly to the ideal, he opts out of a total involvement in the system. Although the congregational form of church is important, he does not feel restricted to it. In describing his spiritual experiences he mentions the different churches that he has been to. These include Roman Catholic and Anglican. But he attended these for the purpose of worship. So in terms of worship he is much freer, and may be happy in many different traditions. Indeed he stated that:

“although I have a great affinity with the congregational background, to be honest, if the congregational, United Reformed Church ceased to exist tomorrow, I would just find another one to attend.” (81)

He is a regular attender at worship, but from the whole tenor of the discussion it was clear that he did not particularly enjoy the worship. Attendance has become a duty and a chore. But this attitude is clearly related to his post as organist. While many see it as an important part of worship, he sees it as very peripheral in the way that it is approached in his church. He feels he has little input into the worship, even when he plays the organ, and equates himself to little more than a mechanical means of music (50). Therefore, his task in worship, at the very least, distracts him from worshipping and, probably more likely, stops him from worshipping. It is not a good experience for him.

“I think one of the problems of being a church organist is that you are on duty in an extremely practical role and you don’t participate in the same way that other people do.” (50)

The important parts of worship are those directly related to the place of God in life and faith (prayer, thinking about God and life, and listening to God) and that worship is the place to meet God. It is also about the fellowship of people, and the rituals (e.g. Holy Communion). However, hymns, music and preaching are not important for *Mike*. This suggests that he wants worship to be the place of spiritual experiences and experiences of God, but the reality is often different.

But worship can be good, exciting and worthwhile. Most of the spiritual experiences that he spoke of occurred in places of worship and in acts of worship. He was prepared to drive a round trip of seventy miles to join an act of worship in the USA. This is not the action of a

person who finds no interest in worship. Rather it is the action of a person who is hoping to encounter some experience in the act of worship. And that is exactly what happened. One important aspect of this was that he was part of the congregation and not involved in providing the music. This was an essential aspect that enabled him to enjoy the church worship.

So while worship may be tedious, there can be times, given the right setting, when it is uplifting and worthwhile. Normally the worship is not considered a spiritual experience, when he is out of the normal routine, it clearly can be. The exception to this is the time of worship one evening when the minister was sick, and the congregation had to be responsible for leading the devotions. This was different from the normal pattern and it enabled both *Mike* and others who were meeting to be exposed to a new type of spiritual experience. The questionnaire shows that he feels worship is a spiritual experience (or perhaps, can be) but that it does not allow him to express his experiences. This may, also, be a reflection on his present feeling about his role in worship. But generally *Mike* feels that church is functional and, as such, is not a good encourager of spiritual experiences.

### ***Faith, Worship and Spiritual Experiences***

*Mike* is a person of faith who understands that faith is central to both his life and to life in general. The world is a material world but it is also a spiritual world, so the realm of faith cannot be ignored. But faith is largely a practical affair. Faith is lived out with other people and is part of the day to day events of life. Faith is something that can be discussed and shared with a variety of people. Underlying the understanding and outworking of faith is the

concept that all religions have a validity, although the Christian faith is the one that makes sense for the respondent. People of all faiths and religions can be the agents of God.

God is perceived largely as transcendent and the process of relating to God is primarily a cognitive one. God is understood through the teachings of the Church but also through the subject's own reflections and experiences. God is to be worshipped, but this can be more of a duty than a good experience, so worship is more about God than about the worshipper. Worship can be inspiring and uplifting and when this happens it may be possible to feel the presence of God. This is, however, a rare occurrence and God is not really encountered in the everyday.

What is encountered is a much more indescribable, spirituality. This is mostly expressed as a feeling of awe and wonder, and often related to the created world. This wonder can be found in church buildings in the awe of what they represent in terms of architecture, history or tradition. Spiritual Experience can be an exceptional event, but mostly it is an everyday occurrence. The spiritual is found in the material, and in the everyday events, not as special events, but more as a reflection and interpretation of everyday events. The spiritual then is perceived by those who have an appropriate background, to interpret events in a spiritual way. Spirituality is something that is lived out on a personal basis and, particularly, through relationships with other people, which are important. To get alongside people to share their joys and sorrows, even just to share a part of their life, is an expression of *Mike's* faith and, therefore, is central to his spirituality.

Being a practical person, and a business man, *Mike* approaches faith and spiritual experiences in a rational way. He cannot relate to Pentecostal experiences such as speaking in tongues, although he can understand what they are about. Yet he is also a musician who values greatly the church organ and what it represents. Religious music is important for him, but it is functional rather than mystical, and becomes spiritual only in as much as it enables people to worship. Spirituality is about living your life on the basis of one's faith, and spiritual experiences are about interpreting the world of events and opportunities given.

We have now completed the analysis of the people who were willing to discuss their experiences. *Betty, Hannah, Lucy* and *Ozzy* returned questionnaires that included a description of at least one spiritual experience. However they were not willing to be interviewed, so the information about the interviewees and the analysis of their spiritual experiences and faith are based solely on the details given on the returned questionnaires. From the previous work, with the respondents who were also interviewed, we have gained some knowledge about the relationship between spiritual experiences and the way that faith is expressed. So we can use these four questionnaires to estimate how the respondents might express their faith. First we look at *Lucy's* story.

### **6.7. Interpretation and Analysis: Lucy**

*Lucy* is in her middle seventies and a retired nurse. Originally from the Caribbean, she described her background as Christian, and she has been attending the Birmingham church for the past eighteen years.

## *The Spiritual Experiences*

*Lucy* considered that she has had occasional spiritual experiences and listed one. This experience (L.1.) was an answered prayer. The context was that she was anxious or afraid about the operation and unsure whether the operation would be the right course of treatment. Her uncertainty was due to the possibility that the operation might not be successful, so she prayed for the right decision, and by inference, gain peace of mind over the matter. In the morning the surgeon decided on a different course.

She felt the prayer was answered because she was not really strong enough for an operation, so an alternative course of treatment was carried out. Therefore, she has a belief in answered prayer which itself presupposes that she can communicate with God. Her spiritual experience will be classified as an “Answered Prayer”<sup>30</sup>, which we will call its purpose, with the consequence of contentment and loss of fear.<sup>31</sup> The setting of the spiritual experience is the hospital, and her concern over the pending operation is the trigger for the experience.

This is one example of a spiritual experience, but she indicated on the form that the experiences that she has had were when she was alone, at home, and in hospital. They all relate to times when she was in the context of prayer, worship, or thinking about God and life. Assuming the cited experience to be indicative, then, her spiritual experiences have been triggered by her concerns, and are in the context of prayer and worship. The experiences were when she was on her own, and so they are individual and private affairs. While church

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<sup>30</sup>According to HAY D. (1990).

<sup>31</sup>It is a “Confirming” experience, according to GLOCK C.Y. and STARK R. (1965), or a “Regenerative” experience according to FRANKS DAVIS C. (1989), and DONOVAN P. (1979).

worship is important for her, the indications on the questionnaire are that she does not associate spiritual experiences with church worship. Although she only answered part of question 13, about the relationship between spiritual experiences and worship, the parts she did answer show that she feels communal worship does not involve or encourage spiritual experiences (both given a value of 0). Yet at the same time, in question 11, she says that worship is important because it is a spiritual experience. While these two statements seem to be irreconcilable, there is an indication that the spiritual experience associated with worship is personal and individual, rather than communal. Worship can be the setting for an individual spiritual experience.

### ***Faith***

*Lucy* does not say how long she has been a Christian, but indicated that her cultural background is “Christian”. We may, therefore, assume that she considers that she has had a faith in God for a long time, and it is part of her life. How real this faith is from day to day we cannot assess. However, she has been attending the present church for 18 years and is about to become a member of the church. This indicates that she is taking a step of commitment to the local congregation as a response to her faith. It could be that her faith is more meaningful for her now than it used to be.

Her faith is influenced strongly by spiritual experiences, the teachings and traditions of the Church and Scripture, with Scripture being a little less influential. Within the limits of the questionnaire, we can only really discuss her faith in the light of her understanding of prayer.

Her faith and her experiences show her that prayer is effective. It is effective in that it can influence God, determine her life, and also influence the lives and decisions of others.

### ***God***

Through the description of the spiritual experience, it is clear that she believes in a God with whom she is able to communicate. God not only hears prayer and worship, but responds. Therefore, it is a two way communication and relationship. Further God is expected to be “at my side”, so God is, primarily, immanent and concerned for the individual. God is also the source of guidance and providence, as we see *Lucy* putting her trust in the action of God to determine the outcome of her operation. She is not simply looking for comfort and peace from God, but an action on his part to determine her future. She is also able to trust that the outcome is due to God’s providence. Having placed the issue of her operation in the “hands of God” she is willing to accept that the decision of the doctor is God’s prompting. Consequently, God not only influences and guides her, but also other people.

### ***The Church***

The church is important for worship. Worship is important in many ways. The fellowship is important, as are the experiential aspects such as Holy Communion, hymns, and meeting God. In this sense she can say it is a spiritual experience for her. Worship can provide the context and the trigger for her to experience God or spiritual matters, however, worship as such does not involve spiritual experiences or encourage them. Again this suggests that *Lucy* has the concept that spiritual experiences are personal and individual. The church and the



worship setting is also important as it provides the opportunity to think about the issues of life and eternity. As she does not feel that preaching and teaching are important, this again suggests that the church worship provides the atmosphere to help her to contemplate these things.

### ***Faith, Worship and Spiritual Experiences***

Spiritual experiences have been important for *Lucy*. They have influenced her faith and the way that she worships. But this influence is only one of many and the teachings of Scripture and the Church have also been important. Worship is important, for a number of reasons, but it is also the context in which she can meet with God. Worship and prayer is the context of her spiritual experiences, which are personal and individual. While communal worship will help her to reflect about life and feel that she can experience something of God, it is probably the private times of worship and prayer that are more likely to provide the trigger for her spiritual experiences.

All three aspects of the Christian life, spiritual experiences, the teachings and traditions of the Church, and Scripture, have helped her determine her understanding of God, the world, the way that she worships, and her relationship with others. She did not answer the questions about the influence on lifestyle, and this seems to be because she did not understand the concept of lifestyle. An annotation in question 10 relating to lifestyle indicates that she has poor health. Is it the case that she does not separate faith and lifestyle, or is it that she sees no relationship? The details of the spiritual experience suggest that God and her faith are very important aspects of her life, so her lifestyle is influenced by her faith.

## **6.8. Interpretation and Analysis: Ozzy**

Ozzy, a young man in his late thirties, became a Christian in his early teens, and has been attending the Birmingham church for six years. His attendance can be irregular because of his work as a musician and actor.

### ***The Spiritual Experiences***

Ozzy gave only an outline description on the questionnaire of the occasional spiritual experiences that he had had. The implication is that they are all similar in purpose and probably triggered in similar circumstances. The setting is one of “focusing on God and talking with him”, which may imply meditation and reflection, but it could also be prayer and worship, depending on the understanding and definition of these activities. The answers to questions two and three indicate that the experiences can come when he is in different places. It seems that the main activity that triggers them is when he is thinking about God, but that the thinking is more than a simple cognitive process. It is a process of wanting to communicate with God. Consequently the experiences take place in the setting of prayer, worship and thinking about God and life. They can take place when the person is alone or with others, but in all cases the experiences are personal and individual.

These spiritual experiences have a number of aspects to them. First, they are a means of communication with God, although this may be a one-way communication. This communication is initiated by the experient who is seeking to find the sense of God in his

life, or in a particular situation. He is putting himself into the context of a spiritual experience. In this sense he is wanting to generate the experience. This is an experience, but he describes it more in terms of the trigger and the setting for the experience, which is meditation and prayer.<sup>32</sup>

Second, when the exercise is successful, he does experience something of God. This is described as presence and guidance. So here we have a further aspect to the communication, in which God is felt to respond to the approaches of the experient. What is meant by presence and guidance is not elaborated upon, so we can only accept these terms as descriptive of the experience without knowing the actual content.<sup>33</sup>

The third aspect of the experience is that there is a sense of well-being which lasts for some period of time. This well-being is described as a “sense of boldness and power and inner strength.” It is not about knowledge of God, as such, so it is not a noetic experience primarily, but one that produces a sense of feeling good, and one that empowers him. What this empowerment is, again, is not described. It may be that the experient is looking for help for a particular situation, or it may be that he feels the strength for life in a more general way. In either case, the spiritual experience is one that may give some meaning and direction to life and so the consequence is power, strength and boldness.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, the experience is said to be quite overwhelming and emotional. This suggests that it is also a mystical experience in which the experient is, in some ways, caught up in the

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<sup>32</sup>The experience would be classified as “Meditation” by KELSEY M. (1975).

<sup>33</sup>Hay might describe this experience as “Presence of God” by HAY D. (1990).

fullness of God. This would be an experience that affects the emotions and so it probably feels as though the experience permeates much of the person's life, and possibly his body and mind. In this sense it may also be described as a unitive experience.

So, the experiences have many aspects to them. They are unitive, mystical, relational, and emotional. The experiences are triggered by the experient himself, who is in the frame of mind for an experience of God, through his prayer or reflective attitude at the time. It could be that he is generating the experience through this meditation and "focusing".

### ***Faith***

*Ozzy* says that he has been a Christian for 22 years, which probably means that he had some kind of conversion experience when he was 14 years old. A conversion experience would be consistent with the description of the spiritual experiences that he has had. Certainly it would be inferred that he made a positive decision at that age to be a Christian. We do not know if he had any previous influence from the church, or if he comes from a Christian family.

The Bible strongly influences his faith, lifestyle, and understanding of God, and significantly influences the way he worships and his understanding of the world. The influence of the church is slightly less, but still very significant. As he did not answer question 8, we do not know how much his spiritual experiences have influenced him, but from the description of them, one would assume they were quite important. It would be interesting to know why did he not answer this question.

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<sup>34</sup>It might be called a "Regenerative" experience by Donovan and Franks Davis (DONOVAN P. (1979).) and

## *God*

The description of the spiritual experiences indicates that God can be communicated with, and also communicates with the individual. There is a two way relationship between the person and the Divine. However, God is heard and sensed only when the person is in the right frame of mind. God, therefore, is understood in a personal way, and as relational. God can inspire, guide, and give a sense of well-being and fullness to the person. The relationship with God can, presumably, vary in intensity and content, but it can be profoundly mystical at times.

According to the questionnaire, *Ozzy's* understanding of God is influenced by the Scriptures very strongly, and also by the Church's teaching and tradition, strongly. We can assume that the influence of the Scriptures is very positive, but, as indicated by the annotation on *Ozzy's* questionnaire, that of the church can be negative. However, there is insufficient information to discover why it can be negative. As we have noted, it is interesting that *Ozzy* does not answer question 8, about the influence of his spiritual experiences. Yet from the description of the experiences one would expect that the influence was important. As he gains guidance, strength, and boldness from his encounters with God, surely these times must be very significant for him.

## ***The Church***

While the experiences described are related to meeting with God, and feeling a sense of his presence and guidance, these do not seem to be part of the expectation or experience that *Ozzy* has of worship. For him worship is about what the human does and not about what God does. The importance of worship is teaching, preaching, prayer, being with others, and thinking about God and life. It is not about listening to God or meeting God. Yet worship is a spiritual experience. It does not involve or encourage spiritual experiences. This suggests that the content of worship does not include people's spiritual experiences and there is little or no teaching about them. However, being there is an experience. Whether this is just a case that worship is a setting for personal and individual spiritual experience, or whether it is a more communal experience, we do not know. It is possible that the experient has had the sense of God both in times of communal worship and while he is on his own. The answers to question 2 suggest that this is the case.

## ***Faith, Worship and Spiritual Experiences***

The church is important for *Ozzy* as it provides worship and also is influential on his understanding of his faith, life, and God. However, the questionnaire suggests that the relationship between the church and spiritual experiences is that worship can provide the setting, but that the two are not integrated. Spiritual experiences are significant in his life as they provide a means of communication with God. This empowers him and gives him the strength to live his life. They must be significant for his faith, but perhaps he is unable to quantify or describe this relationship. We can infer from the description of the experiences

that he feels that he can be intimate with God, and that the sense of God's presence is something that can be very tangible for periods of time.

### **6.9. Interpretation and Analysis: Betty and Hannah**

The two respondents to the questionnaire, *Betty* and *Hannah*, both indicated that they had had occasional spiritual experiences, but neither described any that they had had. *Betty*, is in her late seventies and has been a Christian for twenty years. She associated her experiences with church. This was the only setting for her that had triggered such experiences, and they were associated with prayer and thinking about God. We may surmise, from the results of question 11, that the experiences were times when she had felt God speaking to her, for the importance of worship is thinking about God and listening to God. The encounters with the Divine, through church worship, may be noetic experiences.

*Betty* has a very positive understanding of the relationship between spiritual experiences and worship. She feels very significantly, that the worship she attends involves spiritual experiences, and is itself a spiritual experience. Worship also strongly encourages spiritual experiences and allows expression of them. One, therefore, might conclude that *Betty* does expect that worship will be a spiritual experience and that it is a place to find God, because the importance of worship is communication with God. As these experiences are in the setting of worship, they are spiritual experiences.

The spiritual experiences of *Betty* have been significantly influential on all aspects of her faith and life, but the teachings and traditions of the Church and Scripture have been slightly more

influential. Therefore, we can conclude that the experiences are to be put alongside the more cognitive aspects of faith, and do not stand out as more prominent in their influence.

*Hannah* is in her middle eighties, has been a Christian all of her life and a member of the Birmingham church for sixty-five years. She also appears to associate spiritual experiences with church worship as she indicates that the only place where they occur, for her, is at worship. We may consider that she means communal worship rather than private worship, as her experiences occur when she is with others. As with the previous respondent, *Hannah* does not describe the experiences, so we have no idea of what the experiences contain, or what the triggers might be. The setting is worship, so we can assume that the trigger may be worship also. As she did not complete question 13, it is difficult to know what relationship worship has with spiritual experiences, except that she feels that worship significantly involves spiritual experiences.

The important aspects of worship are prayer, being with others, Holy Communion, and music and hymns. This suggests that she is a person who is less concerned with the cognitive parts of worship but relates more with the symbolic and emotional. These are the experiential parts of the liturgy and so it is possible that these make up, or are part of, the spiritual experiences that she occasionally has. Being relational and emotional aspects of worship, *Hannah* may be telling us that hymns, music, and Communion may be the triggers for experiences. As these experiences occur in church she will be describing them as spiritual.

Further *Hannah* is willing to attribute much influence to these experiences. Of the three questions 8, 9 and 10, the most fully answered was question 8 (about the influence of spiritual



experiences), and the influence on her faith, worship, style of church and lifestyle are very significant. She was less sure about the influence of the teachings and traditions of the Church and was unable to assess the influence of Scripture on her life.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **DIVERSE UNDERSTANDINGS: THE RELATIONSHIP OF FAITH AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES**

## **7. DIVERSE UNDERSTANDINGS: THE RELATIONSHIP OF FAITH AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES**

### **7.1. Significant aspects of Spiritual Experiences**

Through the analysis and classification of the spiritual experiences, we have been able to analyse the different understandings of God, the different types of faith that the individuals have expressed, and have looked at their individual relationship with the church. It is now appropriate to draw some conclusions about the relationship between faith, spirituality, and spiritual experiences.

The in-depth analysis of seven people's understanding of their spiritual experiences and reflections on their faith has helped us to see that there is a great variety of experiences and understandings in a small group. To a large extent the findings from the questionnaires have been substantiated by the discussions, but the discussions have enabled a greater analysis of the material. They have supplied us with data to examine, individually, the influence of spiritual experiences on faith and spirituality, and they can be used to explore the missiological significance of spiritual experiences.

Analysing the spiritual experiences according to the fivefold classification devised, we can now compare and summarise the findings. The classification of the sixteen spiritual experiences described by seven of the participants, either on the questionnaire or in the discussions, has yielded the following data which is also tabulated in the Table 6.

**Table 6**

		Experience	Setting	Trigger	Medium	Purpose	Consequence
Annabel □	1	Healing as a result of prayer	Church worship	Concern for friend	Prayer	Answered prayer	Contentment & healing
	2	Finding the medal	Hostile friends	Concern for friend (lost medal)	Prayer	Answered prayer	Faith, justification, conversion
	3	The presence of grandmother	Retreat week	Smell	Smell (or memory)	Presence of dead	Assurance
	4	Worship	Church worship	Sharing & song	Song	Close relationship	Acceptance
Carrie □	1	The Dream	Home	Concern for husband (& self)	Dream (?visitation)	Communication	Assurance & confidence
	2	Hymns & prayers	Church	Worship	Hymns	Assurance	Contentment
Eric □	1	Junior Church & BB preparation	Home	Lack of inspiration	Unexpressed prayer	Inspiration	Confidence & ability
	2	The preacher	Sermon	Preacher	Sermon	Inspiration	Challenge
Felicity □	1	The anger of death	Church worship	Hymns & music	Worship & people	Presence & release	Resolution
	2	The Discussion	Work	Subject of the discussion	Discussion	Presence of God	Well-being
	3	Villa Park	Worship	Song	Song	High emotion	Well-being
Lucy	1	The operation	Hospital	Pending operation	Prayer	Answered prayer	Contentment, loss of fear
Mike □	1	Sunday evening worship	Church worship	Hymn & Psalm	Memory	Revisited memory	Confirmation of faith
	2	Cliffs of Dover	Aeroplane	Contradictory emotions	Nature	Nature mysticism (awe & wonder)	Well-being, thankfulness
	3	Church buildings	Church	? Preaching, ?history	The Place	Awe & wonder ?mystical	well-being
Ozzy	1	God's presence	?	Meditation	Meditation, prayer	Presence, guidance	Power, strength, boldness

**Summary of Classification of Spiritual Experiences According to the Fivefold Classification**

## ***Setting***

The setting for the spiritual experiences is the place or event at which the experiences occurred. In the sixteen cases, nine different settings were delineated as follows:

**Table 7**

<b>Setting</b>	<b>Occurrences<sup>1</sup></b>
Church Worship	5
Sermon	1
Church Building	1
Retreat Week	1
Home	2
Work	1
Aeroplane	1
Hospital	1
Hostile friends	1

**Settings**

From this it is clear that the most common, though not the majority of, settings are related to the church and church worship. Six events took place during worship and one (*Mike*) while in a church building, which included the worship but also included the influence of the building itself. The retreat week may be classified as a religious setting as the person was in a particular spiritual context. Otherwise from the list we can deduce that a spiritual experience can take place anywhere.

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<sup>1</sup> The figures represent the number of occasions this is found in the spiritual experiences analysed.

## ***Trigger***

The triggers delineated seem to follow a similar pattern to the settings as we classify them as follows<sup>2</sup>:

**Table 8**

<b>Trigger</b>	<b>Occurrences</b>
Hymns and songs	4
Preaching	3
Worship	1
Meditation	1
Concern for others	2
Smell	1
Discussion	1
Operation	1
Emotions	1
History	1
Inspiration	1

## **Triggers**

The most common trigger among this group is hymns and songs, which together with preaching and worship produces the largest group of triggers. All these are related to public worship. If we add to this group the one instance of meditation then we find that 8 triggers are related to worship. Most of the other triggers seem to relate primarily to the individual, and his or her concerns and anxieties. This type would include operation, emotions, history, and inspiration. Only one trigger appears to relate to the senses (smell). So broadly we have two types of triggers, those related to worship and those related to concern, anxiety, and the like.

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<sup>2</sup> We have delineated 17 triggers rather than 16 as *Mike's* spiritual experience of Church Buildings is a combination of experiences.

## ***Medium***

Again the classification of the medium of each spiritual experience gives us a similar pattern to those we have found in the setting and the trigger. Here we find that worship related mediums are the majority, although not all of them are in the context of public worship. Indeed, in all but one of the cases where prayer is the medium, they were in the private and individual context. This leaves us with five of the mediums in the context of public worship. So while this is not the majority, it is still one of the two largest groups. The other mediums are quite diverse, and illustrate the vast range that are possible.

**Table 9**

<b>Medium</b>	<b>Occurrences</b>
Prayer	5
Songs	3
Sermon	1
Worship	1
Smell	1
Discussion	1
Memory	1
Nature	1
Place	1
Dream	1

**Mediums**

## ***Purpose***

When we come to summarise the purpose of the experiences we have the following descriptions:

**Table 10**

<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Occurrences</b>
Presence	4
Answered Prayer	3
Awe and Wonder	2
Inspiration	2
Revisited Memory	1
Assurance	1
Communication	1
Relationships	1
High Emotion	1

**Purpose**

The largest group is that the people felt a presence, which can be described as supernatural and external. One of these is the presence of the grandmother, and the others are the presence of the divine in some form. The next largest group is answered prayer, two in the context of healing and the other asking for a help with finding the medal, which could be said to be miraculous. All the purposes are personal, as would be expected.

***Consequence***

When we come to the consequences, we find that they seem to be related to faith, which is private and individual. The descriptions are as follows:



**Table 11**

<b>Consequence</b>	<b>Occurrences</b>
Well-being	4
Contentment	3
Assurance	2
Confirmation of faith	2
Acceptance	1
Confidence	1
Challenge	1
Resolution	1
Power	1

**Consequences**

Looking at the descriptions of the consequences of the experiences it can be seen that generally the spiritual experiences described in the case study have produced a sense of well-being and contentment in the experiencers. Well-being is the largest group and contentment the next, but assurance, confirmation of faith, acceptance and confidence can be added to the list as similar consequences. There is only one experience that led to challenge. One experience led to the resolution of a problem that was personal and perhaps psychological, while it could be said that a number of experiences resulted in the resolution of problems, such as healing, and help. Although it is not generally expressed, there is the implication that the spiritual experiences also had the result of confirmation or development of faith. This is due to the experiencers' sense that the well-being and contentment arose from the feeling that God had intervened and helped the experiencer.

## **7.2. Worship and Experiences**

In all three cases of setting, trigger and medium, we find that the largest group is worship related. It is the most common element in these classifications, but only in the case of the

medium can we say that it represents the majority. This indicates that the context of worship, both public and private, is significant for the spiritual experiences of the people in this case study. The most common consequences of the spiritual experiences are feelings of contentment, assurance, well-being and acceptance which led to some development, or at least confirmation, of the faith of the individual. The purpose of the experiences is more variable, but answered prayer and the feeling of an external non-physical presence were the most common. Finally, while the triggers often related to the worship context, public or private, there was also a significant element of the triggers being personal issues and concerns or events involving other people, actions, or places. The triggers and the consequences are possibly the most “internal” aspects of the experiences, while the other aspects, setting, medium, and purpose involve the external. In the case of the purpose, the examples indicate that it involves the recognition of an external influence or presence on the experient.

These conclusions appear to be consistent with the conclusions from the analysis of the questionnaires, which indicated that the religious context, whether private or public, was significant for spiritual experiences. According to the questionnaires, this context, including the importance of the teaching and traditions of the Church and the Scriptures was influential in determining the spirituality of the people in the case study. It was also noted that for those who had responded positively to the questionnaire as having had spiritual experiences, worship was considered to be more of a spiritual experience than those who had responded negatively. For the experients, worship was important for prayer, meeting with God, and a place of spiritual experiences. The non-experients emphasised the social aspect, hymns and music as the more important parts of worship. So while worship at this particular

congregation may not be seen to encourage and involve spiritual experiences very much, it does have its place in the context of spiritual experiences.

What is less clear is the relationship between expressed faith in terms of worship style and experience. Within the one congregation, sharing the same worship style and ecclesiology, there are a variety of spiritual experiences. It would be reasonable to assume from this that the spiritual experiences are not particularly associated with the worship and the expectations of the church, but are more associated with the individual. This does not deny that many of the experiences are associated with worship, and that worship is often the trigger, the setting, and the medium of the experiences.

It is clear that there are two traditions within the congregation. These are the Caribbean contribution and the traditional English congregationalism, and these two reflect different spiritualities. However, those who attend the church do so out of choice and they must feel happy to continue to do so. Those who have felt unhappy with the worship will, presumably, have left and gone elsewhere. In discussion, the minister of the congregation<sup>3</sup> explained that he felt that while everyone seemed to be happy with the worship, it does not mean that it expresses everybody's spirituality. He feels that there is a large gap between the impact of spiritual experiences of the individual and that expressed in worship. Indeed he felt that it would be impossible to make Sunday worship an expression of all the individual spiritualities. Therefore, there seems to be little space in worship to express and explore the various spiritual experiences and so, while worship may be a spiritual experience for some, it is mainly the place where God is experienced through the Word and the liturgy.

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<sup>3</sup> The informal discussion was held after the initial analysis of the reports of Spiritual Experience and the discussions with respondents with a view to evaluate the findings.

Yet it needs to be noted that two of the respondents talked of a time of worship that they had shared in and had cited it as a spiritual experience.<sup>4</sup> *Annabel* felt that it was an experience of friendship and acceptance and also perhaps something of the mystery of faith. *Mike* found it to be a time when he could reflect on his memories which were related to a time of nature mysticism. Clearly there was a real feeling of a spiritual experience taking place that evening, but the two expressed it in different ways. Does this indicate that, at all levels, an experience is always related to, interpreted through, and understood in the particular context of the individual, which will include their own personalities, faith background and theology? If so, it suggests that all experiences will be different and contextual. Finally it needs to be noted that the influence of formal worship can be ambiguous and that the influence of private worship may be more significant. The data suggests that private worship, prayer and meditation, indicating a person's piety, will have a significant influence on spiritual experiences, and the understanding of them.

### **7.3. Faith and Experiences**

#### ***Annabel***

For respondent *Annabel* faith is prior to the experiences. Indeed they are initiated through the fact of her faith and her understanding of God. In the experience of praying for healing, the whole experience is infiltrated with her faith. The setting is within the religious context of worship, where she has an opportunity to pray. This indicates that it is her faith that leads her to the spiritual experience. The trigger, being her concern for her friend, is related to her

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<sup>4</sup> This was the informal evening worship when the minister was ill.

understanding that friendships are important. This may be part of her faith, but it could simply be normal human anxiety. The medium, being prayer, however, is again a religious act, and expresses her faith that God can be called on to respond. So she approaches the prayer with the expectation of results. The purpose and the consequence of the experience are the feelings that God has answered prayer, so that she is content and her faith has been assured. The spiritual experience is not so much about the person who has been healed, but about her own faith and that it is vindicated through the answered prayer. In this sense, then, her faith is confirmed and strengthened, though not necessarily changed, through the experience.

A similar process is found in the second example of the experience of the lost medal. It is her faith that leads her into the situation of being prepared to look for the medal. Her faith is prior to her experience and it arises out of it. Again the setting and the trigger are about her faith, but also her understanding of friendship. It is her concern for her friend who is in crisis because of the lost medal. That in itself is related to religion as the medal was from the Pope. But the event is not so much about the girl's faith but about the faith of *Annabel*. Here is the opportunity to express her faith and, perhaps, also to defend her faith in the face of hostility, or at least, cynicism. The experience being answered prayer is vindication of her faith stand, and indicates that the medium of prayer is effective. Again God is there to be called upon to act.

Through these two spiritual experiences we see that the expressed faith and the experience are interrelated. The experiences reinforce her understanding of God, and her relationship to God. God responds when called upon. Her faith is prior to the experiences, but we may also

conclude that the faith is confirmed and strengthened through the process. While the experiences are not, for her, conversion experiences leading to a new understanding of faith, the event of the finding of the lost medal is a conversion experience for one of the participants. So viewing the experience from that perspective, we would probably have an account of a conversion experience.

The experience of the presence of the grandmother is related to faith in a different way. Here, *Annabel* is in a time of faith crisis, following the death of her grandmother. She expressed that while she was meeting death every day in her work, she was afraid of how she might act in the face of the death of somebody close to her. She had to face her fear, and this experience is related to that necessity. The crisis was both about how she might react, and also what it might do to her expressed belief in life after death. She constantly assured the relatives of the deceased patients that life continued after death, but this was largely an intellectual assent to belief. Now she had to face it herself.

“I honestly thought in the back of my mind, “I won’t think that, I will just be bereft and won’t be able to think of Grandma anywhere else because I will just lose my faith - and I didn’t. I just felt lots of reassurance that my faith was really important to me then.” “It was a time when I found my faith.” (32, 36)

So in this example we see that the whole experience is within the faith setting. She is on the retreat week because she is searching for faith and reassurance, the purpose of the experience is a proof of life after death, for her, and the trigger is the crisis of faith. She is reassured, her faith is confirmed and strengthened, she finds that she has not lost her faith and her expressed beliefs are confirmed. In this case then, the experience comes out of faith, but faith is also the result of the experience.

In the fourth experience, the whole event is in the context of a service of worship, so faith is again prior to the experience. Faith is also part of the setting, the medium, and the trigger, whether that be her faith or the faith of the people taking part in the worship and the singing. As friendship and acceptance are important for her, this experience reinforces her beliefs and shows that people are accepted in the group.

In *Annabel* we have a clear relationship between expressed faith and spiritual experiences. Faith is prior to all the experiences but it is also confirmed and strengthened through them. The process appears to be cyclic or a spiral, as faith enables the spiritual experiences to take place, while they in turn vindicate and develop faith.

### *Carrie*

The most significant spiritual experience in analysing *Carrie* is the Dream. This is set within a crisis situation of the husband's terminal illness, but the real crisis is for the respondent herself. She is living with the anxiety and possible guilt that she is not looking after her husband well enough and that she might be being selfish in her relationship to him. It has to be noted, however, that in the discussions there was no implication that this was the case. However, her concern was that she would fail in the task. This is partly a reflection on her theology and understanding of God. God is perceived as the righteous "ruler of heaven and earth" and, therefore, as a judging God. The spiritual experience, then, arises out of this anxiety of hers, that she might be failing her husband and God. The assurance that she is doing well comes in the dream or the visitation. Faith, then, is very much the context of this spiritual experience. It is her faith that is making her anxious and it is her faith that allows

her to be assured. She has a daily relationship with God through prayer and seeking guidance, and this dream is consistent with her faith. Faith is related to the setting and the trigger, but it is more clearly exhibited in the purpose and consequence of the spiritual experience. Although she describes the words of comfort and encouragement as from an angelic figure, she implies that ultimately they are from God. Her faith is upheld, as she knows that she can communicate with God, but now finds that God can communicate with her in a very dramatic way. Her faith and her actions are strengthened and her life is given reassurance.

Through the experience *Carrie* has a new understanding of God, in that she understands that God only expects her to do what she can. If she does her best, she has not failed. Faith is an integral part of her life and her spirituality is expressed in daily prayer and seeking for guidance. God is real to her each day, but the experience shows a new reality. The experience comes as a result of her struggling with her spirituality (faith and action) and results in a deepening understanding of that faith. So, again in this example we find that faith and experience nourish each other. Faith is prior to the experience but is also a consequence of it.

### ***Eric***

Exploring the faith and the experiences of *Eric* we find ourselves encountering a different type of spiritual experience to the previous two respondents. While their experiences are very dramatic, the experiences of *Eric* are more amorphous. Yandell<sup>5</sup> might consider them to be

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5 YANDELL Keith E. (1994). *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



subject/aspect experiences, but the respondent implies that they are in some way an encounter with the divine (the other). The faith expressed by *Eric* is consistent with the type of experience he relates. He does not expect dramatic encounters with God, but understands that God works in a more anonymous way, through thought and through action. The purpose of all the experiences related is inspiration, but this inspiration is associated with God. All the experiences are broadly in the context of faith. The inspiration needed in the first two examples is for religiously related activities (Sunday School and Boys' Brigade meetings), and the inspiration gained in the third example is through worship. In this way the setting for the first two experiences is faith related, and the third is a religious activity. The trigger is that *Eric* requires "outside" help and guidance which he implies comes from God. The consequences of the experiences are either that he is given the gifts, skills, and ideas for his meetings or that he is challenged by the words of the preacher.

His experiences, then, are consistent with his expressed faith. He understands that God works in hidden ways, through people and through inspiration, and his experiences of God are exactly these. It is difficult in this case to assess the state of influence of faith and experience. Which influences which? What seems to be clear is that the experiences do not change his faith or his understanding of God, but at the most, reinforces his beliefs in the way that God works, and the way in which his faith should be expressed.

### ***Felicity***

*Felicity* understands that spiritual experiences are associated with the Church or religion. Two of her experiences are in these settings so are clearly related to faith issues. The first

takes place in the church and the second at a religious meeting in a football ground. In the most dramatic experience, related to the death of her father, the trigger, as well as the setting and the medium, is the worship. And into this situation she feels that there is a divine presence and intervention. This is experienced both through her own emotions, but also, significantly for her, through the actions of other people. Like *Eric*, *Felicity* declares that her understanding of God is that God works through other people, situations, and actions. So she is able to see the divine at work in events and situations. She does not want to accept that God is immanent in a more dramatic way. Yet she expresses that she felt a presence during this experience. Indeed she says that there is a presence in all the experiences that she relates.

In the experience of the discussion at work, she feels that God is at work through the discussion, and so is present there. This is her “liberal” theology. Yet at the same time she acknowledges a presence in a different and more tangible way in the other experiences. So *Felicity* has something of a paradox in her faith that she does not seem to be able to deal with. She seems to keep this more tangible experience of God separate from her general understanding.

So faith is important for *Felicity* and it underlies the spiritual experiences that she has. Faith is prior to the experiences, but, although she does not seem to want to acknowledge it, the experiences are offering her a development of her understanding of how God works and, therefore, a development of her faith. Perhaps, she cannot respond intellectually to this aspect of her experiences. So in this example we have a different relationship between faith and spiritual experiences. Her expressed faith is not so consistent with her experiences. She wants to interpret the experiences in the light of her faith, but it is clear that they do not

totally fit together, so it appears that in reflecting upon the spiritual experiences, she selects those aspects that support her beliefs.

### *Mike*

The experiences that *Mike* related have a purpose of awe and wonder. This is specifically true for the “White Cliffs of Dover” and the “Church Buildings” experiences, and to some extent it is involved in the revisited memories of wonder in the other experience. The consequences of the experiences are largely the production of feelings of well-being and contentment. As such one may ask whether these have much to do with faith. Are the experiences faith related or are they simply human experiences that anyone, who has faith or not, might experience? Certainly there are examples of similar experiences related by people who would claim to have no faith or religion. However, *Mike* does express his faith in the discussion and the questionnaire and so one feels that implied within the descriptions of the spiritual experiences is the involvement of faith and the influence of God.

Clearly two of the experiences are related to faith, in that church buildings provide the setting, and the contents of the worship supply the trigger for the experiences. In the case of the church buildings experience the building is the medium of the experience of awe and wonder. It is his faith that has brought him into the context for the spiritual experiences.

The “White Cliffs of Dover”, however, does not seem to have a clear association with faith. The experience could be called a Nature Mysticism, but purpose, setting, and trigger seem to be more about his personal moods than faith. In the description of the experience there is

nothing that expresses faith or beliefs. The phenomenon is important to him and perhaps he does relate the sense of wonder to the grandeur of God, but this is only speculative. Consequently, in this case, the relationship between expressed faith and spiritual experiences is not easy to assess or describe, but the lack of specific association of his experiences with the Divine or aspects of faith is consistent with the way he expresses his faith in everyday life.

### *Lucy*

The scenario of the operation indicates clearly that, for *Lucy*, faith is prior to the experience and in fact is inherently part of the process of the experience. It is her beliefs that enable her to pray for a good outcome of the decision to operate or not. Her faith underlies the medium, purpose, and consequence of the experience, as she believes that God is instrumental in the decision making process. The spiritual experience strengthens her faith, although one suspects that this is because it confirms her own wishes, for the implication from the story is that she did not really want to undergo the by-pass operation.

### *Ozzy*

Faith is essential to all aspects of the spiritual experiences related by *Ozzy*. It is his faith that puts him in the setting for the experience, although we do not know the physical setting for the experiences. The results of the meditation and prayer are experiences that have the purpose of guidance and the presence of the divine and provide a consequence of power, boldness, and strength. Faith is clearly prior to the experience, but in a sense the experience also leads to new dimensions of faith for the experient. Presumably the experience itself

actually extends for the length of time that he feels bold and powerful. His faith, which is very much an individual faith and not strongly related to religion and the church, is strongly related to the spiritual experiences and the sense of God's presence.

#### **7.4. The Priority of Faith**

The conclusion from this analysis is that the overall situation appears to be that expressed faith is strongly linked with the type of spiritual experience encountered, and the understanding of it. Where a faith understands that the actions of God can be more dramatic, the spiritual experiences appear to be more dramatic. This is the case with *Annabel*, *Carrie*, *Lucy* and *Ozzy*. When God is understood to be active in a different way, not necessarily less dynamic, but certainly less dramatic, then the experiences find the experiences of God more in everyday events and in the words and actions of other people. This seems to be the case for *Eric*, *Felicity* and *Mike*, although it is noted that *Eric* seems to have more dramatic encounters with the divine, but does not want to interpret them in this way.

In all of the examples, faith appears to have been prior to any experience. The people involved in the project all had a Christian upbringing of one sort or another, so that they have always lived with faith being part of their lives. As such they have all had, at least, an inherited faith, but also have made that faith their own in their own ways. They have all chosen to continue to express that faith through the particular church tradition and worship. This indicates that they have made a personal choice to continue in their faith. For some that upbringing was more formal and conservative; for others it was in a tradition that has been labelled as "liberal Protestant". This, too, seems to have had an influence on the type of

spiritual experiences they have, and expect to have. *Annabel* was brought up with the understanding that God will act if called upon, and, indeed, that is her experience. *Eric*, however, understands that faith is about serving others, and so experiences God in other people's action and in his own action for others. God is found to inspire and guide in subtle rather than dynamic ways.

The expressed understanding of, and relationship with, God also illustrates the influence of culture and background on the type of spiritual experience encountered and the relationship between faith and experience. *Carrie*, *Lucy* and *Ozzy* all mention God (or Lord) in the descriptions of their spiritual experiences and they all had dramatic spiritual experiences. *Carrie* used the term Lord and the name God more than any of the other respondents in the discussion. *Lucy* and *Ozzy* did not participate in the discussion part of the project so we do not know how much they used the name God in conversation. All of them have a Caribbean Christian background which is, as mentioned, more likely to be more disciplined and conservative. The respondents *Annabel*, *Eric*, *Felicity* and *Mike* are all white British from a "liberal Protestant" background. They use the name God far less frequently and seem more reluctant to refer to the Divine Being. *Mike* only used the name once, and that was in reference to Scripture as the Word of God. *Eric* and *Felicity* have less dramatic experiences and so this correlates with their background. We have seen that *Felicity* seems to be struggling with the conflict between her inherited faith and her more dramatic experiences. *Annabel* is an interesting case, as she has two parts to her faith background, the liberal Protestant from her Father and the Roman Catholic influence from her grandmother. Hence she is willing to acknowledge the dramatic encounters with God, influenced by her

grandmother, but at the same time her conversation reflects the other aspect of her faith tradition.

Therefore, it is clear that there is, in general, a correlation between the expressed faith of the individual and the type of experience that they have of God, or the divine action. However, what is unclear is how much the understanding of God and faith is due to the experiences and how much the experiences are tempered by the understandings and beliefs. The best description is that they are interrelated and mutually encouraging and developing. It was described earlier as a spiral process; experience feeds faith and faith feeds experience. In all the examples of spiritual experiences it has been shown that faith was prior to the experience. None of them are “classic” conversion experiences, although some of them do lead to a new or developed faith. However, it is noted that all those taking part in the project are adults with a long history of faith and experience, and so it can only be concluded that faith was prior to these experiences and not that it is prior to all experiences.

### **7.5. Spirituality and Experiences**

We have seen that faith is strongly related to spiritual experiences, and that there is a reciprocal relationship between the type of faith and the type of experiences encountered. The case study has given us a range of experiences and a range of faith types. There is also a range of expressed spirituality.

All of the respondents appear to have had a concept of God and all seem to be able to indicate that their spiritual experiences have included an encounter with God, whether this is more or

less dynamic. So all have felt the presence of God and all have felt that this has been the presence of “an other” rather than an internal presence and feeling. Although for *Eric* this is less clear as his experiences are those of inspiration. The clearest examples are *Annabel* and *Carrie* who encounter God as object rather than subject.

These two respondents also stand out from the others in their appreciation of the supernatural or “other worldly” aspects of life. *Annabel* understands that there is another realm of life, as she encounters the presence of her grandmother. This experience assures her of life after death and so confirms that there is more than the physical, material realm of existence. Hence *Annabel*’s faith deals with the higher or eternal nature. This is also the case for *Carrie*. She is willing to acknowledge the existence of angels, which presupposes a belief in another realm of existence and another dimension to life. In the discussion there is an implied belief in the reality of heaven and hell, and the nature of God as judge. She also has an understanding of Satan. Indeed we can say that her life is orientated towards “eternal life” and the reality of the spiritual realm.

For the other three main respondents the focus of life and spirituality is the world around them. Reality is about daily life, and there seems to be little reference to the spiritual realm, heaven and hell, or the supernatural. God is seen in the world, nature and other people, and this is also where they receive their stimuli for faith. For *Eric* we might say that heaven is found on earth through the “good” in other people. For *Felicity* this might be through human relationships.



None of the respondents express an encounter with God that might be negative, frightening, or disturbing. Therefore, we see nothing expressed of the “tremendum” or “august”<sup>6</sup> nature of God, the *via negativa*, or “the dark night of the soul”. It may simply be that, had the respondents had such experiences, they did not classify them as spiritual experiences.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively it may be that the experiences that they are looking for are to do with the generation of well-being. We have seen that this is a major component of the experiences related, and in all cases the experiences have resulted in some sort of assurances, well-being, and contentment. But what we do not appear to have is consequences from the experiences that have resulted in dramatic spiritual development, change, or personal growth. Again, the closest we get to this aspect is in the examples of *Annabel* and *Carrie*. Although they would not use the term “conversion experience”, both have, in a sense, had something of a conversion experience, as they are challenged to new understandings. *Annabel* is challenged in her lifestyle and in her understanding of elements of transcendence and *Carrie* in her approach to life. *Eric* is also challenged at times through preaching and worship. Of all the respondents only *Carrie* speaks of guilt and possible fear, but this is assuaged through her experience. All express that they feel contented in their lives and *Carrie* has a particularly strong sense of this.

The strongest element of the experiences that influence their life and lifestyle is that they feel blessed by the experiences. For example, *Eric* feels the Holy in certain church buildings and settings, and although he does not use the term blessing, this is a possible description of the

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6 OTTO Rudolf (1950). *The Idea of the Holy: an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*. (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

7 P1 (pilot study) had a sense of the majesty of God, and the tremendous responsibility being laid on her in a particular situation. She described it as “totally terrifying”, yet it was not a negative experience and it gave her the courage to continue her task.

feelings. The others also have something of this, but would speak more of a good feeling or well-being.

In all cases, with the possible exception of *Eric's* experiences of inspiration, we can say that all experiences are of "an other" and that the experience is from outside of the self. The concept of inspiration, however, is more ambiguous and this could be either, or both, an experience of the inner self and the "other". Yet, generally speaking, the experiences do not express any feeling that the experiences were from within the self, or that they were looking to themselves for the experiences. Rather they are from the Divine. They all indicated that spiritual experiences have been important in their lives, and we have seen how faith and experiences are linked. But they have all seen this as the work of God and not as an inner development. Where well-being has been achieved this is through the encounter with God in whatever form that has taken. The experiences of *Annabel*, *Carrie*, and *Felicity* may be described as involving an encounter with the inner self, but this has only been part of the experience. God, whether expressed or not, is not excluded from the experiences and the purposes and consequences of them.

Therefore, we can conclude that the spirituality of the people in this survey is related to their spiritual experiences. Those who have a greater sense of the transcendent have a spirituality that is more orientated towards the spiritual realm, while those who have a greater focus on the immanence of God have a more world orientated worldview, that relates to other people and relationships. Yet all experience God working in the lives of others, and in their own lives, to bring them contentment, peace, well-being, or a strengthening of faith. Therefore, there is a strong element of the immanence of God in all the experiences. This analysis is,

obviously, about trends within the group rather than a distinct classification. However, it does enable us to consider how the spiritual experiences, expressed faith, and spirituality relate within the church, and also to the context of the contemporary culture.

## **7.6. Spiritual Experiences and Mission**

Finally, we can also make some assessment of the relationship between spiritual experiences and concepts of mission. Here we are understanding that mission is both the work of God and the response of people.

The general observation is that God does work through spiritual experiences and through them is active in the world. Because the spiritual experiences reported in this study are individual and personal, then this is seen to be the way that God is at work. The mission of God is to the individual and, generally, this provides the ability to cope with life and with life's crises. For *Annabel*, *Carrie*, *Eric* and *Lucy*, God works in them to enable them to deal with the crises at hand. *Mike* and *Felicity*, however, have a different viewpoint and consider that God works in other people and through nature, awe, and wonder. They perceive that other people are influenced by these experiences and so God works in other people, even those who do not have faith.

Turning to the second aspect of mission, the actions of the experiencers, we find some evidence that spiritual experiences lead to action. In nearly all cases, the consequence of the spiritual experiences were personal. One clear example of a missiological outcome of the spiritual experience is the event of the finding of the lost medal. However, *Annabel* has already

witnessed to her faith by persuading the other girls to look for the medal, and so the experience has a missiological setting. *Carrie* feels that her task is to “do her best”. *Eric* has a clear understanding that the Christian task is primarily to help other people and “to make a difference” in the world. *Felicity* feels that God works through other people, and this motivates people to be concerned for others. Finally, *Mike* puts a high priority on relationships.

What we have called the consequence of the spiritual experience has not particularly led to action for others, but it has been a motivator for the individual. They have, however, indicated the way that God acts for each person, and this, as we have seen, is in conformity with their faith. We can also now add that the way that God is perceived to work is part of this relationship with spiritual experiences.

The findings of this case study have been significant in understanding how spiritual experiences are related to expressed faith for people in a particular church. The next task is to explore how these findings compare with other studies of spiritual experiences and faith, undertaken in recent years in the British context.

## **PART 3**

### **SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES IN TODAY'S SPIRITUAL CLIMATE**

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES IN THE 20TH CENTURY: A COMPARISON OF SURVEYS**

## **8. SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES IN THE 20TH CENTURY: A COMPARISON OF SURVEYS**

### **8.1. Surveys of Spiritual Experiences**

Over the last twenty-five years there has been an increasing desire to use the survey method to assess various phenomena and variables within society as a whole or within certain groups of society. This sociological method has been adapted to explore many aspects of life, religion, and experiences. This is also the case with spirituality, religious experience, and faith issues. The growing amount of information, together with the lineal nature of the data, enables, at least tentative, conclusions about trends in such issues. Our first task is to look for trends in reporting of spiritual experiences by exploring some of the major surveys that have taken place in Britain that have included questions about spiritual experiences.

David Hay of Nottingham University has carried out, or been involved in, a number of major surveys of Spiritual Experience among the general population in Britain.<sup>1</sup> While these have been mainly quantitative surveys, there is also an element in them that looks in more detail at some of the spiritual experiences encountered. For example, in 2000, Hay was involved in two studies. The first was a series of discussions with selected groups from the general public. The second was the inclusion of questions about spiritual experiences in the Soul of Britain Survey. This work was undertaken at the invitation of the Bible Society and supported by a number of groups. The financing of this enabled Hay to employ assistants in the work to interview respondents and so get a deeper understanding of the survey. In

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<sup>1</sup> Data from these surveys is included in: HAY David (1979). Religious Experience amongst a group of post-graduate students - a qualitative study. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 18, pp. 164 - 182; HAY David and HUNT Kate (2000). *Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Don't Go To Church*.

Chapter 3 we explored Hay's understanding and analysis of spiritual experiences. The purpose of this section is to look at the statistical data that he has analysed.

The three main surveys were undertaken in 1976, 1987 and 2000, together with a student survey in 1978. The statistics for these surveys indicate an increase in spiritual experiences among the population. Those admitting to having spiritual experiences in the different recent surveys are: 1976 National Opinion Poll (NOP) survey - 36%<sup>2</sup>; 1978 Students survey - 65%<sup>3</sup>; 1987 survey - 48%<sup>4</sup>; 2000 survey - 76%<sup>5</sup>. However, it needs to be noted that the data on the website containing an analysis of the BBC Soul of Britain Survey<sup>6</sup> seems to be at variance with this figure. We will return to this later.

Earlier surveys in the United States of America in 1962, 1966, 1967, undertaken by Gallup and analysed by Back and Bourque<sup>7</sup>, and the Princetown survey of 1978<sup>8</sup> indicate response rates of 20.5%, 32%, 41% and 35% respectively,<sup>9</sup> and show a rapid increasing response rate through the 1960's. However, the 1978 survey indicates a drop in the rate of reporting spiritual experiences. Either this figure is an anomaly for the USA or there was a sudden change in the number of experiences being reported. An earlier Hay survey in Britain in 1973 and the Hardy survey of 1985 indicating a response rate of 31% and 33% respectively,<sup>10</sup> also

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Nottingham: University of Nottingham; and HAY David (1987). *Exploring Inner Space: is God still possible in the 20th century?* Oxford: Mowbray.

2 HAY D. (1987), p. 122.

3 HAY D. (1979), p. 167.

4 HAY D. and HUNT K. (2000), p. 13.

5 HAY D. and HUNT K. (2000), p. 13.

6 Available at: <http://www.facingthechallenge.org>. (downloaded 21/01/05).

7 Reported in HAY D. (1987), pp. 121 - 2.

8 Reported in HAY D. (1987), pp. 121 - 2.

9 Quoted in HAY D. (1987), pp. 121 - 2.

10 Quoted in HAY D. (1987), pp. 121 - 2.



show a pattern of a steady increase in the reporting of spiritual experiences during the second half of the 20th century.

The 1981 European Values Study survey<sup>11</sup> included a question asking the respondents if they had had a “profound spiritual experience.” The statistical response for the United Kingdom indicated that 19% of people responded positively. The full details of the questions and answers are not published in the report and it is not known what is meant by a “profound spiritual experience”. The term used does suggest that the survey was looking for something very much out of the ordinary realm of experience, and this may be the reason why the figure is much lower than we might expect from the results of other surveys.<sup>12</sup>

In 1987 Edrington published his findings from a survey of 50 working class men in Erdington, a suburb of Birmingham.<sup>13</sup> The project was an attempt to identify the types of spirituality among British men by identifying at random 50 men and interviewing them about their spirituality. It is claimed that the interview technique was one of discussion rather than answers and questions, although the interviewers had pre-selected topics to explore and a series of over 130 questions in 31 sections according to topic.

One section refers to the subject of spiritual experiences, with the leading question being “Have you ever had an experience that you would call religious or spiritual?” This was followed up by some suggestions of spiritual experiences. Edrington states that 60% claimed

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11BARKER David (1995). *The European Value Study 1981 - 1990*. London: Gordon Cook Foundation.

12THOMPSON Kenneth (1988). *How Religious are the British?* In THOMAS Terrence (ed), *The British: Their religious beliefs and practices 1800 - 1986*. London: Routledge, p. 229.

13EDRINGTON Roger B. (1987). *Everyday Men: living in a climate of unbelief*. Frankfurt: Lang.

that they had had spiritual experiences, although only 22% could identify a specific event.<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to know how Edrington arrived at the figure of 22% as the data in his appendix 2 shows variance to these conclusions. Only 9 people answered positively to the leading question, which gives a figure of 18%. From the data relating to question 22: 3, which gives a list of eight possible types of spiritual experience, we discover that four people did not answer the question, so the base number becomes 46. Out of these, 39 of the men said that they had experienced at least one of the types of experience, if you include the category of “being tempted by the devil”. However, this category is vague; one could assume that all people have been tempted to do wrong and this is often understood as coming from the devil. If this category is excluded from the results, then 27 men said that they had had at least one spiritual experience, which results in a figure of 59%. Another 8 think they might have had such an experience, giving a total of 76%. 6 felt they had experienced the devil, while all the others had only experienced the sacred, God or the holy. Clearly Edrington’s figures relate to those who could definitely say they had had a spiritual experience, and not those who thought they might have had one.

The results indicate that probably far more people have had spiritual experiences, but many would not look at them in this way. The group being surveyed was randomly chosen. It was found that 22% of the men considered themselves Christian, but only about 10% were church-goers.<sup>15</sup> However, 56% said they were “believers” which meant that they broadly believed in the existence of God. This further indicates that there is a necessity for a religious context, and a means of interpretation, to understand experiences in a spiritual or religious

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<sup>14</sup>EDRINGTON R. B. (1987), p. 104.

<sup>15</sup>EDRINGTON R. B. (1987), p. 111.

way. One of the comments the author makes about the descriptions of the spiritual experiences is that the men found it very difficult to interpret and explain their experiences.<sup>16</sup>

The Finding Faith Today survey undertaken in 1990 was primarily a project to survey the different ways in which Christians came to faith. It looked at factors that encouraged faith and helped faith grow under the general aim of “to discover and learn from the spiritual journeys of those who had become Christians and made a public profession of faith in the recent past.”<sup>17</sup> The process consisted of interviewing people who had been through an adult religious rite that had included some form of profession of faith, in the previous 12 months. The people were selected by local churches. While not a completely random selection of people, it was considered to be a representative group and 511 people took part in the survey.

One section of the survey related to spiritual experiences, which are described in the report as “out of the way experiences which you would describe as religious in some way.”<sup>18</sup> Of the many factors that were considered to lead people to faith, or be “supporting factors” that lead to faith, only 3% of people considered that these “out of the way experiences” were factors that lead to faith, and another 3% considered them supporting factors. Of the people who reported having such experiences, 9% said that they had brought them to faith or to a new faith, but 32% said that they had strengthened faith.<sup>19</sup> In this latter case, presumably the spiritual experience came after faith, but for the 9% of experiences the spiritual experience was prior to faith. It seems surprising that few mentioned these as either a main or supporting

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<sup>16</sup>EDRINGTON R. B. (1987), p. 105.

<sup>17</sup>FINNEY John (1992). *Finding Faith Today: how does it happen?* Swindon: British and Foreign Bible Society.

<sup>18</sup>FINNEY J. (1992), p. 93.

<sup>19</sup>FINNEY J. (1992), p. 99; HANLEY Pam (1992). *Finding Faith Today: the technical report*. Swindon: British and Foreign Bible Society, p. 107.

factor, despite the fact that a large minority said that they themselves had had a charismatic experience either at the time of their turning to God or soon afterwards, and that many of them came from charismatic churches.”<sup>20</sup> This does raise the issue of whether the questionnaire was biased in some way that made people look for other factors in coming to faith.

Of the people interviewed, 43% said that they had had such spiritual experiences, of which 13% had had a lot of spiritual experiences, 55% had a few and 32% only one.<sup>21</sup> This is a somewhat lower figure than other surveys have indicated. Does this support the suggestion from the current survey that church-goers appear to have a lower incidence of spiritual experiences than the population in general?

The Soul of Britain Survey was undertaken by the BBC in what is described by them as the largest survey ever undertaken.<sup>22</sup> The project surveyed 1000 people by telephone in the year 2000 and asked a range of questions about lifestyle, values, and religion, which included the questions mentioned earlier. Unfortunately the BBC data is not very specific, and the analysis seems to differ from that undertaken by Hay. Therefore, we will look at this data as supplied. It is said that at least 25% of the population have had some sort of religious or spiritual experience, while 29% have felt the “sacred in nature” and 38% have had an awareness of God. While there may be an overlap in these statistics, it seems that the term “spiritual experience” is being used in a very specific way, although there is no clear definition or meaning, as it does not seem to include “an awareness of God” or “the presence

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<sup>20</sup>FINNEY J. (1992), p. 38.

<sup>21</sup>HANLEY P. (1992), p. 104.

<sup>22</sup>The results were broadcast in a series of programmes in June and July 2000 and selected aspects of the data are available at: <http://www.facingthechallenge.org/soul2.htm>. (downloaded 21/01/05.)

of the sacred in nature”. However, if we perceive all these categories to be spiritual experiences, as we have done in this project, the total figure could be as much as 92%. However, understanding that there is an overlap in the statistics, a figure of 67% (38 plus 29) may be a more reasonable figure. If we take the higher figure from this survey, we will see that it comes close to the 76% figure reported by Hay. However, if we take the lower figures of 25%, 29%, and 38%, then they are considerably less than the other surveys. Therefore, accepting that the Hay analysis of this data is the more systematic and clear, we need to work with his figure of 76%.

## **8.2. Analysis of the Surveys**

The findings of these different surveys are collated in Table 12<sup>23</sup> and Graph 1. The graph is tenuous, but it indicates a continuous increase in the reporting of spiritual experiences from the 1970’s through to the present day. The most reliable data is that used by Hay, whose surveys were consistent in their method and used similar questions for analysis.<sup>24</sup> Hence we can be confident that his material is a good indicator of the increasing reportage of spiritual experiences through the last decades of the twentieth century. When we add in the data from other surveys, we have to be aware that the information is gathered in different ways and sometimes for different purposes. Consequently while the data may be arrived at authentically, it may not simply be transferred into the graph, but needs to be taken more tentatively. The data from the USA indicates that there was a rapid increase of spiritual experiences through the 1960’s and a flattening off during the 1970’s. Hay reports that Back

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<sup>23</sup>Table 12 and Graph 1 will be found on page 257.

<sup>24</sup>The core question of Hay’s surveys was taken from Hardy’s work. It is “Could you ever remember being aware of or influenced by a person or a power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your

and Bourque considered this due to two possible reasons. First, that there was an increase due to the increasing interest in mysticism and the paranormal in the 1960's and, second, that there was an improvement in the techniques in gathering the data.<sup>25</sup>

When we incorporate the Hardy results into the graph we find that there is a “flattening off” of reportages in the 1980's. Noting that Hay's survey methods are based on Hardy's, then there should be a consistency with the data that means that we need to at least acknowledge that it could be the case. The data from the Edrington, Hardy, and Soul of Britain surveys do not fit easily with the Hay data. This is likely to reflect the different way in which the data was collected and analysed. We have already mentioned that the data from the Edrington survey and the Soul of Britain survey is not clear and can be interpreted in different ways. However, if we use the higher figure in both cases, they fit with the general impression that there is an increase in reporting of spiritual experiences over the years, even though they are at variance with Hay.

If these sets of data are superimposed (Graph 2<sup>26</sup>) then it leads to the conclusions from this graph which may suggest the following scenario for Britain. Following behind the USA, there is a general increase in reportings of spiritual experiences through the second half of the twentieth century. There is a general increase during the 1970's but this flattens out during the early 1980's. Towards the end of the 1980's and throughout the 1990's there is a significant increase. The possible reasons for this may relate to the general changes in religiosity during this period, which will be looked at later.

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everyday self?” HAY David. (1979). Religious Experience Amongst a Group of Post-graduate Students - A Qualitative Study. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 18, pp. 164 - 182.

25HAY D. (1987), p. 122.

26Found on page 258.

Hay considers that there is not so much an increase in the number of spiritual experiences, but rather a greater willingness to admit to having them and to relate them.<sup>27</sup> However, this does not change the analysis, as the three periods of the late 20th century would have a similar effect, whether this is the actual number of people having spiritual experiences or those being prepared to talk about them. What it does indicate, however, is the increase in awareness and willingness to talk about them in the late part of the century, and that in 2000 over three quarters of the population felt they have the social permission to do so.

The significance of the Finney survey is that it is confined to people who go to church. While it is a survey relating to specific people, it is still useful as an indicator. It indicates that there are significantly fewer people in the Church willing to admit to having spiritual experiences than in the general public. Taken together with my own survey which gives a figure of 53% of church people having, or admitting to have, spiritual experiences, it suggests that there is a trend over the years of fewer people having, or admitting to have, spiritual experiences in the Church than in the general population. However, Rice reports a survey among Presbyterians in the USA in 1978 when 64% said that they definitely had, or thought that they might have had, “a religious or mystical experience.”<sup>28</sup> This may suggest that in the USA there is a greater acknowledgement of spiritual experiences among church-going people, than among the general public. In 1994, in an equivalent survey, when the question was asked: have you had “a particularly powerful insight or awakening that changed the direction of your life”, 54% responded positively.<sup>29</sup> Noting that the question seems to be more specific and many of

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27HAY D. and HUNT K. (2000), p. 14.

28RICE Howard L. (1991). *Reformed Spirituality: an introduction for believers*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 47.

29PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA) (1994). Presbyterian Panel: Listening to Presbyterians - Spirituality. *Presbyterian Panel*. Feb. 1994, p. 10. ([http://www.pcusa.org/research/panel/reports/0294\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://www.pcusa.org/research/panel/reports/0294_full_report.pdf), downloaded 29/08/04.)

the respondents seemed to interpret it as meaning conversion experiences, this may suggest that the 1978 figure is reliable. The figures from the U.S.A. are collated in Graph 3.<sup>30</sup>

The figures in the graph suggest that there is a slower increase in the number of people reporting spiritual experiences. However, with only two points of data this can only be a tentative indication. Yet, again, it needs to be noted that while a number of people were willing to talk about their experiences, it is not something that they would do in public or in worship.

### **8.3. Types of Spiritual Experiences Reported**

Some of the surveys also give some statistical data about the types of experiences of the people surveyed, and it is to these that we now turn for some comparisons and general indications.

Hay found that there were a great variety of types of spiritual experiences, although he reduces them to six in his 2000 survey, and eight in the 1987 and 1979 surveys. The main types of experiences in Hay's surveys<sup>31</sup> are described as: a patterning of events, presence of God, prayer answered, the sacred in nature, presence of the dead, and evil presence (in 1987 this was "a presence that is not God"). When we compare settings which are included in the statistics for the 1978 survey as "place of experience", we find similarities. It should be noted that Hay does not really deal with triggers as such, though he quotes the findings and

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<sup>30</sup>Found on page 287.

<sup>31</sup>HAY D. and HUNT K. (2000), p. 13.



classification of Greedy<sup>32</sup> as an example of triggers. Hay includes silence, nature, being with friends, times of happiness, prayers, church worship, in art, and in darkness. The present project has found all these with the exception of darkness. Comparing the consequences of the spiritual experiences to Hay's feelings and permanent consequences<sup>33</sup>, it is found that both surveys include peace, joy, fear, new direction in life, and happiness. Hay also encountered conversion experiences. Our survey includes confirmation of faith and resolution of problems which do not seem to figure in Hay's work. However, it is possible that they are included in Hay's definition of new depth and direction in life. So, again, we find a general correlation between the surveys.

Although it was not the purpose of the Finding Faith Today survey or the reports, there was an attempt to classify the types of spiritual experiences. The system of classification is not clear, but it was undertaken in two ways. The first could be described as a descriptive approach, but included aspects of purpose and medium. The descriptions were categorised into four broad types<sup>34</sup>: The presence of the Divine (God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit); Supernatural (including dreams and visions, premonitions, messages); Charismatic (healing, tongues, answered prayers); and Feelings (peace, security and happiness). The second way of classifying them was according to their consequences.<sup>35</sup> The majority considered that the experiences strengthened their faith (32%) while other categories included: appreciating God's love or power, being a proof of God or the Holy Spirit, being an inspiration, hope or assurance, and proof of life after death. A few people felt there was no lasting consequence. Although the vast majority of respondents understood the experiences to be positive and

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32HAY D. (1990), p. 70.

33HAY D. (1979), p. 176.

34HANLEY P. (1992), p. 104.

35HANLEY P. (1992), p. 107.

helpful, some retold stories of experiences of the demonic or an evil presence. So the report indicates that there are a great variety of spiritual experiences and tells of the difficulty in categorising them.

With respect to the context of the experiences, the findings only relate that while many people had spiritual experiences in a church setting, the reports indicate that experiences could occur anywhere and many of them were totally unexpected and unsought. About half the people said they were alone at the time of the experience, while the other half were in the company of other people.<sup>36</sup>

The Edrington Survey reported that the experiences were both of the demonic, and feelings of fear, and also positive comforting feelings. The types of experiences included visions, evangelical experiences, callings from God, war experiences, and prayer,<sup>37</sup> and while they had had some influence on their lives, the experiences had made no radical change. The one exception to this was the man who started going to church after his experience.<sup>38</sup> Such experiences must then be understood to have had possibly an immediate impact on the men, but had had no lasting consequences.

It can be seen that, in the present project, the types of experiences found in the other surveys, were all recounted. In addition one person had mystical type experiences and others had an experience related to the closeness of people. So generally speaking the different surveys indicate that the types of experiences are similar throughout the time period, and that there is

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<sup>36</sup>HANLEY P. (1992), p. 104.

<sup>37</sup>EDRINGTON R.B. (1987), p. 105.

<sup>38</sup>EDRINGTON R.B. (1987), p. 106.

a great diversity. The experiences are largely experiences of the Divine which lead to some form of comfort or assurance. The Edrington, Hay, and Finney surveys report experiences of evil, of fear and the demonic, while our survey does not. This difference may simply be explained by the fact that my survey was restricted to a small group of church-goers and they are much less likely to report the experience of the presence of evil.

Again Hay and Edrington indicate the frequency of the different types of experiences, but because of the nature of the present survey, it is not possible to make a comparison. These types delineated, relate mainly to those that are classified in the present study as the purpose of the spiritual experiences. The most frequent purpose of spiritual experiences in this survey are the feeling of the presence of God and answered prayer, which are the second and third most common in Hay's surveys.

#### **8.4. Understandings of God**

Hay, Edrington, and the Soul of Britain surveys also include data about the concepts of God. Comparing the different concepts of God that come from the surveys, generally, Hay considers that people feel God is transcendent, judging, punitive, and male, but also at times people feel God is a "household god" who looks after the immediate family.<sup>39</sup> From the Edrington data we discover that working men's belief in God appears to be vague as they were unable to express their understanding of God. But the three main concepts that were expressed projected God as powerful, although that power was limited, human-like, and impersonal. As God is impersonal with limited power, one might conclude that there will be

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<sup>39</sup>HAY D. (2000), p. 28.

little expectation of an encounter with God or the sacred. There was a general feeling that people no longer needed God in a technological age,<sup>40</sup> and that there was a greater willingness to accept even the most simplistic concept of scientism<sup>41</sup> than to acknowledge the worth of God. Consequently it is not surprising if people do not consider it likely that God will be encountered. The Soul of Britain survey concluded that 26% of people believe in a personal God and 44% in God as a “spirit” or life force, totalling 70%. 33% consider that God can be found outside of organised religion. This suggests that, of the people who believe in God in one form or another, 37% look for God within organised religion, but only 15% regularly attend religious activities. It appears that belief in God has not declined but has changed. People feel freer to pick and choose the belief that they want, or that suits their purposes, and that this is often a mixture of beliefs from different sources and religions.<sup>42</sup> The European Values Study survey<sup>43</sup> indicates that belief in God fell from 74% to 69% from 1981 to 1990. However, there was a corresponding rise in those who believe in a personal God (from 32% to 36%) and those who pray (from 57% to 59%) which indicates a move away from the institutional church to a more personal and, possibly, experiential spirituality.

A section of the report of the Finney survey deals with people’s images of God.<sup>44</sup> It was found that before “coming to faith” the most common images of God were vague, impersonal, remote and irrelevant, which seems to be in accord with the findings of Edrington. But after conversion the images change to a personal God who is intimate and relevant. Finney notes that there appears to be a change of emphasis from God as creator to

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40EDRINGTON R.B. (1987), p. 86.

41EDRINGTON R.B. (1987), p. 134.

42Available at: <http://www.facingthechallenge.org/soul2.htm>. (downloaded 21/01/05.)

43BARKER D. (1995), p. 48.

44FINNEY J. (1992), pp. 83 - 86.

God as friend, although he notes that this latter concept may include aspects of Creator.<sup>45</sup> He does not give his reasons for this assumption. However, there were a wide range of concepts of God among the people interviewed. The report does not relate these concepts to those who had spiritual experiences, so no comment can be made about the concept of God as an indicator of faith or spiritual experiences.

### **8.5. Life and Belief in the United Reformed Church**

A more recent survey was undertaken in 2001 under the title of the Church Life Profile<sup>46</sup>. This was an examination of the life of churches, mainly in England. The analysis of the data was used to provide a profile of the Church in England and also profiles of different denominations. For those congregations that took part in the survey, they were also provided with a congregational profile. The method was to get each congregation to ask those attending on a particular Sunday to complete the questionnaire. The minister also completed a questionnaire and together they were returned to be analysed. This survey enables us to have some specific details of the URC, which are significant for the present study.

Questions asked included, the type of church, its theology (approaches), church activities, the profile of the congregation and its members. There was no particular question about spiritual experiences, and there is no information about people's concept of God. However, there is a section in the survey about the presence of God in worship and importance of God in the life of the church-goer.

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<sup>45</sup>FINNEY J. (1992). p. 85.

<sup>46</sup>GELDER Alison and ESCOTT Phillip (2001). *Faith in Life*. London: Churches Information for Mission, and ESCOTT Phillip and GELDER Alison (2002). *Church Life Profile 2001: denominational results for the United Reformed Church*. London: Churches Information for Mission.

From the data recorded it appears that, in general, people in the URC are less likely to experience awe and mystery, or the presence of God, in church worship than other churchgoers, yet the figures are still relatively high.<sup>47</sup> 63% consider that they always or usually experience God's presence in worship (67% for other churches) and 32% sometimes experience this. Only 11% always or usually have a feeling of awe or mystery, while 56% say that sometimes they have this sense. This indicates that the experience of God, awe and mystery, is relatively frequent in worship in the URC. These statistics seem to be at variance with the reports from the current study. Although the questions asked were different, only 26% said that meeting God was an important part of worship. However, for those who have had spiritual experiences, 66% had these in church. Does this suggest that spiritual experiences are relatively common in church worship in the URC, but that many people do not interpret them as such? This may be supported by the statistics that indicate that in the Birmingham Church, of those who admit to having spiritual experiences, 66% consider that worship involves spiritual experiences and 45% consider that it is a spiritual experience. For those that have not had such experiences, worship neither involves nor is a spiritual experience. The overall figure appears to be much lower than the URC in general. Conversion experience is comparatively rare in the URC, with only 19% admitting to this; a "gradual development of faith" seems to be the norm.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, few would say that their faith has grown significantly in the last year.<sup>49</sup> This also appears to be similar to the case of the church in this study.

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47ESCOTT P. and GELDER A. (2002), p. 10.

48ESCOTT P. and GELDER A. (2002), p. 15.

49ESCOTT P. and GELDER A. (2002), p. 16.

Within the URC, people are less likely to say that God is very important in their lives, but 69% would consider God the most important or more important than most things.<sup>50</sup> We have seen that there seems to be a reluctance to speak about God in relation to everyday life and yet it is clear that God has an important place in the life of the people. Also 86% of the URC consider that their spiritual needs are met by the church<sup>51</sup> and this is probably also the case for the Birmingham church, as the discussions indicated that, with one significant exception, the church was meeting the people's needs.

In the current project God is understood as transcendent, but more importantly, as immanent and the majority feel God is one who helps, comforts, and guides. Many feel that they have a relationship with God, while others look for the evidence of God in the world, either through nature or in other people, and the actions of others. Only one person seemed to be concerned with God's attribute as judge. So this would indicate that there are differing concepts of God in the Church and in the public in general.

## **8.6. Summary**

By looking through some of the different surveys that have taken place over the last twenty-five years, we can conclude that in general there has been an increase of reporting spiritual experiences from 31% in 1973 to 76% in 2000. At the same time there is an indication that the figure for those who go to church and report spiritual experiences is lower than the figure for the population in general. This suggests that either church-goers have fewer spiritual

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<sup>50</sup>ESCOTT P. and GELDER A. (2002), p. 16.

<sup>51</sup>ESCOTT P. and GELDER A. (2002), p. 15.

experiences, have a different understanding of what a spiritual experience is, or are more reluctant to speak about them.

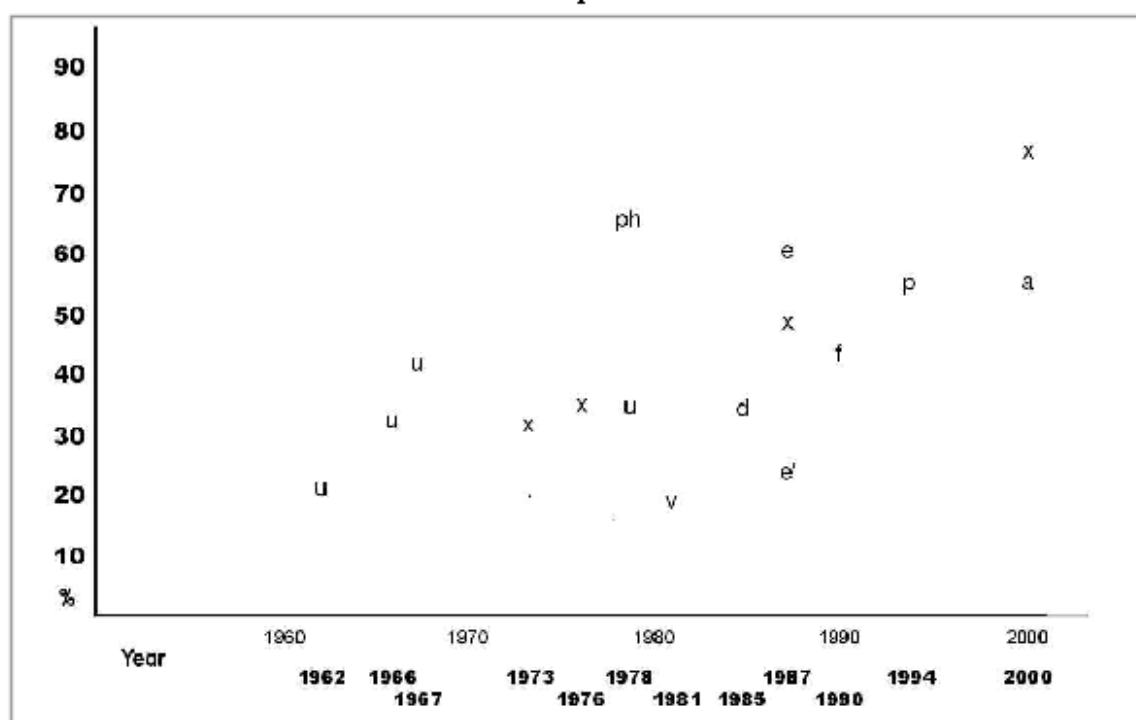
The comparison also indicates that the types of experiences are very numerous, but that each survey, in general terms, has discovered a similar variety of experiences, and this is irrespective of whether the people are church-goers or not. However, it is noted that the experience of God in the work of others is only found in the current survey, and that the experience of the presence of evil was not found among the participants.

What is clear, then, is that from the past twenty-five years the reporting of spiritual experiences has become more prevalent for people of whatever expression of faith or none. Spiritual experiences are clearly linked with belief in, or acknowledgement of, the Transcendent, supernatural or God, whatever the image of God is for the experient. This encounter with God and the supernatural brings comfort and assurance and has some effect on the life of the person, even if it is not long term. All the surveys indicate these general associations so significantly that they need to be taken seriously by the Church. We now have the task of exploring these phenomena more fully in the light of the current cultural context of the Church in Britain, and extrapolate the implications for the Church.

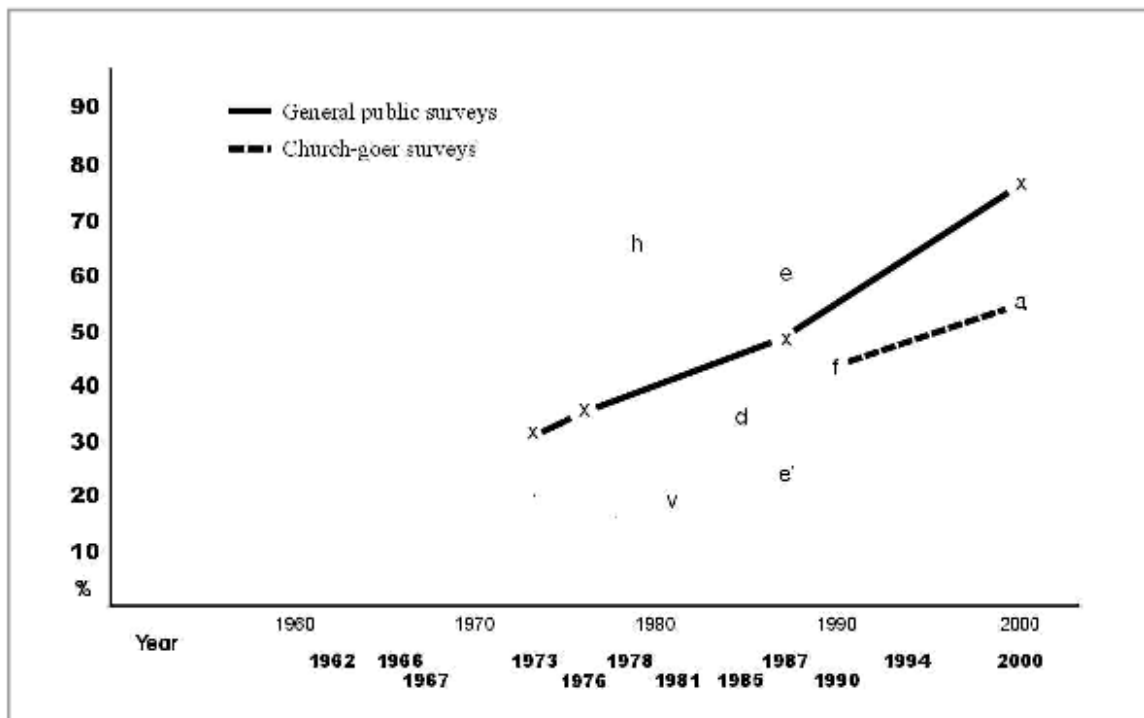


**Table 12**

Date	Country	Survey (and Reference)	Key	%
1962	U.S.A.	Gallup/Back & Bourque (Hay 1987 p. 121)	u	20.5
1966	U.S.A.	Gallup/Back & Bourque (Hay 1987 p.121)	u	32
1967	U.S.A.	Gallup/Back & Bourque (Hay 1987 p.121)	u	41
1973	U.K.	Hay (Hay 1987 p. 124)	x	31
1976	U.K.	N.O.P. (Hay & Morisy JSSR 1978 p. 256)	x	36
1978	U.S.A.	Princetown (Hay 1987 p. 122)	u	35
1978	U.K.	Hay Students (Hay JSSR 1978 p. 167)	h	65
1978	U.S.A.	Presbyterian Panel (Rice 1991 p. 47) <sup>1</sup>	p	64
1981	U.K.	European Values (Thompson 1986 p. 229)	v	19
1985	U.K.	Hardy (Hay 1987 p. 121 )	d	33
1987	U.K.	Edrington (Edrington 1987 p. 104)	e (e')	60 (22)
1987	U.K.	Hay & Heald (Hay & Hunt 2000 p. 13)	x	48
1990	U.K.	Finding Faith Today (Hanley 1992 p. 104) <sup>1</sup>	f	43
1994	U.S.A.	Presbyterian Panel (Presby 1994 p. 10) <sup>1</sup>	p	54
2000	U.K.	Hay & Hunt (Hay & Hunt 2000 p. 13)	x	76
2000	U.K.	Perceptions of God <sup>1</sup>	a	53

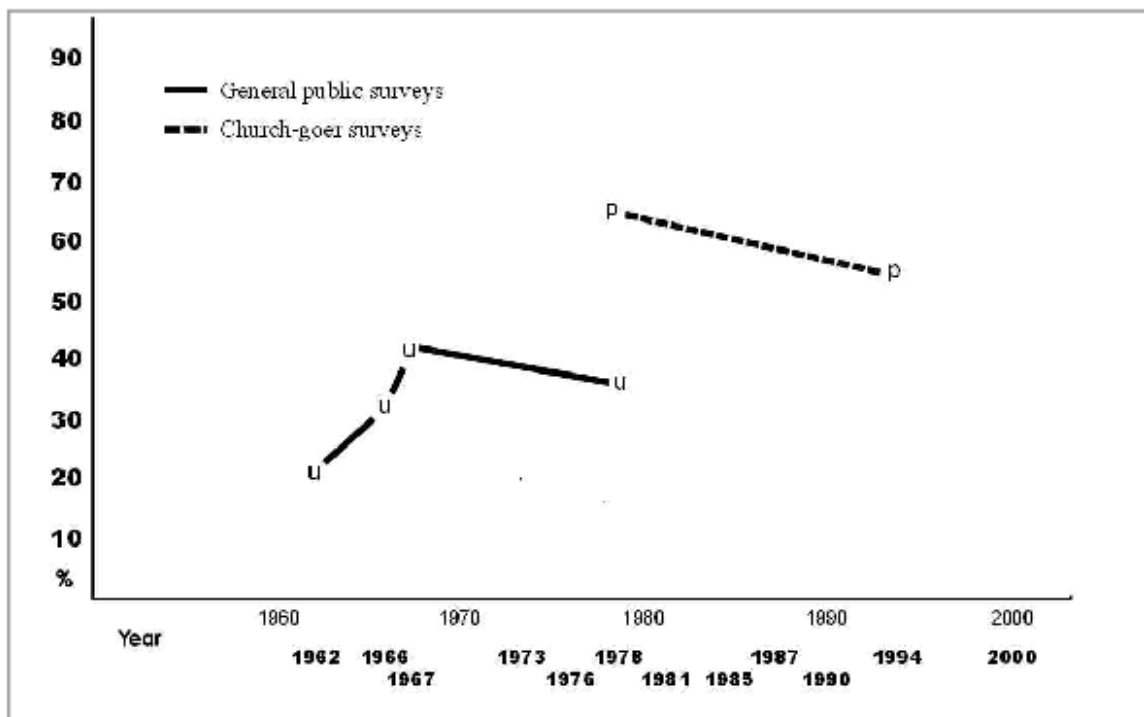
**Comparison of Surveys of Spiritual Experiences**<sup>1</sup>= survey conducted among church-goers only**Graph 1****Comparison of Spiritual Experiences - Percentage Responses**

Graph 2



Comparison of Spiritual Experiences - U.K. Data, showing trends

Graph 3



Comparison of Spiritual Experiences - U.S.A. Data, showing trends

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **CHURCH AND FAITH IN BRITAIN TODAY: ANALYSING THE RESULTS OF RESEARCH INTO CHURCH DECLINE**

## **9. CHURCH AND FAITH IN BRITAIN TODAY: ANALYSING THE RESULTS OF RESEARCH INTO CHURCH DECLINE**

The general situation of the Church in Britain is considered to be one of decline. This is both an anecdotal understanding and one that is backed up by survey and study evidence. Yet what this decline is, and means, and whether it is a decline in faith, religious or spiritual awareness, is something that appears to be a major object of discussion. The main pivot for discussion is the level of church membership and attendance at worship.

### **9.1. Finding Faith**

In 1992 John Finney<sup>1</sup> published his findings from his research into why and how people become members of the church. Membership is a confusing term to use as different churches perceive it, and define it, in different ways. Consequently he described his objective in terms of interviewing those adults who had, within the previous year, made a public confession of faith in some way that indicates that they have become committed to the church which they attend.

Although there are a number of factors that influence people coming to faith, his findings seem to imply that the main reason why people join the church is through the influence of other people. These may be a spouse, a friend, or a member of the clergy.<sup>2</sup> Other factors such as reading the Bible, evangelistic events and church activities are of lesser significance.

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<sup>1</sup>FINNEY John (1992). *Finding Faith Today: how does it happen?* Swindon: British and Foreign Bible Society, and HANLEY Pam (1992). *Finding Faith Today: the technical report*. Swindon: Bible Society.

<sup>2</sup>FINNEY J. (1992), pp. 36- 37.

As we have seen, spiritual experiences are a rare factor in the process of coming to faith. Finney notes that although many in the survey spoke of “charismatic” phenomena such as healings<sup>3</sup>, only 3% of people in the survey mentioned such phenomena as being significant for coming to faith.<sup>4</sup> We might conclude that spiritual and supernatural<sup>5</sup> experiences have no place in coming to faith and possibly little place in the life of the Church. Yet Finney, in raising the question as to why such events might be mentioned in the survey, but are not significant in bringing people to faith, is suggesting doubt as to the findings.<sup>6</sup> We have already suggested that the phenomenon may be due to the way in which the survey was conducted, but it could equally be due to the influence of the Church in the people’s lives that does not emphasise the place of the spiritual experience. However, some of those interviewed were from “charismatic churches”<sup>7</sup> and one would have thought that the influence from these churches would be to emphasise the place of such supernatural experiences.

Finney’s research intended to have a balance of responses from all denominations but the majority of responses were from “mainline” Protestant churches, with the “New” and Charismatic churches only representing 14% of the response which is approximately the proportion of the population of churchgoers.<sup>8</sup> Of those taking part in the survey from all denominations only 12% classified themselves as charismatic.<sup>9</sup> Hence the survey can be seen to primarily reflect the mainline Protestant churches. We have noted that within this large

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3FINNEY J. (1992), p. 38.

4FINNEY J. (1992), p. 49.

5As previously discussed the term “spiritual” denotes the involvement of the divine while the term “supernatural” does not necessarily involve the divine.

6FINNEY J. (1992), p. 38.

7FINNEY J. (1992), p. 38.

8The response for the Roman Catholic Church represented 14% of the survey which is a proportionally lower response than the other churches (FINNEY J. (1992), p. 2.)

section of the Church community in Britain, spiritual experiences have not been emphasised with the exception of a conversion experience. Rather the Protestant denominations in Britain have shied away from the aspects of faith associated with feelings, intuition, and the supernatural. A strong tradition within these churches has been to objectify faith into a rational and cerebral activity. It is understood that many members of charismatic churches and the New churches have transferred from other denominations, perhaps due to a seeking for some new expression of faith. Therefore, perhaps, it is not surprising that spiritual experiences do not feature highly in people coming to faith. Movement from one church to another may be the result of moving house or a dispute with the previous church, but it may also be due to a crisis of faith or a searching for a new way to express faith. In such cases people have not “come to faith” in joining a new church, but may have responded to a development of faith. Increase in membership of the New and Charismatic churches may reflect this process. It may also suggest that spiritual experiences are less associated with conversion and joining a church, and more with faith development.

## **9.2. Church Decline**

In contrast to John Finney, most recent research has been undertaken to look at the phenomenon of church leaving. This work has indicated that people leaving is the major concern of the church, and the survey method has been put to use to assess this factor of church and society. According to Gill<sup>10</sup>, the method of gathering statistics about the number of people attending church as a means of assessing the strength and success of the Church,

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<sup>9</sup>FINNEY J. (1992), p. 2.

<sup>10</sup>GILL Robin (1993). *The Myth of the Empty Church*. London: SPCK.

was first put into practice in the middle of the nineteenth century. Brown<sup>11</sup> considers that it is the need of social scientists to gather data and the need of the churches to have evidence of “success” that encouraged the gathering of statistics for church attendance. Finney concludes that church-going has been in decline since the mid-nineteenth century, in terms of the percentage of the population, even though attendance figures rose during the first half of the twentieth century and this is confirmed in the Brierley statistics. The decline is a consequence of a number of factors, including population movements and the over provision of church buildings producing a crisis of finance and confidence among church members.<sup>12</sup> This, in itself, is related to the competition between churches.

However, most statistics see the major decline beginning in the mid-twentieth century. According to Brierley<sup>13</sup> church membership reached its peak in the 1930’s with over ten million people being committed to a church, representing 31% of the adult population. This level of membership is considered to be relatively stable until the 1960’s. However, between 1960 and 2000, membership fell by 40%, and now only 12% of the adult population of the country are church members. The results taken from Brierley<sup>14</sup> are collated in Table 13<sup>15</sup> and Graphs 4 and 5.

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11BROWN Callum G. (2001). *The Death of Christian Britain: understanding secularisation 1800 - 2000*. London: Routledge, p. 11.

12GILL R. (1993), p. 189.

13BRIERLEY Peter (1999). *UK Christian Handbook: religious trends 2000- 2001 no. 2*. London: Christian Research, p. 2.12.

14BRIERLEY P. (1999).

15The tables and graphs are found at the end of the chapter on pages 280 - 284; Table 13 and Graph 4 on p. 280; Graph 5 on p. 281.

The English Church Attendance Survey of 1998<sup>16</sup> indicated that attendance at worship is continuing to decline rapidly. The fastest decline is seen in what Brierley terms the “Institutional Churches”. These consist of those churches which are State churches in at least one country and includes the Roman Catholic Church. The Methodist, Free, and Independent churches have also seen significant decline, but the “New” churches have seen some growth. However, it is noted that this growth is not all through new converts, but that as much as 50% of the growth may be due to people transferring from other denominations.<sup>17</sup> However, in terms of numbers, the growth in these churches does little to offset the major decline of the church as a whole.

The survey, and its predecessors in 1979 and 1989, indicate the rate of decline in attendance at worship. In 1979, 5.4 million people attended church regularly, representing 11.7% of the population. This reduced to 4.7 million (9.9%) in 1989, and to 3.7 million (7.5%) in 1998.<sup>18</sup> The greatest decline is seen in the Institutional Churches, from 3.8 million in 1979 to 2.4 million in 1998. The other churches have fared much better showing a decline from 1.5 million to 1.4 million.<sup>19</sup> The growing churches are the Baptist Church with an increase in attendance of 2% from 1989 to 1998 (but a decline in the previous decade); the New Churches which have seen a growth from 64,000 in 1979 to 214,000 in 1998<sup>20</sup>, which is impressive and represents a shift from 1.2% to 6.2% of the church-going public; the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) with a 110% increase from 1989 to 1998<sup>21</sup> (although

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16BRIERLEY Peter (2000a). *The Tide is Running Out*. London: Christian Research 2000 and BRIERLEY Peter (2000b). *Steps to the Future*. London: Scripture Union . The survey results primarily reflect attendance at Sunday worship, although there is an acknowledgement that weekday worship is increasing.

17BRIERLEY P. (2000a), p. 40.

18BRIERLEY P. (2000a), p. 27.

19BRIERLEY P. (2000a), p. 32. Figures are rounded, for convenience.

20BRIERLEY P. (2000a), p. 37.

21BRIERLEY P. (2000a), p. 45.



they also showed a decline in the previous decade); and other churches which include the Orthodox church and other “ethnic” groups with an increase of 151% over the nineteen years. These figures, however, do not significantly influence the overall statistics.

Viewed in another way, the statistics suggest that, in relative terms there has been a movement from the Institutional churches to the Pentecostal and New Churches. In 1979 the Baptist, Pentecostal and New churches represented 10.7% of the church-going population, but in 1989 this had increased to 19.5%.<sup>22</sup> When we consider that these churches could be seen to represent a theology that is more accommodating to spiritual experiences, particularly charismatic and Pentecostal experiences, then we may be witnessing a movement away from the intellectual to the experiential in spirituality. We have already suggested that the movement may be an indicator of faith development. The amazing increase in the attendance at Quaker meetings, may also represent this shift, but it needs to be remembered that Quaker meetings can be quite cerebral in approach. Unfortunately Brierley’s classification of “churchmanship” within the major denominations is not helpful in assessing any shift within the mainline churches.

A survey undertaken on behalf of the Methodist Church sought to find out not how many people were leaving the church, but why they leave. The results of this research were published in 1997<sup>23</sup>, although it needs to be considered that people may be reluctant to admit that they have lost faith, so this figure may not reflect the true position. The main conclusion from this study is that the majority of people do not leave the church because of a loss of faith. Only 18% of those surveyed said that they had.<sup>24</sup> This is consistent with a survey in the

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22BRIERLEY P. (2000a), p. 46.

23RICHTER P. and FRANCIS L.J. (1997). *Gone But Not Forgotten: church leaving and returning*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.

24RICHTER P. and FRANCIS L.J. (1997), p. 137.

1960's which found that people left the church through lack of interest rather than loss of faith.<sup>25</sup> They may leave because of a crisis of faith, but this crisis tends to be about content of faith and the authority of the church, rather than a loss of faith. Many in the survey expressed the concern that they found the church stifling and there was not room to question faith or for faith to develop. However, there appear to be many factors identified in this survey leading to people leaving the Church. These range from lack of time in a person's life, and changing lifestyles, to the high financial cost of being part of the church.

The conclusion of the survey is that people leave for many reasons, but not usually through loss of faith. Faith changes and develops and often the church is unable to deal with these changes, so the survey concurs with the understanding that Britain is becoming a society where people "believe but do not belong". This also confirms the perception of the church that sees it as unspiritual, for it does not enable people to develop their spirituality, and as spirituality changes, such people feel they need to separate themselves from institutional Christianity. This concurs with the findings of the Kendal Project, which we shall address later. The survey indicated that over one quarter of those leaving church cited this as at least part of the reason.<sup>26</sup> Part of the problem of not being able to deal with people's expectations and faith development is that the Church is not very good at being all things to all people, and having space for a variety of expressions of faith and expectation<sup>27</sup>. It may be suggesting that the way the Church deals with such an issue is to seek the "lowest common denominator" and to fall back on institutionalism rather than embrace change.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Reported in GILL R. (1993), p. 213.

<sup>26</sup>RICHTER P. and FRANCIS L.J. (1997), p. 64.

<sup>27</sup>RICHTER P. and FRANCIS L.J. (1997), p. 160.

<sup>28</sup>RICHTER P. and FRANCIS L.J. (1997), p. 104.

While the report of the survey does not specifically deal with spiritual experiences, it does indicate that spirituality is one of the issues for leaving church. In some cases the issue was that people were no longer willing to accept the teaching or authority of the church and wanted to be free to be individuals. This is sometimes associated with “growing up” and rejecting a kind of religious parentalism.<sup>29</sup> In other cases it is because the church was stifling spiritual growth. An example is given of an Anglican woman who wanted to move on from an intellectually based faith to “being much more drawn into silence and wondering at the symbols and metaphysics.”<sup>30</sup>

Advice given to the church by Richter and Francis is that the Church needs to change, by finding new models of spirituality<sup>31</sup>, understanding better the process of faith change and crisis<sup>32</sup>, and recognising that there is a major cultural change in society, which will demand new ways of responding to faith issues.<sup>33</sup>

### **9.3. An Unspiritual Church**

Michael Riddell<sup>34</sup> asks the question: why, when people are searching for a spirituality, they do not turn to the Church? His conclusion is that the perception of the church is that it is something that is living in the past, and has become spiritually bankrupt. Having allied itself with rationalism during the enlightenment, and by taking on board scientism in its attempt to

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29RICHTER P. and FRANCIS L.J. (1997), p. 50.

30RICHTER P. and FRANCIS L.J. (1997), p. 62.

31RICHTER P. and FRANCIS L.J. (1997), p. 143.

32RICHTER P. and FRANCIS L.J. (1997), p. 146.

33RICHTER P. and FRANCIS L.J. (1997), p. 149.

34RIDDELL Michael (1998). *Threshold of the Future*. London: SPCK, p. 11.

defend itself from the claims of the scientist, it has seriously compromised itself, and no longer has any relevance to those who wish to be spiritual.

John Drane, who seems to have influenced Riddell's conclusions, often states that in his discussions and contacts with people of New Age spiritualities, their perception of the church is that it is unspiritual and has nothing to offer the young people of today. In his recent research he has concluded that the Church is often perceived of as being unspiritual by those who do not attend church. This is in stark contrast to a society that is post-modern, where the superstitious, supernatural and the spiritual have an important place. The rise of the New Age is often understood to be a response to the changing paradigm of society that had become very secular and material. The almost exclusive emphasis in a secular society on scientific rationalism, and the rejection of plausibility and authority in faith matters, seems to have been seriously challenged from the 1960's so that the spiritual has regained a place in society.

By exploring the cultural changes in Britain, Drane determines that the Church is "out of step". The Church is perceived as being part of a past era, the enlightenment or modern era, while society is moving to post-modernism. Consequently the Church, and particularly the Protestant church, which accepted the ideologies of reason and the intellect, is unable to relate to a society which emphasises the intuitive and feelings. John Drane writes:

"the church is in love with words, doctrines, rational arguments about faith. ... Could it be that we Christians are somehow imprisoned in a kind of cognitive captivity, which is inhibiting our mission, and maybe even keeping Christ to the fringes of the Church? ... When the medium is written, literary, bookish, and wordy, then by definition the most important things are going to be those things we can think about, reflect on and analyse, and the unimportant things

are going to be intuition, experience and the concerns of the spirit - none of which can adequately be communicated through words.”<sup>35</sup>

He further comments, that, while much of society has accepted the new parameters of post-modernism, the Church in the West has not. This is a major reason, for him, why the church has declined so rapidly. Much of the leadership of the church was educated under an academic system that rejected the supernatural.

“In the face of a dominant materialist view of reality, any worldview that had a place for the supernatural was soon relegated to the mythological dustbin as a hangover from a primitive and unsophisticated world that had apparently gone for ever. The dominance of this opinion in theology and philosophy in particular produced whole generations of church leaders who came to understand their own faith heritage in reductionist terms, and who regarded spiritual experience as little more than a branch of social anthropology, to be studied (if at all) only as a historical curiosity.”<sup>36</sup>

Not being able to understand the new thought forms, the church has lost its confidence.<sup>37</sup> The Church is considered to be “McDonaldised”. It has become standardised without any surprises for people and has ignored the fact that people are individuals and different. It assumes that all people are the same and so offers a standardised “product”. This standardisation is a perspective that is rational, abstract, theoretical, authoritative, predictable, and formal.<sup>38</sup> For the church to become accepted as part of the new paradigm, this old way of doing theology needs to change.

“What this amounts to in particular is that the linear model of the Enlightenment, beginning from abstract, rational first principles from which practical conclusions may be deduced, is replaced by a cyclical model in which the starting point is experience, which can then be brought into connection with the accumulated wisdom of the Christian theological tradition

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35DRANE John (1997). *Faith in a Changing Culture: creating churches for the next century*. London: Marshall Pickering, p. 31.

36DRANE John (1999). *What is the New Age Still Saying to the Church*. London: Marshall Pickering, p. 201.

37DRANE John (2000b). *The McDonaldization of the Church*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, p. 6.

38DRANE J. (2000b), pp. 4 and 44.

which in turn may facilitate new insights into the nature of the stories - which then raise new questions for the tradition, and so on.”<sup>39</sup>

This is illustrated for Drane by contemporary Church worship, which has become predictable, efficient, and simplistic. It remains very cerebral and, therefore, more associated with enlightenment concepts than post-modern ideas. Human experience does not feature strongly in the worship of the mainline denominations. Such an approach appears, for many, to be divorced from normal life, which is understood through experiences, emotions, and feelings<sup>40</sup>. He summarises this as:

“The old paradigm taught that if you have the right teaching, you will experience God. The new paradigm says that if you experience God, you will have the right teaching.”<sup>41</sup>

In a recent article about preaching, Lysons attributes this inability to make worship relevant to everyday experiences, to the use of a lectionary which determines the teaching each Sunday. Lectionary readings give some control over what is preached, so that experience is marginalised and doctrine made central. He considers that what is needed in worship is to preach from “sensitivity to the expressed or ascribed needs of the congregation”.<sup>42</sup> Green considers that in the early twentieth century there was a “qualitative shift away from an experiential and towards a devotional understanding of common Christian practice”<sup>43</sup>. Although he is mainly speaking about the Anglican Church, this may also be seen to be the

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39DRANE J. (2000b), p. 8.

40DRANE J. (1997), p. 136.

41DRANE J. (2000b), p. 73.

42LYSONS K. (2004). Why I am not a Lectionary Preacher. *The Expository Times*. Volume 115. number 8, May 2004. London: Continuum, pp. 262 - 265. Of course lectionary preaching does not have to preclude making preaching relevant to the congregation and everyday life - that is part of the art of preaching!

43GREEN S.J.D. (1996). *Religion in an Age of Decline: organisation and experience in industrial Yorkshire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 386.

case for the United Reformed Church and also represents this move from experience to liturgy.

Drane's research and involvement in the New Age movement, has encouraged him to acknowledge that the New Age challenges the Church to take a different approach to spirituality more seriously. Experience, and, in particular, spiritual experience, feelings, and the mystical are important aspects of post-modern and, therefore, New Age spirituality.

“It is the search for spirituality - a mystical essence of personal, direct encounter with “God” - that is at the heart of much of the New Age Movement. In this quest, it is inevitable that hands-on experience is going to be far more important than mere intellectual belief.”<sup>44</sup>

So he concludes that the Church needs to realign itself with the contemporary culture, by moving on from the constraints of the past and returning to its origins where faith is essentially experiential.

“In particular we need to affirm that spirituality comes before theology, and allow experience of God to take precedence over metaphysical speculation.”<sup>45</sup>

Drane's thesis appears to be based on his own experience and observations of different groups and people. It is to some extent anecdotal because he has not compiled the data in a systematic way. Yet it is a challenge to the Church, even though, as we have seen, the concept of spirituality is very fluid and not easy to define. Hall<sup>46</sup>, however, has undertaken an ethnographic study of youth congregations and his evidence is more systematically compiled.

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44DRANE J. (1999), p. 58.

45DRANE J. (1997), p. 50.

46HALL John (2003). *The Rise of the Youth Congregation and its Missiological Significance*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham, PhD Thesis.

His findings seem to confirm Drane's experiences. The Kendal project also speaks of this move from church to "holistic spirituality".

What needs to be considered is the interpretation of the data. Is the new spirituality simply a rejection of the cognitive and intellectual or is it more complex than this? The rejection of religion, in this case the institutional church, may include the intellectual aspect, but it is also about control. This is illustrated by the centrality of creeds and specific rituals, all of which are under the control of the Church and clergy. The freedom of individual spirituality without the need to conform to a particular pattern of defining and explaining faith may be more significant.

#### **9.4. Belief and Belonging**

Bruce's extensive work on the state of the religion and, particularly, the Church in Britain also acknowledges that the Reformation changed the concept of faith, from one which had a significant place for superstition and the supernatural, to one which made intellectual assent to doctrine central.<sup>47</sup> Religion became an individual choice to be in a relationship with God, and how to express that relationship in worship and church membership. Further, he agrees with other scholars that by buying into secular values, the distinctiveness of Christian teaching has been lost.

"In so far as the supernatural or the spiritual is still to be found in the mainstream, it is almost homeopathic concentrations: so watered down as to be a shadow of its former self, nearly undetectable to the untrained eye."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>BRUCE Steve (1995). *Religion in Modern Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 15.



He understands that this has led to the decline in the Church, both in terms of falling church attendance and its declining influence and authority in society. Bruce considers that the modernisation of the Church, through the Protestant Reformation and the acceptance of Enlightenment thinking, encouraged the relativising of faith, giving people not only a choice of religion, but also a choice of believing or not believing. Consequently people were able to opt out of religion completely. However, while Bruce places the origin of this change in the Reformation, it has been seen significantly in the decline of Religion and the Church in the 20th century. Therefore, there must be other factors that precipitated the decline.

Lynch, in his study on “Generation X”<sup>49</sup>, concludes that the decline of the church is due to the general move away from institutional religion to a personal pursuit of the meaning of life.<sup>50</sup> The decline in the Church and church attendance, then, is not an indicator that there is a decline in belief. Indeed the polls indicate that there continues to be a belief in God, even an increase in belief. As he defines religion as institutional, then he sees a decline in religion, but not in belief. The movement is from organised activities of worship and expression of faith, to personal experiences. This movement can be illustrated by comparing the level of church attendance in Britain with the level of reporting of spiritual experiences. Graphs 7, 8 and 9<sup>51</sup>, show that, while church attendance and membership has been in decline over the last twenty years, the reporting of spiritual experiences has been increasing rapidly.

Lynch continues, suggesting that the new “religion” is to be open to experiences that give a person a sense of being part of something greater, and spirituality as “a kind of signpost that

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48BRUCE S. (1995), p. 125.

49LYNCH Gordon (2002). *‘Generation X’ and the Search for Meaning*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.

50LYNCH G. (2002), p. ix.

51Found on pages 284 - 285.

indicates that people have a need to live with a sense of meaning, value and mystery.” It, therefore, tends to be identified with anything that can help someone attain that sense of meaning and value, or to feel “spiritual” in relation to their life.”<sup>52</sup>

Davie agrees that religion has shifted from Church based and, therefore, community based, to an individually based religion.<sup>53</sup> This individuality has allowed for a greater emphasis on experience and feelings than was possible in community based religion. She understands that, while the decline of the Church may have started earlier, it is significant from 1945. Such decline is due to the Church attempting to relate to society with secular values rather than responding to the paradigm changes in 1960’s society. Continuing to divide life into the sacred and the secular, it responded intellectually, organisationally, liturgically, and by developing social work. It failed to understand the developing post-modern thought in which the sacred and the secular came closer together, and existence consists of relationships, and so religious life was destroyed not transformed. Consequently:

“There is no longer any point in dividing our experience into ‘this-worldly’ and ‘other-worldly’ categories. For if everything is related to everything else, the separation of the sacred and the profane begins to lose its plausibility. The sacred starts to spill into everyday thinking.”<sup>54</sup>

Far from becoming secular, then, she considers that British society is still very religious. Having rejected institutional religion, and the Church, religion takes on new forms, such as “mass observations” in times of crisis, and a supermarket of faiths and spiritualities. The conclusion is that Britain has become a society of “believing without belonging”, and that religion is taking on new forms.

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<sup>52</sup>LYNCH G. (2002), p. 105.

<sup>53</sup>DAVIE Grace (1994). *Religion in Britain Since 1945*. Oxford: Blackwell.

<sup>54</sup>DAVIE G. (1994), p. 41.

“Religious life - like so many other features of post-industrial or post-modern society - is not so much disappearing as mutating, for the sacred undoubtedly persists and will continue to do so, but in forms that may be very different from those which have gone before.”<sup>55</sup>

Davie considers that this is a new way of expressing religion, but in fact it is a rejection of religion, if this is defined principally as an institution. What has mutated is spirituality, which no longer needs to be connected to an established or institutional religion.

These different forms, that Davie refers to, are generally called spiritualities and are classified under the umbrella of “the New Age Movement”. However, this represents more than a simple shift from community religion to individual religion. While there has been a shift in spirituality from an institutional, intellectual, and credal expression of faith, to one that is centred on experience and feelings, there is also a shift in the focus and locus of faith. This is illustrated in the researches of Heelas and Woodhead<sup>56</sup>, who define religion in terms of obedience and submission to a transcendent God and a tradition which mediates this authority (so placing it within the institution). They define spirituality as experience of the divine as immanent in life, focusing on the higher or inner self to transform the self. It is, then, personal; that which is interior or immanent; that which is one’s experienced relationship with the sacred; and that wisdom and knowledge which derives from such experiences, and is in contrast to religion that attempts to transform society. While traditional religion is about obedience and submission to the Transcendent, spirituality is concerned for the here and now, so the locus has shifted from the transcendent Divine, to the immanent within the individual.

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<sup>55</sup>DAVIE G. (1994), p. 199.

<sup>56</sup>WOODHEAD L. and HEELAS P. (2000). *Religion in Modern Times: an interpretative anthology*. Oxford: Blackwells, and WOODHEAD Linda et al. (2002). *Religions in the Modern World*. London: Routledge.

The Kendal Project, directed by Heelas and Woodhead<sup>57</sup>, was research using survey and interview techniques in the town of Kendal, to ascertain how many people were involved, on a regular basis, with traditional religion and with new spiritualities. These new spiritualities are described as Holistic Spiritualities in the project, and include alternative medicine, massage, therapies, as well as meditation, yoga and the like. The project recognises that some people take part in these activities from a purely health perspective and have little concern for them as spiritualities, and so makes allowances for this in the analysis. However, the conclusions indicate that there has been a move away from the traditional forms of religion (which the project describes as the “congregational domain”) to the individual Holistic Spiritualities. From their survey<sup>58</sup> they noted that, while at present the number of people involved in the alternative spiritualities is small (representing about 0.6% of the population), the growth of interest and participation over the last forty years is very significant, leading the project to predict that it will rise to 3% of the population in the next fifty years.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, it is predicted that the churches will decline from the present 7.9% to about 0.9%<sup>60</sup> of the population in a similar period.

This change from congregational to individual, and from religious to holistic spirituality, is understood to be part of a changing culture that is described as subjectivisation. The authors do not want to use such terms as secularisation or sacralisation when they describe the changing culture. Instead they prefer the more philosophical concept that contemporary

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57HEELAS Paul et al. (2005). *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

58The survey counted all people attending church on a particular Sunday and all people attending alternative holistic spiritual activities over a period of a week. (HEELAS P. et al. (2005), pp. 35 - 36.) The researchers compared their findings with other studies and concluded that they were representative. (HEELAS P. et al. (2005), pp. 50 - 55).

59HEELAS P. et al. (2005), p. 137.

60HEELAS P. et al. (2005), p. 41.

interest is not in religion or its decline as such, but in the increasing concern for the individual, independence, and the importance of the influence of the experiential, memories, and inner life on health, wealth, and the spirit.

## **9.5. Faith in the United Reformed Church**

The present study of spiritual experiences was undertaken in a congregation of the URC. The statistical data informs us that the URC is one of the churches that is in rapid decline and we can understand why this might be if we examine its history and ecclesiology.

The URC and its predecessors which united to form the URC, have been strongly influenced by enlightenment ideals. The Reformed nature of this church, reinforced by the outcomes of the conflict between Science and Religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has meant that the church is largely white middle class in make-up. Faith has been mainly expressed through the intellectual and the cerebral approach to worship and has resulted, to a greater extent, in the exclusion of the sensual and experiential in church life. During the 1960's there was a significant acceptance of the "Social Gospel".

This heritage is still largely seen in the URC, as indicated by the findings of the 1998 Church Survey and the Church Life Profile Survey of 2001.<sup>61</sup> From the 2001 survey it is found that over a third of the people in the URC (39%) prefer to use the term "reformed" to describe the church, and over a fifth (21%) use the terms "moderate" or "liberal" with a 13% minority

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<sup>61</sup>The results of this survey, undertaken by the Churches Information for Mission, is found in the documents: GELDER Alison and ESCOTT Phillip. (2001). *Faith in Life*. London: Churches Information for Mission, and ESCOTT Phillip and GELDER Alison. (2002). *Church Life Profile 2001: Denominational Results for the United Reformed Church*. London: Churches Information for Mission.

calling themselves evangelical<sup>62</sup>. Brierley, in the 1998 survey, uses different labels for what he terms “churchmanship” and finds that the URC is 49% liberal, 14% low, 16% broad and 21% evangelical.<sup>63</sup> The different terms used in the different surveys means that it is difficult to correlate the findings, but both surveys indicate that the majority of the people in the URC would place themselves, and the Church as a whole, within the broad or liberal tradition of the Protestant Church. While a significant number are also happy with the description of evangelical, only 4% describe themselves as Pentecostal or Charismatic<sup>64</sup>. Consequently it is clear that the emphasis within the URC is still largely cognitive and not experiential. Part of the description of the URC, from the Church Life Profile, is that it takes “a more cerebral approach to worship” and puts low importance on evangelistic outreach and has a lack of apparent vision in the churches.<sup>65</sup>

This style of ecclesiology reflects the state of the church. The age profile of the members indicates that the average age is higher than the average age of the church as a whole, that the majority of members (68%) are women (which to some extent reflects the age profile), and that the church congregations are relatively small (the average attendance at Sunday worship being 90). Most of the congregations are situated in suburbs (33%), small towns (20%), and rural areas (28%)<sup>66</sup>. Only 7% are found in the inner city areas and 4% on “council estates”.

The church is strongly involved with community work provision, which means that what resources and energy are available is put into this work and maintaining the church and its institution, and little is done for outreach and to encourage growth. The URC follows a

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62ESCOTT P. and GELDER A. (2002), p. 12.

63BRIERLEY P. (2000a), p. 154.

64ESCOTT P. and GELDER A. (2002), p. 12.

65SCOTT P. and GELDER A. (2002), p. 2.

similar pattern of decline that is found in all the major Protestant Churches in the UK, with church attendance and membership falling sharply (see Tables 13, 14 and 15 and Graphs 4, 5 and 6<sup>67</sup>). However, nearly three-quarters of the members felt that their faith had grown over the 12 month period before the Church Life Profile survey had taken place.<sup>68</sup> Consequently while the report states that, “The overall picture this presents is of a denomination which to a large extent mirrors the popular media stereotypes of ‘church’ and ‘Christianity’”<sup>69</sup>, at least for the members, it deviates from the perceived notion that the church is “unspiritual” and that the church does not allow for spiritual growth.

The local church that took part in the “Perceptions of God” research, was an inner city church with a membership of 67 and an average attendance at worship of about 60. Therefore, while it is smaller than the average URC, it is an average Inner City URC. Likewise, its membership is more varied than the average URC, having a significant number of people from the Afro-Caribbean community within it. But this largely reflects the “inner city” nature of the area.

## **9.6. Conclusions**

In summary, then, we can see that recent research into the state of the Church in Britain today, has concluded that there is a rapid, and significant, decline in Church going in Britain. This has been related to the change in culture from what is generally described as modern to post-modern. This change has also been variously described as a secularisation process, a

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66BRIERLEY P. (1999), p. 2 and p. 13.

67Found on pages 281 - 284.

68ESCOTT P. and GELDER A. (2002), p. 16.

69ESCOTT P. and GELDER A. (2002), p. 2.

subjectivisation process, and a rejection of institutions, leading to less interest in expressing faith in traditional ways. Rather, there is a movement to express spirituality in more individual ways, emphasising the emotional and experiential. The decline in the church is understood, then, to be related primarily to the inability of the church to move out of its enlightenment rationalism, where faith has been defined in terms of a cerebral and intellectual assent to doctrine or faith statements. Such an approach is seen as authoritarian, constraining, and institutional. These are all rejected in a post-modern society, which is changing to be more subjective and less objective in the way the world, and life, is constructed. The growth in alternative and holistic spiritualities is a significant indicator of this movement. It is also illustrated in the rapid increase in the number of spiritual experiences reported over recent years. Graphs 7, 8 and 9<sup>70</sup> compare the percentages of the population reporting spiritual experiences with the percentage of the population in church membership and attending church. The rapid increase in the reporting of spiritual experiences over the last forty years takes place against the background of steadily declining church attendance and membership. However, it is worth repeating that the exception to decline is the New, Charismatic, and Pentecostal churches who are seeing an increase in attendance. That these churches emphasise the place of spiritual experiences, as well as doctrine, and a greater concern for the individual's life and spirituality, has to be a significant factor in their growth.

Having explored the background of the context of the church in Britain, and the place of the URC within this, we need to return to our findings in the survey of spiritual experiences and draw conclusions about the importance of spiritual experiences in the life of the church.

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<sup>70</sup>Found on pages 284 - 285.



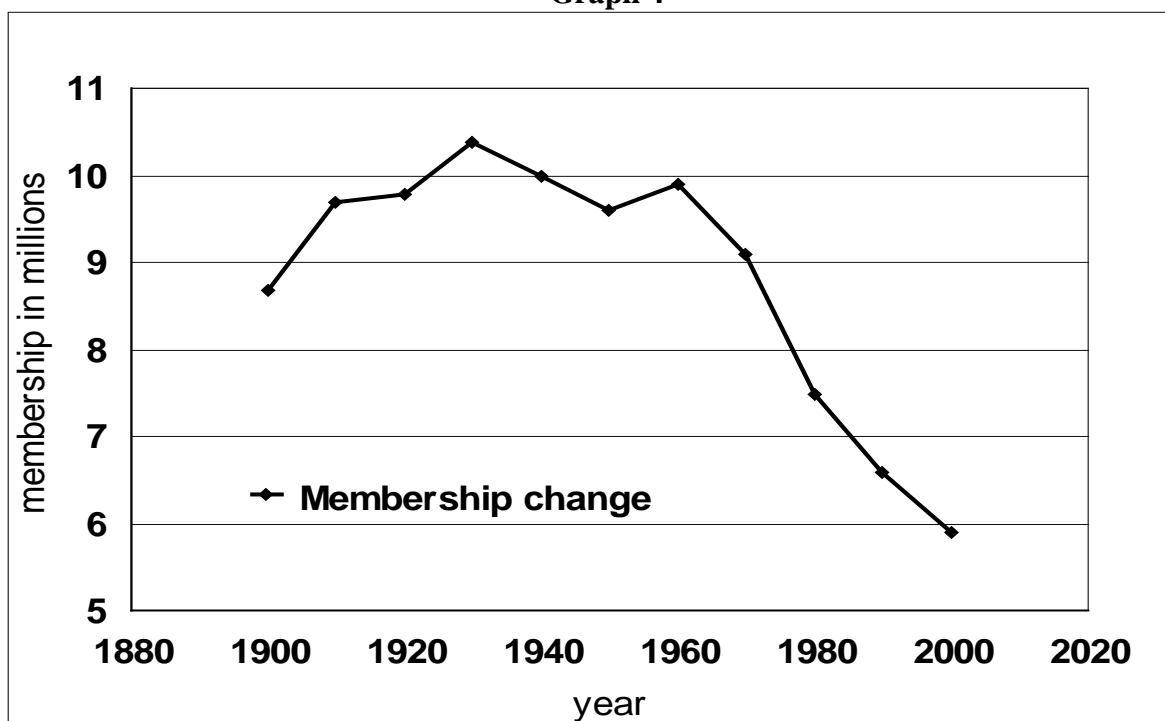
Table 13

Year	Total Church Membership in the UK	Total Protestant Membership in the UK
1900	8,663,826	6,751,869
1910	9,703,961	7,708,651
1920	9,802,669	7,695,669
1930	10,357,153	8,167,418
1940	10,017,230	7,784,960
1950	9,613,984	7,182,444
1960	9,917,845	7,073,275
1970	9,079,403	6,333,200
1980	7,528,995	5,076,192
1990	6,624,051	4,422,568
2000	5,861,796	4,140,296

**UK Church Membership by Year**

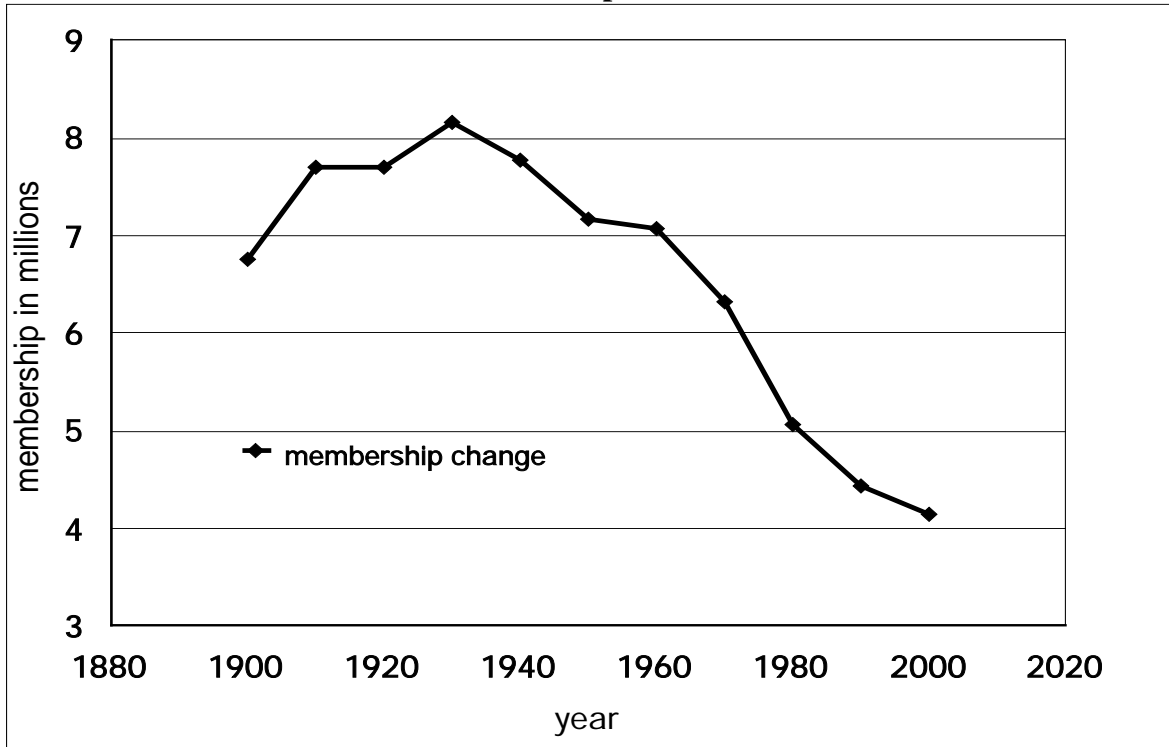
[source: Brierey 1999]

**Graph 4**



**UK Church Membership Change**

**Graph 5**



**Protestant Church Membership in the UK**

Table 14

Year	Presbyterian Church of England	Cong. Union of England & Wales	Combined total of PCE and CUEW	United Reformed Church
1900	76,071	278,683	354,754	
1910	86,828	310,645	397,473	
1920	83,710	314,920	398,630	
1930	84,146	313,497	397,643	
1940	76,815	280,360	357,175	
1950	69,676	229,668	299,344	
1960	71,329	214,583	285,912	
1970*	59,473	167,802	227,275	192,163
1980				147,337
1990				116,670
2000				87,250#

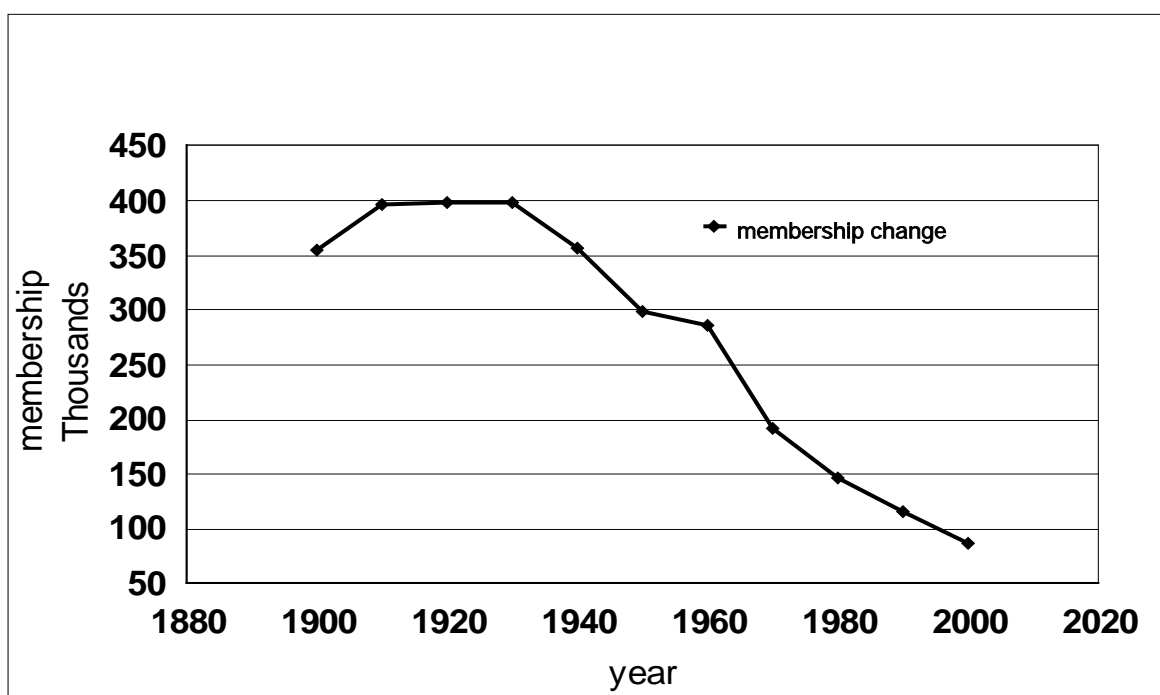
### URC Church Membership by Year

[source: Brierley 1999]

\* the figure for the United Reformed Church is the figure at its foundation in 1972, when not all members of the uniting churches joined the URC.

# The figure used in the table is from Brierley, however the URC handbook 2001 gives the figure 92,787.

Graph 6



Church Membership Change in the URC

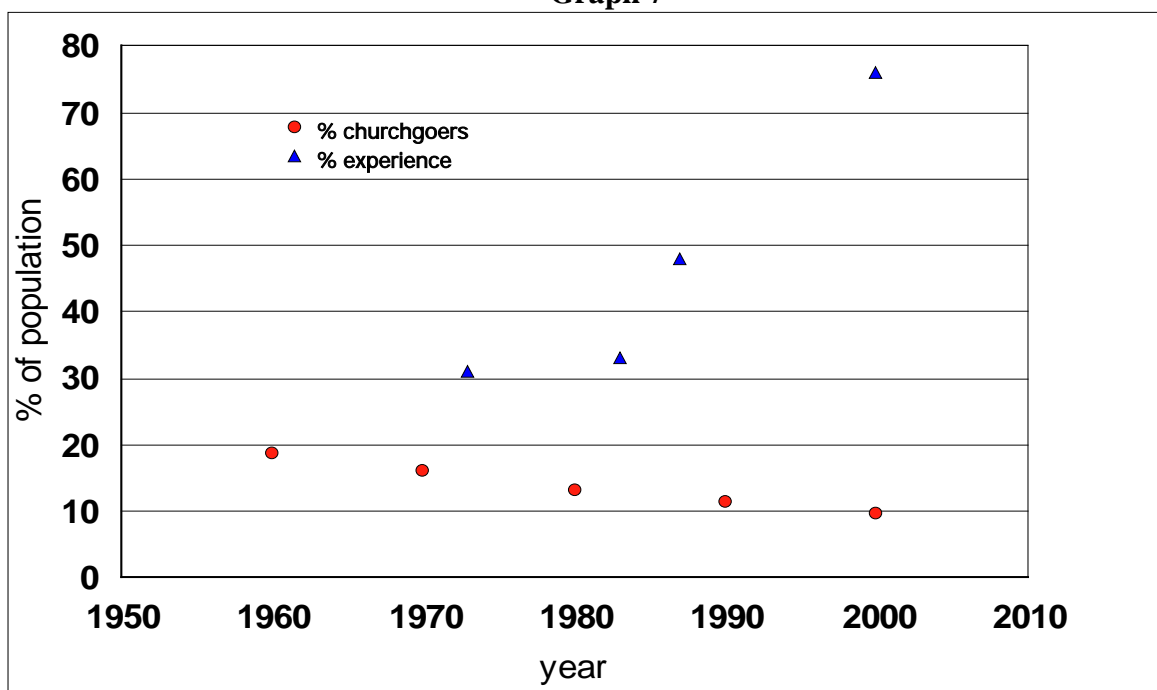
**Table 15**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Church Membership as % of UK population</b>	<b>Church Attendance as % of UK population</b>
1900	22.65	
1910	23.06	
1920	22.26	
1930	22.48	
1940	21.00	
1950	19.14	
1960	18.82	
1970	16.35	
1980	13.36	11.7
1990	11.45	9.9
2000	9.91	7.5

**Church Membership as a Percentage of the UK Population by Year**

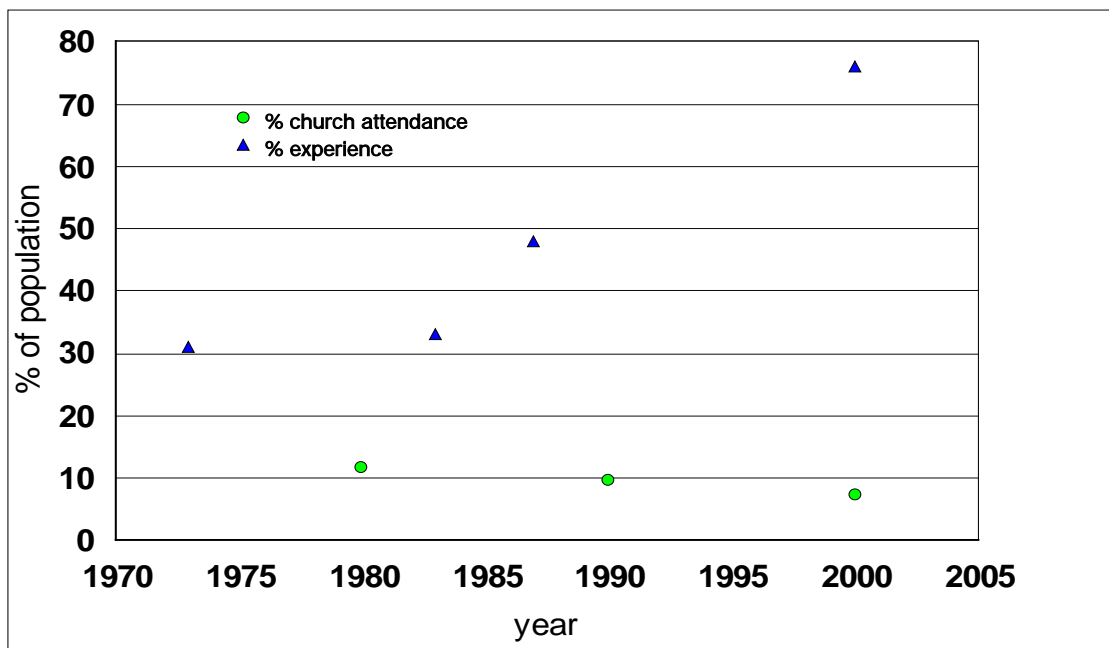
[source: Brierley 1999]

**Graph 7**



**Comparison of Church Membership and Reporting of Spiritual Experiences as a Percentage of the Population**

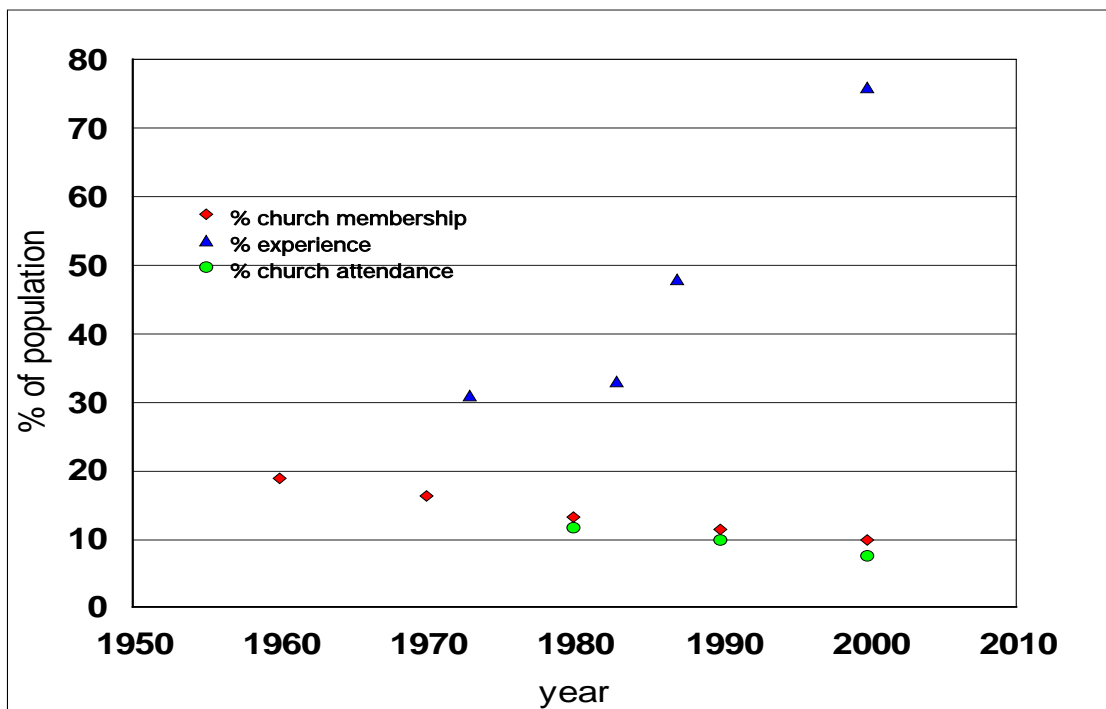
[sources: various]



**Graph 8**

**Comparison of Church Attendance with Reporting of Spiritual Experiences as a Percentage of the Population.** [sources: various]

**Graph 9**



**Comparison of Church Membership, Attendance and Reporting of Spiritual Experiences as a Percentage of the Population.**

[sources: various]

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **CONCLUSIONS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAITH AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES**

## **10. CONCLUSIONS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAITH AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES**

The case study of the spiritual experiences among a local congregation in Birmingham has given an opportunity to explore Spiritual Experience within a particular context. The study has provided the opportunity to understand spiritual experiences in the individual contexts of each person, and this enabled us to understand the relationship of the spiritual experiences to each person's expressed faith. Indeed, inherent in the method of study for this project has been the assumption that it is important to study spiritual experiences as individual and unique experiences. While it is acknowledged that there may be common factors for some of the spiritual experiences, it was decided not to take a reductionist position. But we have looked at some of the general trends and similarities as we have explored the reported experiences. This has helped us to classify the spiritual experiences in order to understand them more fully. Each report speaks of the spiritual experience in a different language according to the context of the individual. Therefore, it was found that the spiritual experiences are different. Each is associated with its own context and has a unique content and purpose. These contents and purposes were associated with the particular individual crisis of the moment.

### **10.1. The Variety of Experiences**

That each spiritual experience has its own context, not only helps explain the individuality of each experience, but also the variety that were reported in the study. Varying from the almost mystical to what might be described as the almost "every day", the study provided a range of

types of spiritual experiences. This range has included the dramatic occurrences of a dream, healing, answered prayer, through the more internal feelings of awe and wonder at natural phenomenon, the presence of the dead and of God, the stirring of emotions through preaching and the joy of worship and worship space, to the reports of finding inspiration.

We have also found that variety is expressed in the range of settings and triggers for the experiences, so that we could only conclude that for the people in this survey, there is no one setting or trigger that is more important than another. The setting of church worship was significant for a number of the reports, but was only one of many. Prayer and meditation were common mediums for experiences, but others used memory, nature, spoken words, and a dream.

Where the spiritual experiences seemed to converge is in the consequences. All the experiences indicated that the events provided an assurance, confidence, contentment, or well-being. This might have included a challenge to the person's life or faith, but that challenge was constructive not destructive. No experiences were reported that were considered to be negative, or to have involved the supernatural in a negative way. The well-being that they provided was for the individual, usually related to a specific incident or concern.

The only common element in all the experiences was that God was understood to be involved. However, while this might be a "common core", it does not indicate that the experiences are all essentially similar, as might be understood by Otto, Malsow and others.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 4.



It suggests that all the experiences are “spiritual”, that they address the individual’s situation and enable the person to attend to their situations.

## **10.2. Spiritual Experiences and Faith**

It was found that the type of spiritual experiences each person had relates to their history of faith, and their theological language. In one example, the spiritual experience challenged the received understanding of faith and so could be described as a type of conversion experience. We concluded that there was a clear relationship between expressed faith and the type of spiritual experience a person had. As all the people involved in the case study have had a long period, indeed a lifetime, of faith and religious involvement, then their faith had been prior to the experiences that they described. This could suggest that faith is prior to spiritual experiences, but it needs to be noted that faith continually develops and changes, so that while faith is prior to a particular experience, faith is also influenced and developed by that experience. Hence it can be said that the experience is part of the development of faith and is prior to, and determines, the later faith of the individual.

The work of Hay and Nye<sup>2</sup> indicates that spiritual experiences are not confined to later life and, therefore, are not dependent on a prior faith. It is found that children have high frequencies of spiritual experiences. One of the issues related to children is that they do not necessarily have the language and concepts to interpret, and describe, the experiences, and may be dismissed by adults and themselves in later life as childish fantasies. But it would

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2 HAY David and NYE Rebecca (1998). *The Spirit of the Child*. London: Fount.

also be true to say that children are not without faith.<sup>3</sup> The faith that they have will depend upon their context. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that faith and experiences continually inform each other.<sup>4</sup>

This case study, then, has shown that there is a significant relationship between expressed faith and spiritual experiences. Spiritual experiences are a factor in determining faith, and appear to be a means of expressing that faith, while faith gives meaning to the experiences.<sup>5</sup> Lindbeck calls this a dialectical relationship.<sup>6</sup> Spiritual experiences may only be one factor influencing a person's faith, others will include culture, community, experiences of life, and personality. These will provide the overall context for a person's faith.

The dialectical relationship between the spiritual experiences and the way in which people articulated and expressed their faith, indicates that God is experienced in appropriate ways for each individual. The experience of God seems to conform to the expected type of experience. Cupitt considers that this understanding of the relationship, between experience and prior faith, conforms to the doctrine of accommodation that states that God will communicate with a person according to the capacity of that person.<sup>7</sup> The expectation for spiritual experiences will include prior faith commitment. Bagger concludes that

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3 One of the participants in the pilot study referred to a childhood spiritual experience that she considered has influenced her faith and attitude to the Church.

4 This was also the finding of Lane in LANE Dermot A. (1985). *The Experience of God: an invitation to do theology*. Dublin: Veritas publications, p. 9.

5 LANE D.A. (1985), p. 55.

6 LINDBECK George A (1984). *The Nature of Doctrine: religion and theology in a Postliberal age*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, p. 32.

7 CUPITT Don (1998). *Mysticism after Modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 37. While Cupitt is discussing the specific spiritual experience defined as "mysticism", the statement is clearly relevant to all spiritual experiences. Other studies, including the investigation of Near Death Experiences and Visions, also appear to conform to this theory, otherwise the object of the vision would be unrecognisable. (see WIEBE Phillip H. (1997).) Cupitt appears to be rather dismissive of this type of theory, yet this study does seem to affirm that God is revealed in this way.

“experience ... includes influence (of a sort) from previous beliefs and commitments.”<sup>8</sup>

And he concludes this partly from his reading of the work of Schleiermacher, that indicates that we experience what we suppose is the best explanation of the experience event.<sup>9</sup> So for one experient in the case study, believing that she is unworthy of a visit from God, sees an angel; for another not really believing in a God who “breaks-into” history, experiences God in other people; while for another, God is the one who answers prayer. For the person who does not believe in supernatural events, God is experienced in the work and needs of other people. For the person who has been brought up in a faith context that accepts that God can answer prayer, even miraculously, God is experienced through the miraculous find of a lost medal.

This understanding, then, will inform any method of study of spiritual experiences and raise the question whether they can be studied fully if they are not studied in context, for any experience, however normative or exceptional, is not an isolated event.<sup>10</sup> We have already understood that an experience includes the event itself and the interpretation of it, but also that the event involves interpretation. This interpretation is informed through the prehistory and the post-history of the experience.<sup>11</sup> The prehistory will include all prior experiences, faith, religious experiences<sup>12</sup> and social, personal, and community influences.<sup>13</sup> Doctrine,

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8 BAGGER Matthew C. (1999). *Religious Experience, Justification and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 11.

9 BAGGER M. (1999), p. 2.

10 This is an issue that is being discussed at the Alister Hardy Society/Modern Churchperson's conference in June 2004.

11 RANKIN Marianne (2000). *Mysticism in the Christian Tradition. De Numine*. no. 29. Sept. 2000, Oxford: RERC, pp. 9 - 13. referring to the work of KATZ Steve on “Language, Epistemology and Mysticism”.

12 This concurs with the conclusions of Hardy, which he described as a relationship of “interaction.” HARDY Alister (1979). *The Spiritual Nature of Man: a study of contemporary religious experience*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 119.

religious knowledge and traditions are also factors that help to mould the spiritual experience and its understanding.

Likewise the post-history of an experience is the context and the culture in which the person is set. The culture gives the parameters within which an experience can be authenticated, described, and interpreted. This moderates the description, the interpretation, and the understanding of the experience. Indeed, the act of “telling their stories” is an additional means of allowing the experiences to develop faith. It is, in effect, a process of theological reflection and an important part of that process for people.<sup>14</sup>

So an experience, and in the context of this study, a spiritual experience will be encountered within a complex of influences. In the same way, the reflection, understanding, interpretation, and description of the experience will be moulded by personal and communal elements. Description and interpretation is normally controlled by what is considered to be orthodox interpretations. Orthodoxy meaning not just religious orthodoxy but social as well.<sup>15</sup> Different cultures and sub-cultures will have their own, usually, informal guidelines on how experiences can be described and interpreted, while institutional religions are more likely to have formal requirements.

These elements, involved in describing and interpreting the experiences, also have to take into consideration the processes of dealing with reports. Studying spiritual experiences is not

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13FOX Mark (1999). Experiences or Tales? Approaching Paranormal and Religious Experience at the End of the Millennium. *De Numine*. no. 26. Feb. 1999, Oxford: RERC, pp. 14 - 17.

14STRINGER Martin (1999). *On the Perception of Worship: the ethnography of worship in four Christian congregations in Manchester*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, p. 157. Stringer also understands that the telling of the story gives structure to the experience.

15FOX Mark (2003). *Religion, Spiritualities and Near Death Experience*. London: Routledge.

an observation of events, but a “reading of the texts” albeit that the texts are oral accounts. However, they need to be understood as texts, which themselves have gone through a process of refining, and so are secondary material. Only the experient has first-hand experience of the event, but as we have seen this in itself is never “pure”. Experience is always event plus interpretation.

We have also seen that spiritual experiences are only one element that develops faith. The case study used doctrine and Scripture as two other factors in a person’s faith. In all cases, for people who acknowledged that they had had spiritual experiences, it was found that doctrine and Scripture were also important for faith. The importance of Scripture seemed to be increased for those who had had spiritual experiences. So even with these three factors it will be understood that they are interrelated. Doctrine and Scripture are part of the prehistory and post-history of the person, and so it is seen that the interrelationship is one of mutual influence.<sup>16</sup>

This case study, then, has shown that there is a significant relationship between expressed faith and spiritual experiences. Spiritual experiences inform faith, and appear to be a means of expressing that faith, while faith gives meaning to the experiences.<sup>17</sup> Spiritual experiences may only be one factor influencing a person’s faith and so any theological reflection must also take these other factors into consideration. This study has considered the case for doctrine and the Scriptures, but it is recognised that other factors play their part in informing faith. All these factors, which will include culture, community, experiences of life, and personality will provide the overall context for a person’s faith.

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<sup>16</sup>BAGGER M.C. (1999), p. 22.

### 10.3. Spiritual Experience and Immanence

To call an experience “spiritual” implies that there is a spiritual dimension to the experience and all the experiences reported in the case study can be said to have had this element. So, Spiritual Experience is related to God, the Divine, the transcendent or “the Other”, the Universe, or the supernatural, and it is related to the human self. An experience will not be considered spiritual if it does not include the understanding by the experient that it has involved such an encounter. So, in this sense, there is an agreement with Otto that the core of a spiritual experience is an encounter with the Divine. In our study we have found that such encounters do vary from the almost mystical to the everyday. For those who took part in the study, being members of a Christian Church, it was an encounter with God, although that encounter may have involved an intermediary who was either human or supernatural. There were only two reports that spoke of other supernatural occurrences, one being the visitation by an angel, and the other being a sense of the presence of the dead. So we had examples of supernatural encounters, but also the understanding that the work and presence of God could be seen in other people.

In the spiritual experiences reported in the case study, all appear to have been, at least in part, an experience of encounter with the transcendent nature of God. God may have been encountered through awe and wonder, as “out there” or needing intermediaries. But, with the possible exception of the experience of the angel, the experients did not report that they had had feelings of anxiety or fear.<sup>18</sup> *Ozzy* may have had an experience that was of a more mystical nature, but he did not express these feelings. From the reports, the spiritual

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<sup>18</sup>LANE D.A. (1985), p. 55.

experiences have been more about the immanence of God. God is experienced as loving, caring, helping, guiding, and comforting.

The transcendence of God is not necessarily only expressed in terms of awe and majesty and fear. God is also experienced as loving kindness.<sup>19</sup> The transcendent God of love is expressed by Morgan as

‘that moment of pointless loving communication is the best glimpse many of us will have of what that rather solemn and pompous word [transcendence] means.’<sup>20</sup>

Otto would also understand that there is an element of love, “fascinans”, in the encounter with the transcendent. However, for the Christian, the love of God is associated more with God’s action in Jesus Christ which is an expression of the immanence of God.

There may be awe and wonder in the created world, and therefore, an acknowledgement of the awe and wonder of God, and while this may relate to the transcendence of God, it can also be about the presence of God. None of the experiencers had a concept of “pointless loving communication” but rather felt that there was a consequence to the experiences. God is present in the world, and in people and events. So while some theologians might consider this type of revelation to be about the transcendent<sup>21</sup>, the examples from the study have indicated that God is revealed as primarily the immanent not the transcendent God. *Carrie*,

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18One respondent in the pilot study reported the experience of being overawed by the majesty of God.

19Psalm 25: 6; 89: 49.

20MORGAN Peggy (2004). Continuing the Work. *De Numine*. no. 35. Feb. 2004, Lampeter: RERC, p. 22.

21Such revelation is often termed “General” or “Natural” revelation and some theologians, understanding that this reveals God as creator, consider this to be revealing the transcendent nature of God. Daxy considers this to be the position of Rahner (DAXY Gabriel (1997).) *Revelation in the Theology of the Roman Catholic Church*. In AVIS Paul (ed), *Divine Revelation*. London: Darton, Longman And Todd) and Avis, who considers that Moltman believes that transcendent is discerned in every kind of experience (AVIS Paul (1997b). *Divine*

who understands God as more judgmental, and therefore, has a fear of God, has clearly had a prehistory of faith that has emphasised this aspect of the nature of God. She indicated that this was part of her childhood upbringing. The Roman Catholic tradition has had an influence on *Annabel* who perceives God as ‘out there’. However, it can still be said that all of the respondents perceive God as more immanent, or even wholly immanent as the spiritual experiences are of God at work within the human sphere, in other people, and sharing in, and helping to solve, an individual’s crisis.

The experience of immanence is also an experience of the “Mission Dei”, for God is seen to be working with the individual, and within the physical, creaturely realm. The mission is one that brings liberation and understanding at a time of crisis. It may also bring challenge, but it brings a freedom to the person by confirming and developing faith and the underlying basis of their world view. The mission is, therefore, contextual, because it relates to the individual’s situation. Cruchley-Jones calls this the “epiphany of God”.<sup>22</sup>

#### **10.4. Spiritual Experiences and Anthropology**

The study has shown that not only is God primarily encountered as immanent, but also encountered within the realm of human affairs, and therefore, emphasises the incarnational concept of God and the actions of God. So it can be postulated that this congregation’s spirituality is within the human realm and related to the human condition and human affairs.

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*Revelation in Modern Protestant Theology*. In AVIS P. (ed), Divine Revelation. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.).

22CRUCHLEY-JONES Peter (2001). *Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land?* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, p. 199. Cruchley-Jones explores the concept of “Mission in Exile” which he understands to be seeking to be open to the presence of God and how God is present in a context. This will lead to discovering how to act in context.



It is supernatural in that the encounters are understood to be with God or supernatural beings, who penetrate the “natural”. God (or God’s guidance) is revealed to the experiencers directly and is often the response to particular crises and situations. Yet God is also revealed in nature, music, and worship. This is not what might be called mystical, in that the experiencer is not taken “out of the world”, but instead they experience the divine within the world.

Therefore, it appears that the human element in the experience is important. Hay and Hardy, approaching spiritual experiences from a biological perspective, are willing to claim that spiritual experiences are part of anthropology, that is, a human phenomenon.<sup>23</sup> However, they recognise that they also involve the transcendent. Maslow agrees that they are a human phenomenon, but prefers to define them as being under human control and that spiritual experiences are the human transcending to his or her limitations.<sup>24</sup> This study emphasises that the human element is important because it is in, and through, the human condition that the divine is experienced.

This human element is personal and communal. The personal element is the individual situation, history, and concerns. The communal element includes the faith community of which the person is a part. While this might provide a setting for an experience, such as worship, it also provides a tradition, beliefs, and doctrines. The wider community provides, or withholds, a societal consent for the discussion of spiritual experiences. Both, or either, of these will provide a language, whether adequate or not, for the description and understanding

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23HARDY Alister (1966). *The Divine Flame: an essay towards a Natural theology of religions*. Oxford: RERC, p. 74. HAY David (1982). *Exploring Inner Space: is God still possible in the 20th century?* Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 9.

24MASLOW A. (1970). *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper and Row.

of the experience. Without language there is no means of accessing thought or concept, or of understanding experience. The cognitive element is, therefore, highly significant.

The neurotheologians highlight the significance of the anatomy of the human brain to be able to process spiritual encounters. While some will want to reduce any spiritual experience to a series of chemical reactions and neural impulses, others will deduce that the brain is ‘hardwired’ for encounters with the divine. Less controversial are the observations that a spiritual experience is not irresistible; a person has to be in the right context for an experience; and have the suitable skills to be able to interpret the event. Therefore, the human element is inseparable from the experience.

### **10.5. The Consequences of Spiritual Experiences**

The encounter with God and the human context are central to a spiritual experience, but most scholars also consider that an essential element is the fruits, or the consequences, of the spiritual experiences. Examples from the Old Testament indicate that while the consequences of the encounters with God had an important impact on the experient, the consequences were felt by and intended for the wider community. Moses is to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery<sup>25</sup>; Isaiah and Ezekiel<sup>26</sup> are given responsibilities for the faith of the community of God’s people. The reports of the encounters with the risen Christ have both individual and wider consequences. They are the basis of faith for the individual disciples and followers of Christ, but they are also interpreted as commissioning events that charge the experients with a universal task. The clearest examples of this are the stories of the disciples meeting the risen Christ on the mountain and receiving what came to be known

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<sup>25</sup>xodus 4.

as the “Great Commission”<sup>27</sup>, and Paul’s encounter on the Damascus Road<sup>28</sup> that he later describes as the time when Christ commissioned him to be the Apostle to the Gentiles<sup>29</sup>. Therefore, it is not without precedent that many scholars consider that the most acceptable way to study spiritual experiences is through their consequences. These are seen to give credibility and authenticity to them.

The actions that seem to have emerged from the experiences of those in the case study have been personal ones. There were no descriptions of feelings of being commissioned to new tasks, or consequences for the wider community.<sup>30</sup> The major effect of the spiritual experiences was to encourage and confirm faith. All respondents reported feelings of well-being, confidence, assurance, and the like. These were immediate consequences but also, on the whole, had lasting effects. One experience provided a resolution of a particular problem, one was a challenge to faith, but mostly they were understood as events of comfort. Again there seems to be an emphasis on the immanent nature of God. The God experienced is a loving, caring God, whose presence is felt, resulting in blessing and well-being. The main consequence is to inform and develop faith.

This development of faith has been personal and individual, and the spiritual experiences have dealt with personal problems and issues. We have noted that the context often includes a personal need, but perhaps we can say that spiritual experiences are themselves often a response to personal need. This would certainly be the case for all those who took part in the

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26Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1.

27Matthew 28: 16ff.

28Acts 9.

29Galatians 1: 15f, 1 Corinthians 15: 8ff.

30It is interesting to note that one respondent in the pilot study, following his experience, felt he was now able to help others who encountered similar crises to his own.

case study, with the exception of *Mike*. Fowler<sup>31</sup>, and others who have studied development of faith, would consider that a crisis point is a trigger to a change in faith, and those who have studied conversion experiences<sup>32</sup> would also consider a crisis as a normal part of the experience and process of conversion. Conversion and faith development can be generalised and systematised, but it has to be acknowledged that each case is individual and unique. We, too, have seen that all the respondents in the study are unique, and express their faith in different ways.

Therefore, we can conclude that the primary consequence of the contemporary spiritual experiences has been one of personal and spiritual growth. Issues and situations have been resolved, questions answered, and faith confirmed. In some instances faith has been challenged, but we might reasonably say that there has been a development of faith in all cases.

In experiments conducted with Buddhist monks and Christian nuns<sup>33</sup>, it has been inferred that spiritual experiences are good for people. They produce a feeling of well-being, of relaxation and peace. This reduces stress levels and enables a person to have a better perspective on life. Franks Davies suggests that

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31 FOWLER James (1981). *Stages of Faith: the psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.

32 For example, BATSON C.D. and VENTIS W.L. (1982). *The Religious Experience - a socio-psychological perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

33 NEWBERG Andrew et al. (2002). *Why God Won't Go Away: brain science and the biology of belief*. New York: Ballantine Books. They report their findings on trials with Buddhist monks in meditation and Franciscan Nuns at prayer. Michael Persinger using electromagnetic techniques has initiated spiritual experiences in subjects and James Austin lays out his theories in "Zen and the Brain". These are reported in the following articles: VEDANTAM Shankar (2001). Tracing the Synapses of Our Spirituality. *Washington Post*, June 2001; LATTIN Don (2001). Neuro-theology Takes Some Divine Introspection. *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 27th 2001; BERGLEY Sharon (2001). Religion and The Brain. *Newsweek*, 7th May 2001.

“Religious experiences may well be conducive to good mental health and to a healthy, positive attitude towards death ... In innumerable cases, religious experiences have helped people deal with crises, anxiety, sorrow, and guilt, and have provided comfort and hope, courage, guidance, and moral strength.”<sup>34</sup>

However, other scholars would disagree and consider that there is insufficient evidence to show that spiritual experiences produce a healthier person.<sup>35</sup> Francis concludes that they neither show that the person is psychologically stronger or weaker.<sup>36</sup>

The implications of these results are that religion and spirituality are not irrelevant. Indeed the reverse is probably true; a person who has spiritual experiences and is able to respond to them, represents a more contented and whole human being. The experiences have enabled the experients to solve their crises and deal with their situations. They have not been made immune to their contexts, difficulties, nor sufferings, nor been enabled to ignore them, but instead, have been able to deal with them and so develop in faith and life. The spiritual experiences have had a positive effect on their lives. Indeed it confirms part of James’s description, that Religion is that which helps keep people happy<sup>37</sup>, not by taking them away from reality, but by making them more aware of it, and so religious experience<sup>38</sup> is part of this process. The indications from the case study would concur with these findings.

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34FRANKS DAVIES Caroline (1989). *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 247.

35FRANCIS L.J. (2004). *The God Experience (Who Has It and Why?): perspectives from empirical theology*. Unpublished paper presented at the Modern Churchperson’s Conference, July 2004.

36FRANCIS L.J. (2004).

37JAMES William (1960). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. London: Collins, Lecture 3. (A reprint of the original edition published in 1902.)

38James uses the term religious experience rather than spiritual experience, but this can also refer to the institutional and ritual elements of faith.

Part of this reality is the understanding that God is present and able to assist a person. This informs a faith, that we have seen among the respondents, that God is perceived primarily as immanent, being a source of blessing and well-being, and the source of solutions to problems. Each experience has been unique and has spoken to the unique situation of each person. We have, therefore, concluded that spiritual experiences are contextual for the individual.

The “subjectivization” thesis, derived from the findings of the Kendal Project<sup>39</sup>, suggests that society has moved towards a greater concern and focus on subjective aspects of life and faith, at the expense of the objective. So life and faith is influenced or determined by individual feelings, emotions, memories, and experiences. This emphasis on individual experience seems to relate to the increase in the number of spiritual experiences being reported in recent years, as they become more acceptable and less marginalised in the contemporary culture.

MacLaren, commenting on this finding in the Hardy and Hay surveys, says:

“If religious experience itself has not become more prevalent, this suggests that people are increasingly inclined to admit to religious experiences, or at least to interpret their experiences in religious terms.”<sup>40</sup>

People now feel that there is a greater permission to speak publicly not only about spirituality, but about personal spiritual experiences. The findings of the survey of the Birmingham Church suggest that spiritual experiences are more common and more influential for individuals than is generally understood to be true for the Church. However, they are still largely marginalised in worship and theology.

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<sup>39</sup>HEELAS Paul et al. (2005). *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, chapter 1.

<sup>40</sup>MACLAREN Duncan (2004). *Mission Impossible: Restoring Credibility to the Church*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, pp. 66 - 67.

The Kendal Project has further concluded that a large section of the population of Britain is concerned for personal physical, mental, and spiritual health and this is indicated by the number of Holistic Spirituality Practices. It suggests that people are seeking a more fulfilled and happier life. The consequences of the spiritual experiences reported in the Birmingham survey indicate that the people are happier through having these experiences.

### **10.6. Spiritual Experience and the Church**

Previously we have defined religion as primarily a system, or institution, that allows people and communities to express their faith. We have also seen that the essence of faith is experience. Therefore, it is understood that religious practice reflects the relationship between the Divine and the human, and consequently includes the concept of binding a person to the Divine. Faith is the totality of response to the Divine, and this includes the religious element, which is ritual and institutional. Consequently we have discussed Spiritual Experience in relation to the context of the Church.

The comparison of studies of church attendance, belief, and spiritual experiences has indicated that as the church attendance has declined, so the reportage of spiritual experiences has increased. Not all churches are part of this general decline, as the New churches and Pentecostal churches show a general increase in attendance, but this has not compensated for the decline of other denominations. Clearly, then, there is a move away from the mainline churches with the emphasis on the transcendent nature of faith to churches that emphasise a more individual and personal faith, focusing on the more immanent nature of God, through personal experiences and spiritualities that provide a resource for the development of an inner

and individual expression of faith. This trend may be described as a movement towards a faith that acknowledges the significance of the individual's experience to understand and express that faith.<sup>41</sup>

The worship style of the congregation in the case study conforms to the general patterns of worship within the United Reformed Church, being largely word based and cerebral. There is little in the way of formal ritual and symbolism, and what there is tends to be literary and auditory rather than visual. Therefore, it might be assumed that any spiritual experiences that are encountered within this style of worship would be related to the words of the worship, including the preaching, Scripture readings, and hymns. While this was partly true, it was clearly not the whole picture. It was noted that of these the most likely trigger for a spiritual experience is the hymns. But it was seen that, while the words are important, it is often the music that makes the person more sensitised to an experience. Another important factor in the worship was the fellowship that the meetings provided. What was surprising, to some extent, was the importance of the rituals in worship and, particularly, the rite of Holy Communion. Again this is largely word based rather than visual in this church, but it may be assumed that the rite itself, with the tactile, visual, and communal elements, rather than just the words, is very important. For some, in this Reformed tradition, the act of Holy Communion is a meeting with God.

Hence we have shown that spiritual experiences can be related to worship, but not necessarily in a formal way. We have seen that the church can provide a setting or context through its

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<sup>41</sup>The Kendal Project concludes that there is a movement away from the "Congregational Domain" to the "Holistic Spiritual Domain", which represents the subjectivization of society and is contributory to the decline of the Church. HEELAS P. et al. (2005), pp. 112 - 113.



worship and fellowship, but this context only provides the trigger and setting for a minority of the spiritual experiences reported.<sup>42</sup> This has provided a means for the revisitation of memories, and a place where the presence of the divine can be felt. However, it has also been found that many do not find the acts of worship conducive to spiritual experiences, and it may be more common for spiritual experiences to impinge upon the person outside of communal worship, in the quiet of the home or during personal prayer. It was also found that for many, worship itself was not a spiritual experience. Stringer notes that worship, although a communal activity, is experienced differently by each individual and, therefore, all people attending worship will have different and distinct experiences. The meaning of worship is different for each person.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, it was concluded that the times of worship are potentially times of spiritual experiences, but that this was only one setting of many that would provide the opportunity for spiritual experiences.

The church taking part in the case study is a relatively recent foundation, for when this part of the city was being redeveloped in the early 1970's, two local churches took the opportunity to unite together on a new site. However, the tradition of the church goes back to the earlier churches which were congregational. While Congregationalism is understood to be part of the United Reformed tradition, it was a particular expression of this.

The Congregational Church and the Reformed Church, in general, had become associated with the values of the Enlightenment, and so emphasised the importance of the intellect over

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<sup>42</sup>Hardy reports that only about 12% of the 3000 reports of spiritual experiences submitted to the Religious Experience Research Unit claimed to have taken place in the worship or religious setting. While this suggests that only a minority of spiritual experiences take place in the setting of worship, it needs to be remembered that the reports were not confined to people who attended worship, but were from the "general public". HARDY A. (1979). Appendix 1, p. 145 and see AVIS Paul (2003a). *A Church Drawing Near: spirituality and mission in a post-Christian culture*. London: T and T Clark, p. 107.

against experience and the emotions. The methods of the Enlightenment became important for faith, so that liberal Protestantism emphasised the role of the “scientific method” for theology, and so diminished the place of the metaphysical.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, faith became an intellectual exercise. Yet the Reformed tradition has a very practical side to its faith. In the mid-twentieth century this was expressed in terms of the social gospel, partly as a response to the perceived secularisation of society, but also as a more contemporary expression of this social and political concern. It was also at this time, according to Rice, that the dualism of experience and social involvement developed. The social activists developed an almost paranoid fear of religious experience and avoided religious language.<sup>45</sup> Something of this was seen in the case study, when one respondent was reluctant to use religious language to describe his experiences.

Historically, then, the issues of spirituality and spiritual experience have not been addressed within the tradition, which according to Rice, means that

“they [church members] have frequently no basis to integrate their own experience into their faith or church life. They have been hesitant even to speak about their religious experiences for fear of being ridiculed or rejected.”<sup>46</sup>

and

“...Reformed Christians have often seemed almost afraid of their experiences.”<sup>47</sup>

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43STRINGER M. (1999), pp. 73 - 74.

44BRAITHEWAITE R.B. (1983). *Positivism*. In RICHARDSON A. and BOWDEN J. (eds), *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*. London: SCM, p. 454.

45RICE Howard L. (1991). *Reformed Spirituality: an introduction for believers*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, p. 159.

46RICE H.L. (1991), p. 10.

The Church Life Profile survey indicated that the URC is more likely to be involved with community and social issues and activities than the other denominations in England.<sup>48</sup> This is, in fact, very much the spirituality of the URC and the church in the study, although the term spirituality would not normally be recognised in this usage. Rice<sup>49</sup> understands this concern for social and political involvement as a result of Spiritual Experience. Indeed he would see it as the authentication of spiritual experiences, which liberates the individual to the service of human need. Therefore, it is the experience of the immanence (in particular, the incarnation) of God that inspires a socially motivated faith.

It is noteworthy that David Peel<sup>50</sup>, writing a theology for the URC, does not address the issue of Spiritual Experience, and therefore, this suggests that he feels it is irrelevant to the faith of the URC. This fear of experiences has prompted the members of the Church to express faith in activity, which may be social, political, and missionary, but has also included the maintenance of the institution of the Church. The church in the case study is strongly involved in local community and social issues and so continues this tradition. Even though a significant section of the congregation is from the Caribbean, this has not largely changed the ecclesiology or missiology of the church. While it might bring a more conservative element to the way that faith is expressed, the background of the Caribbean members will have been the tradition of the mission activity of the Congregational and Reformed churches. Therefore,

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47RICE H.L. (1991), p. 18.

48ESCOTT P. and GELDER A. (2002). *Church Life Profile 2001: denominational Results for the United Reformed Church*. London: Churches Information for Mission, p. 25. The Kendal Project would classify this church as a Religion of Humanity as it concerns itself with the authority of God, the Scriptures, and its service to the community; HEELAS P. et. al. (2005).

49RICE H.L. (1991), p. 165.

50PEEL David (2002). *Reforming Theology: explorations in the theological traditions of the United Reformed Church*. London: The United Reformed Church.

they are sufficiently willing to accept the church and the way it worships and expresses its faith.

The type of spiritual experiences reported, and the way that faith is expressed by members of the congregation, covers a vast range of types. This is also part of the tradition of the Reformed churches, and indeed is celebrated within the Congregational tradition. Hodgkins writes:

“...for diversity and variety are expressions of our experience of God in all ages.”<sup>51</sup>

It indicates that this church fits in with the general analysis of the URC being “broad”. The great variety of ways in which faith is expressed, indicates the individuality of the faith of the members. They feel that the church is able to accommodate this, and allows them to hold their individual faith perspectives, even if it is not fully expressed through the activities of the church.

### **10.7. Spiritual Experiences and Spirituality**

The exploration of spiritual experiences within one congregation in Birmingham has indicated that the church has its own style of spirituality. This spirituality is linked with its theology and tradition as a “broad” church, emphasising the gospel through community work and action. However, we have also seen that individuals within the church are able to express a complementary spirituality supported by their spiritual experiences. This expression of spirituality enables personal growth in faith, and an ability to deal with times of crisis. We have not discovered that there is a conflict between these two expressions, but neither have

we found that there is an integration of the aspects. Further, it is found that through the spiritual experiences there has been an emphasis on the immanence of God, and less perception of the transcendence. This has enabled growth in faith and an ability to deal more easily with the situations of life, making the individual more fully human.

In the post-modern, contemporary situation, spirituality is often associated with individual growth and development. The initiative and impetus for spiritual growth comes from within the individual so, that the individual is more able to deal with life and feel a more complete person. The decline of the institutional church has been related to the inability to give individuals the space for spiritual growth. We have seen from this study that spiritual experiences have helped people grow spiritually, however, there is a significant difference to the post-modern or New Age understanding. Much of contemporary spirituality is founded on the principle that the individual has the power and ability within themselves to grow. Christian spirituality, however, and the spirituality that we have encountered in the study, is one that is dependent on God. Yet both have a common factor that the development of faith or spirituality is part of human achievement. Therefore, the findings of the study seem to question the popularly held views that the church is unspiritual. Rather there is a different type of spirituality; one that is very real and effective for those involved.

It has also confronted the statistics about the levels of reporting of spiritual experiences over recent years. The various surveys have shown that there appears to be a much larger reporting of spiritual experiences within the general public, than within the church. While this might be statistically true, it may also represent a different understanding of experience

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51HODGKINS H. (1982). *The Congregational Way: apostolic legacy, ministry, unity, freedom*. Nottingham:

and spirituality. The study of the Birmingham congregation indicates that there is a wide variety of spiritual experience within the church. But one must ask the question: how many of these experiences would have been reported if a standard question, such as Hay and Hardy formulated,<sup>52</sup> had been used? The reticence of some of the experiencers indicates that the Church environment is not conducive to relating the experiences, and so they are kept as personal stories and do not become communal ones. This may be the reason that fewer spiritual experiences are reported by people in main stream churches, such as the one in the study.

Having drawn our study to a conclusion, we now turn briefly to the challenges and implications. How might the findings help the Church to develop a different understanding of spiritual experiences and incorporate them into their expressions of faith?

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The Congregational Federation, p. 162.

<sup>52</sup>See footnote 23 of chapter 8.

**EPILOGUE:**  
**IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES**

## **EPILOGUE: IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES**

The Church has been and is being challenged by many issues in the paradigm change of the twentieth century, such as the decline in church attendance, the rise of new and alternative religions and spiritualities in Britain, and the changing culture and values. The Protestant Church, with its feet very much in the values and ideologies of Modernism, is finding itself floundering in the new era of Postmodernism, where much of society seems to have made an attempt to hold together both the benefits of a scientific understanding of the world and to embrace the mystical. A society that is exploring a return to the mystical and spiritual, and is concerned with the importance of experiences, feelings, and relationships, is surely a context that the Church should embrace as an opportunity for discourse.

This project has contributed to the theological and missiological debate about the place of spiritual experiences in the life of faith of the individual and the Church. It has not been a sociological or a psychological study, and it has not provided statistics for analysis of the state of the Church in Britain. However, the findings of the project have been compared with other studies and this has been a useful tool to verify the findings and to explore differences in the findings of the different projects.

We have seen that spiritual experiences are common to all people, although the interpretation of the events will differ according to the different histories that are brought to them. William James entitled his classic work on spiritual experiences, “The Varieties of Religious Experience”, and Hardy’s classification of religious experiences indicates the vast array of types that he encountered. This case study has confirmed that there is a great variety of



experiences that have been reported, taking the position that every spiritual experience is different and unique, even if it is possible to find some common factors. The study has, then, explored the way that spiritual experiences are classified and described. The emphasis on the individuality and uniqueness of each spiritual experience is important in recognising the limitations of reductionist approaches.

The challenge that this brings is that it recognises that each individual is able to experience the divine or transcendent, in her or his own context. Therefore, it confirms that faith is largely an individual affair and that the relationship between the person and the divine is unique. It has also raised the issue that each person's experience of God is different, as God appears to respond specifically to each situation, using the concepts and approaches that would be most appropriate to that individual. Therefore, spiritual experiences, are primarily, about individual faith and individual faith journeys and encounters with the divine. In this sense, it has similarities with New Age understandings. One challenge to the Church is to look for an appropriate balance between the place of individual faith and the faith of the community, in the new paradigm.

We have also found that the general concept of God is one that is more immanent than transcendent, and seen to be active and working in the world, through individuals and events. God is seen to communicate, particularly to provide inspiration and encouragement, and to bring well-being, happiness, and contentment; indeed, to provide a more rounded and healthier life. The church in the case study has been working with an incarnational style of ministry through community work in the area, and this has become more commonplace in many churches. However, another challenge is to explore incarnational theology and the

place of the Immanent in a more personal and individual context, and the importance of the personal religious and spiritual quest.

The recognition of the “believing without belonging” thesis, and the findings of studies about why people leave the church, suggest that the Church is failing to grapple with issues of developing personal spirituality. So the Church needs to develop new forms of spirituality in a new age and paradigm. As spiritual experiences appear to be a common factor among church-goers and the public (with probably over 50% of church-goers and 75% of the population, in general, having specific spiritual experiences), there is an opportunity to develop new ways of expressing faith both for the individuals and the community. The Church has a long history and tradition of interpretation of spiritual matters, with a language and concepts that can address the experiences of people. It has been found, not only in this study but in others as well (such as the Edrington survey), that language for interpreting and understanding experiences is something that is often lacking. The Church, therefore, needs to explore the possibilities of giving spiritual experiences a higher profile in the life and witness of the Church, and celebrating the diversity of faith stories and experiences.

It was expressed that people were reluctant to share their spiritual experiences, and this suggests that the Church needs to give consent and encouragement to the sharing of experiences. Worship may need to reflect this much more than it currently does. The example of the evening service in the case study was clearly something that encouraged many people.

There is also a more fundamental challenge that this research gives to the Church. It raises the question, “What is the Church?” The importance of spiritual experiences in the life of faith, for the individual, suggests that the relationship experienced with the divine is central to that faith. The Church, its institution, and doctrine are returned to their task of enabling faith, and are moved from the centre more to the periphery. This also leads to questions about the nature of the Church and its membership, how the boundaries are drawn and how fluid the concept of church may need to be. So there is a challenge to both theology and ecclesiology.

Consequently, it can be seen that the study has raised a number of issues and challenges for the church. It must also be acknowledged that the study itself is only the beginning of a process that could expand to become a much larger project. This study has not been a sociological, psychological, or statistical survey of the phenomenon of spiritual experiences. It has been a theological and missiological study to explore the relationship between faith and spiritual experiences. We have confined ourselves to a case study of one congregation, but the study would benefit from expanding in many directions to develop and confirm the findings.

First, to undertake further investigations into different types of congregations and churches, to make a comparison between different denominations and styles of church. For example, it could reasonably be expected that a Pentecostal church group would have a higher incident of spiritual experiences. The medium of spiritual experiences among a Roman Catholic congregation would, in all probability, include encounters with other divine beings, angels, and the Virgin Mary.

Second, to extend the project to other groups and to people who are not church-goers, to find correlations or divergences in the findings. This would also provide further information about the concepts and understandings of the terms spirituality and faith.

Third, it is always tempting to undertake macro studies through polls and large surveys, and this may have an important place in the study of spiritual experiences, as it deals in broad terms and statistics. Yet, these studies have proved to be valuable, as they highlight the scale of the subject, and find common and general trends. These need to be supplemented with the in-depth study through discussion and observation, and the case study enables the researcher to investigate events in context. The method used in this study could be extended and revised, improving the questionnaires and interviews, for it is particularly apt in an age of individualism.

Extensions to the study and the challenges to the Church suggest that there is a large area of research still to be undertaken. Important work is being undertaken by others in the field, such as the Religious Experience Research Centre in Lampeter, and the Alister Hardy Society, which are groups that are committed to the continued exploration and understanding of the phenomena which this thesis has called Spiritual Experience. I hope that this study has made some contribution to the discipline which, in particular, highlighted the importance of looking at spiritual experiences in their context.

## **APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX 1

### 1.A. Classification System from William James

From JAMES W. (1960). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. London: Fontana.

#### MYSTICAL

Hallucinations - A vision of God, communication with the divine which gives truth or revelations.  
Photisms - Visions of light, etc.  
Dreamy states - D $\square$  j $\square$  vu  
Meaning of life  
Revelation  
Trance  
Intoxication

#### HAPPINESS

Seeing only the good in life  
Healing experiences  
Positive thinking  
Ecstasy (see also conversion)

#### MELANCHOLY

The overcoming of sin and suffering  
Via negativa  
The experience of evil

#### INNER PEACE

The feeling of unity of the self  
Coming to terms with different parts of the person

#### CONVERSION

Changing from one state to another  
Conscious and subconscious (gradual and instant)  
Ecstasy

#### SAINTLINESS

Loss of fear (affects lifestyle and action)  
Charity  
Happy disposition (leading possibly to martyrdom)  
Purity, asceticism, temperance, penance  
Devoutness

## **1.B. Classification System from Alister Hardy**

1

2 From HARDY A. (1979). *The Spiritual Nature of Man: a study of contemporary religious experience*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 26 - 29.

### **1. Sensory or quasi-sensory experience: visual**

- (a) Visions (181.3)<sup>1</sup>
- (b) Illuminations (45)
- (c) A particular light (88)
- (d) Feeling of unity with surroundings and/or with other people (59.3)
- (e) 'Out-of-the-body' (59.7)
- (f) 'D□ j□ vu' (5.3)
- (g) Transformation of surroundings (24.3)

### **2. Sensory or quasi-sensory experience: auditory**

- (a) 'Voices', calming (73.7)
- (b) 'Voices', guiding (70)
- (c) 'Being spoken through', gift of tongues (31)
- (d) 'Music' and other sounds (23)

### **3. Sensory or quasi-sensory experience: touch**

- (a) Healing (15.3)
- (b) Comforting (29)
- (c) Feelings of warmth, etc. (53.7)
- (d) Being hit, shocked, etc. (18.3)
- (e) Guiding (5.3)

### **4. Sensory or quasi-sensory experience: smell (11)**

### **5. Supposed extra-sensory perception**

- (a) Telepathy (36.7)
- (b) Precognition (69.3)
- (c) Clairvoyance (15.3)
- (d) Supposed contact with the dead (79.7)
- (e) Apparitions (34)

### **6. Behavioural changes: enhanced or 'superhuman' power displayed by man**

- (a) Comforting, guiding (27)
- (b) Healing (34.3)
- (c) Exorcism (3.7)
- (d) Heroism (6.3)

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<sup>1</sup> The figures in parenthesis represent the occurrence of this type of experience per thousand, in the three thousand reports that Hardy received. HARDY A. (1979), p. 29.

## **7. Cognitive and affective elements**

- (a) Sense of security, protection, peace (253)
- (b) Sense of joy, happiness, well-being (212)
- (c) Sense of new strength in oneself (65)
- (d) Sense of guidance, vocation, inspiration (157.7)
- (e) Awe, reverence, wonder (66)
- (f) Sense of certainty, clarity, enlightenment (194.7)
- (g) Exaltation, excitement, ecstasy (47.3)
- (h) Sense of being at a loss for words (25.3)
- (i) Sense of harmony, order, unity (66.7)
- (j) Sense of timelessness (37.7)
- (k) Feeling of love, affection (in oneself) (56.7)
- (l) Yearning, desire, nostalgia (14.3)
- (m) Sense of forgiveness, restoration, renewal (40)
- (n) Sense of integration, wholeness, fulfilment (12.7)
- (o) Hope, optimism (15.3)
- (p) Sense of release from fear of death (36.3)
- (q) Fear, horror (41.7)
- (r) Remorse, sense of guilt (23.7)
- (s) Sense of indifference, detachment (11.3)
- (t) Sense of purpose behind events (113.7)
- (u) Sense of prayer answered in events (138.3)
- (v) Sense of presence (not human) (202.3)

## **8. Development of experience**

### **(i) Within the individual**

- (a) Steady disposition; little or no development recorded (1.3)
- (b) Gradual growth of sense of awareness: experience more or less continuous (91.3)
- (c) Sudden change to a new sense of awareness, conversion, the 'moment of truth' (175.3)
- (d) Particular experiences, no growth recorded (13.7)
- (e) Particular experiences, each contributing to growth of sense of awareness (145.7)

### **(ii) In relation to others**

- (k) Identification with ideal human figure, discipleship, hero-worship (6)
- (l) Development by personal encounter (113)
- (m) Participation in church, institutional, or corporate life (29.7)
- (n) Development through contact with literature or the arts (117.7)
- (o) Experience essentially individualistic, involving isolation from rejection of others (27)

### **(iii) Periods of significant development**

- (r) In childhood (117.7)
- (s) In adolescence (123.7)
- (t) In middle age (70.3)
- (u) In old age (7.7)



## **9. Dynamic patterns in experience**

### **(i) Positive or constructive**

- (a) Initiative felt to be beyond the self, coming 'out of the blue', grace (124)
- (b) Initiative felt to lie within the self, but response from beyond; prayers answered (322.7)
- (c) Initiative and response both felt as within the self; the result seen as 'individuation' (Jung), 'self-actualization' (Maslow) (4.7)
- (d) Differentiation between initiative and response felt as illusory; merging of the self into the All; the unitive experience (22.3)

### **(ii) Negative or destructive**

- (m) Sense of external evil force as having initiative (44.7)

## **10. Dream experiences (87.7)**

## **11. Antecedents or 'triggers' of experience**

- (i)
  - (a) Natural beauty (122.7)
  - (b) Sacred places (26)
  - (c) Participation in religious worship (117.7)
  - (d) Prayer, meditation (135.7)
  - (e) Music (56.7)
  - (f) Visual art (24.7)
  - (g) Literature, drama, film (82)
  - (h) Creative work (20.7)
  - (i) Physical activity (9.7)
  - (j) Relaxation (16.7)
  - (k) Sexual relations (4)
  - (l) Happiness (7.3)
  - (m) Depression, despair (183.7)
  - (n) Illness (80)
  - (o) Childbirth (8.7)
  - (p) The prospect of death (15.3)
  - (q) The death of others (28)
  - (r) Crises in personal relations (37.3)
  - (s) Silence, solitude (15.3)
- (ii)
  - (w) Drugs: anaesthetic (10.7)
  - (x) Drugs: psychedelic (6.7)

## **12. Consequences of experience**

- (a) Sense of purpose or new meaning to life (184.7)
- (b) Changes in religious belief (38.7)
- (c) Changes in attitude to others (77)

### **1.C. Descriptive List from Abraham Maslow**

From MASLOW A. (1964). *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences*. New York: Viking Press, appendix A: Religious Aspects of Peak Experiences, pp. 59 - 68.

1. The experience of the unified universe
2. The acceptance of all things and the worth of all things
3. An understanding of a relationship with the universe
4. Peak experiences are “ego-transcending”
5. It is self validating
6. It gives meaning and purpose to life
7. During the experience there is a disorientation in time and space
8. The world is seen as beautiful and desirable
9. They produce emotions of charity, kindness, etc.
10. Facts and values “fuse”
11. They are passive and receptive
12. Produce emotions of wonder, awe, reverence, and humility
13. Dichotomies, polarities, and convictions are transcended
14. A loss of fear and anxiety
15. Effects are therapeutic and converting
16. They are “like being in heaven”
17. They move the experient to a more perfect humanity
18. A feeling of responsibility and creativity
19. A sense of being selfless, transcends the self
20. Producing a more loving person
21. The experient becomes more a person and less a thing
22. Less selfish (see 19), not striving, needing, or wishing for himself (*sic*)
23. The feeling of being lucky, receiving grace
24. A fusing of pride and humility
25. A sense of the sacred glimpsed through the particular

### 1.D. Classification System from David Hay

<sup>1</sup> The classification is compiled from the data in HAY D. (1979). Religious Experience Amongst a Group of Post-graduate Students - A Qualitative Analysis. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 18, pp. 164 - 182 (indicated with superscript 1); HAY D. (1982). *Exploring Inner Space: Is God still possible in the 20th century?* Harmondsworth: Penguin, Ch. 10 (indicated with superscript 2); HAY D. (1990). *Religious Experience Today: studying the facts*. London: Mowbray, Chs. 4, 5 & 6 (indicated with superscript 3). The Triggers are derived from HAY D. (1990), p. 70, quoting the findings of Greedy and McGreedy.

Content of Experience: Synchasis ("coincidence", repetition of events or ideas) <sup>1,3</sup>

Awareness of a power controlling or guiding <sup>1,2</sup>

Awareness of the presence of God <sup>1,2,3</sup>

Awareness of a presence in nature <sup>1,2</sup>

Answered prayer <sup>1,2,3</sup>

Awareness of the dead <sup>2,3</sup>

Awareness of a Sacred presence <sup>2,3</sup>

Awareness of evil <sup>1,2,3</sup>

Awareness of the unity of all things <sup>1,2,3</sup>

ESP, out of body experience, etc. <sup>2</sup>

Conversion <sup>2</sup>

Place of Experience: Alone or in silence <sup>1,2</sup>

Times of distress or decision <sup>1</sup>

Close to nature <sup>1</sup>

With close or trusted friends <sup>1,2</sup>

Times of great happiness or peace <sup>1</sup>

During prayer or devotions <sup>1</sup>

In darkness or dim light <sup>1</sup>

At a church service <sup>1</sup>

Before works of art, etc. <sup>1</sup>

No special circumstances <sup>1</sup>

With other people <sup>2</sup>

Triggers:

Music

Prayer

Beauty of nature

Quiet

Worship

Being alone in church

Watching children

Reading the Bible

Feelings:

Peaceful <sup>1,2</sup>

Ecstatic joy <sup>1</sup>

Frightened <sup>1</sup>

Loving <sup>1</sup>  
Happy/elated <sup>2</sup>  
Uplifted/awestruck <sup>2</sup>  
Exhausted/numb <sup>2</sup>  
Confused <sup>2</sup>  
Alarmed/troubled <sup>2</sup>  
Normal <sup>2</sup>

Permanent Effects:    Make happier or better <sup>1</sup>  
                                 Give depth or direction to life <sup>1</sup>  
                                 More aware/insight into life <sup>1,2</sup>  
                                 Confirmed or intensified beliefs <sup>2</sup>  
                                 More optimistic <sup>2</sup>  
                                 Encouraged moral behaviour <sup>2</sup>  
                                 None <sup>1,2</sup>

## APPENDIX 2

# SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES AND FAITH

*A research project investigating the relationship between personal spiritual experiences, faith and the Church.*

## QUESTIONNAIRE

### Notes to the questions:

Thank you for giving up some of your time and being willing to be part of this research project.

Please complete as many of the sections as possible. Do not spend too much time on each question, usually your first thoughts are the best.

Questions 2,3,7,11 &12. Please indicate all the relevant answers. You may tick as many boxes as appropriate.

Questions 8, 9, 10 & 13. These questions require you to evaluate the influence of spiritual experiences. You need to decide how strong the influence is. For each question, please select a number on a sliding scale from 0 to 10 that represents the strength of the influence. 0 = no influence, 10 = strongly influenced.

Please place the completed questionnaire in the envelope provided and place it in the box provided.

Thank you again for your help.

John Burgess



## YOUR SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

**1** Have you had spiritual experiences?

no ☐ once ☐ occasional ☐ many ☐

*If "no" please go to question 5.*

**2** Where did these take place?

When you were alone

☐

When you were at home

☐

When you were with other people

☐

When you were in the countryside

☐

When you were in church

☐

Other (please specify)

**3** What were you doing at the time the experiences occurred?

At prayer

☐

Thinking about your life

☐

At worship

☐

Listening to music

☐

At work

☐

Looking at art etc.

☐

Relaxing

☐

Other (please specify)

Thinking about God, religion etc.

☐


**4** Please describe your experience. If you have had many spiritual experiences, please choose one or two to describe.





## YOUR FAITH

**5** How long have you been a Christian?

**6** How long have you been going to your present church?

**7a** Are you:

an attender  
a member  
an elder  
a lay preacher  
other leadership role


**7b** Do you attend worship:

every week  
once or twice per month  
less than once per month  
other (please specify)


--

**8** How much have spiritual experiences influenced you? Please indicate from 0 - 10 the influence on the following aspects of your life. 0 = no influence, 10 = strongly influenced.

Your understanding of God .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Your faith .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Your understanding of the world .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
The way you worship .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
The type of church you prefer .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Your lifestyle .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Your relationship with others .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**9** How much has the teachings and traditions of the Church influenced you? Please indicate from 0 - 10 the influence on the following aspects of your life. 0 = no influence, 10 = strongly influenced.

Your understanding of God .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Your faith .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Your understanding of the world .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
The way you worship .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
The type of church you prefer .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Your lifestyle .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Your relationship with others .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**10** How much has Scripture influenced you? Please indicate from 0 - 10 the influence on the following aspects of your life. 0 = no influence, 10 = strongly influenced.

Your understanding of God .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Your faith .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Your understanding of the world .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
The way you worship .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
The type of church you prefer .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Your lifestyle .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Your relationship with others .....	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



**11 What is important for you about worship?**

Prayer  
 Teaching/Preaching  
 Being with others  
 Celebrating Communion  
 Thinking about God  
 Thinking about your life

☐  
☐  
☐  
☐  
☐  
☐

Listening to God  
 Meeting God  
 Music & Hymns  
 A spiritual experience  
 Other (please specify)

☐  
☐  
☐  
☐

**YOUR CHURCH****12 How would you describe the worship in your church?**

Intellectual  
 Emotional  
 Charismatic  
 Evangelical  
 Traditional

☐  
☐  
☐  
☐  
☐

Socially aware  
 Free  
 Formal  
 Other (please specify)

☐  
☐  
☐

**13 How much does the church worship involve spiritual experiences?** Please indicate from 0 - 10 the relationship between the church worship and spiritual experiences. 0 = no relationship, 10 = strongly related.

Does worship involve spiritual experiences?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Does worship encourage spiritual experiences?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Can you express your spiritual experiences in worship?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
How much is worship a spiritual experience?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**YOU**

Gender

☐ M

☐ F

Occupation

Age

Cultural background

Thank you for taking time to complete this questionnaire. All information gathered in this survey will be treated in strict confidence.

To continue the research I need to talk to people about their spiritual experiences. A discussion will be in private and strictly confidential. If you would be willing to talk about your spiritual experiences and how they relate to worship, will you please complete the following. Thank you.

Name:

Title:

Address:

Post Code:

Tel:

RE&amp;FQ

## APPENDIX 3 Survey Results

### Positive Responses (Group 1)

The letters (A, B etc.) refer to the initial letter of the names assigned to the respondents.  
TOT = total. Figures in brackets indicate that the respondent annotated the answer with the word “sometimes.”

### Triggers for Spiritual Experience (Questions 2 & 3)

#### Places

Question 2: Where did the Spiritual Experiences take place?

	A	B	C	E	F	H	L	M	O	TOT
Alone				X			X	X	X	4
With other people	X				X	X		X	X	5
In church	X	X			X	X		X	X	6
At home	X		X	X			X	X	X	6
In the country								X		1
Other								X		1

#### Activities

Question 3: What were you doing at the time the experiences occurred?

	A	B	C	E	F	H	L	M	O	TOT
Prayer	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	7
Worship	X				X	X		X	X	5
Work							X	X		2
Relaxing								X	X	2
Thinking about God		X	X				X	X	X	5
Thinking about Life	X		X		X		X	X	X	6
Music					X			X		2
Art etc.								X		1
Other								X		1

## Influences on Faith and Life

Question 8: How much have Spiritual Experiences influenced you?

	A	B	C	E	F	H	L	M	O	AVE
Understanding of God	4	5	10	6	5	-	8	10	-	6.9
Faith	7	6	10	7	8	8	8	10	-	8
Understanding of world	7	8	-	6	5	-	7	10	-	7.2
Worship	4	7	5	7	5	8	8	4	-	6
Type of Church	6	7	-	7	5	8	-	0	-	5.5
Lifestyle	2	8	8	6	5	8	-	4	-	5.9
Relationships	5	9	10	7	8	-	7	10	-	8

Question 9: How much has the teachings and traditions of the Church influenced you?

	A	B	C	E	F	H	L	M	O	AVE
Understanding of God	3	9	8	6	7	-	8	10	8	7.4
Faith	3	8	10	6	5	-	8	10	6	7
Understanding of world	4	8	-	7	5	-	7	10	6	6.7
Worship	8	7	-	7	8	8	8	4	5	6.9
Type of Church	9	8	-	7	8	8	-	0	8	6.9
Lifestyle	5	7	10	7	5	-	-	6	8	6.9
Relationships	8	7	10	7	5	-	7	10	8	7.8

Question 10: How much has Scripture influenced you?

	A	B	C	E	F	H	L	M	O	AVE
Understanding of God	7	8	10	5	8	-	6	6	9	7.4
Faith	7	8	10	5	8	-	8	6	9	7.6
Understanding of world	3	8	-	5	5	-	7	8	7	6.2
Worship	3	7	-	6	5	-	-	8	7	6
Type of Church	6	8	-	6	5	-	-	0	2	4.5
Lifestyle	5	7	10	6	5	-	-	4	9	6.6
Relationships	4	7	10	6	8	-	7	8	9	7.4

Comparison of averages:

	Spiritual Experience	Doctrine	Scripture
Understanding of God	6.9	7.4	7.4
Faith	8	7	7.6
Understanding of world	7.2	6.7	6.2
Worship	6	6.9	6
Type of Church	5.5	6.9	4.5
Lifestyle	5.9	6.9	6.6
Relationships	8	7.8	7.4

## Worship

Question 11: What is important for you about worship?

	A	B	C	E	F	H	L	M	O	TO T
Prayer	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
Teaching/Preaching	X		X					X	X	4
Being with others	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
Holy Communion			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7
Thinking about God	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	8
Thinking about Life	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	7
Listening to God		X	X	X			X	X		5
Meeting God			X				X	X		3
Hymns and Music			X	X	X	X	X	X		6
Spiritual Experience	X						X			2
Other										0

Question 12: How would you describe the worship in your church?

	A	B	C	E	F	H	L	M	O	TO T
Intellectual			X		(X)		X			3
Emotional		X	X		(X)					3
Charismatic			X							1
Evangelical			X							1
Traditional	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	8
Socially Aware	X		X		X					3
Free			X	X	(X)		X			4
Formal			X				X			2
Other										0

Question 13: How much does the church worship involve Spiritual Experiences?

	A	B	C	E	F	H	L	M	O	AVE
Involves	7	6	7	4	5	7	0	5	0	4.6
Encourages	6	9	8	4	5	-	0	5	0	4.6
Expresses	5	9	-	6	5	-	-	0	1	4.3
Is a Spiritual Experience	3	7	-	2	5	-	-	5	8	5

## Survey Results

### Negative Responses (Group 2)

#### Influences on Faith and Life

Question 8: How much have Spiritual Experiences influenced you?

	D	G	I	J	K	N	AVE
Understanding of God	4	-	6	-	6	7	5.8
Faith	6	-	6	-	5	5	5.5
Understanding of world	3	-	6	-	6	-	5
Worship	4	-	6	-	-	-	5
Type of Church	5	-	6	-	-	-	5.5
Lifestyle	2	-	6	-	-	-	4
Relationships	8	-	6	-	8	10	8

Question 9: How much has the teachings and traditions of the Church influenced you?

	D_	G	I	J	K	N	AVE
Understanding of God	9	8	9	-	6	7	7.8
Faith	9	10	9	-	5	5	7.6
Understanding of world	6	8	9	-	6	-	7.3
Worship	8	10	9	-	-	-	9
Type of Church	7	10	9	-	-	-	8.7
Lifestyle	4	8	9	-	-	-	7
Relationships	7	6	9	-	8	10	8

Question 10: How much has Scripture influenced you?

	D	G	I	J	K	N	AVE
Understanding of God	9	8	5	-	5	10	7.4
Faith	9	9	5	-	5	6	6.8
Understanding of world	5	6	5	-	7	-	5.8
Worship	9	8	5	-	-	-	7.3
Type of Church	9	8	5	-	-	-	7.3
Lifestyle	8	8	5	-	8	-	7.3
Relationships	8	6	5	-	8	10	7.4



Comparison of averages:

	Spiritual Experience	Doctrine	Scripture
Understanding of God	5.8	7.8	7.4
Faith	5.5	7.6	6.8
Understanding of world	5	7.3	5.8
Worship	5	9	7.3
Type of Church	5.5	8.7	7.3
Lifestyle	4	7	7.3
Relationships	8	8	7.4

## Worship

Question 11: What is important for you about worship?

	D_	G	I	J	K	N	TOT
Prayer	X	X	X		X	X	5
Teaching/Preaching	X		X			X	3
Being with others	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
Holy Communion	X	X		X	X		4
Thinking about God	X	X				X	3
Thinking about Life					X	X	2
Listening to God					X		1
Meeting God					X		1
Hymns and Music	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
Spiritual Experience							0
Other							0

Question 12: How would you describe the worship in your church?

	D_	G	I	J	K	N	TOT
Intellectual	X	X					2
Emotional	X						1
Charismatic							0
Evangelical							0
Traditional	X	X	X			X	4
Socially Aware	X	X	X		X	X	5
Free				X		X	2
Formal					X		1
Other							0

Question 13: How much does the church worship involve Spiritual Experiences?

	D_	G	I	J	K	N	AVE
Involves	4	-	0	0	0	-	1
Encourages	5	-	0	-	0	9	3.5
Expresses	5	-	0	0	0	-	1.3
Is a Spiritual Experience	4	-	0	0	-	-	1.3

## Survey Results

### Comparisons

#### Influences on Faith and Life

Question 8: How much have Spiritual Experiences influenced you?

	Group 2	Group 1	Total *
Understanding of God	5.8	6.9	6.4
Faith	5.5	8	7.2
Understanding of world	5	7.2	6.4
Worship	5	6	5.7
Type of Church	5.5	5.5	5.5
Lifestyle	4	5.9	5.7
Relationships	8	8	8

Question 9: How much has the teachings and traditions of the Church influenced you?

	Group 2	Group 1	Total
Understanding of God	7.8	7.4	7.4
Faith	7.6	7	7.3
Understanding of world	7.3	6.7	6.7
Worship	9	6.9	7.5
Type of Church	8.7	6.9	7.4
Lifestyle	7	6.9	6.8
Relationships	8	7.8	7.6

Question 10: How much has Scripture influenced you?

	Group 2	Group 1	Total
Understanding of God	7.4	7.4	7.1
Faith	6.8	7.6	7.3
Understanding of world	5.8	6.2	5.8
Worship	7.3	6	6.4
Type of Church	7.3	4.5	5.4
Lifestyle	7.3	6.6	6.8
Relationships	7.4	7.4	7.2

## Worship

Question 11: What is important for you about worship?

	Group 2		Group 1		Total	
		%		%		%
Prayer	5	83	8	89	15	88
Teaching/Preaching	3	50	4	45	8	47
Being with others	6	100	8	89	16	94
Holy Communion	4	67	7	78	13	76
Thinking about God	3	50	8	89	13	76
Thinking about Life	2	33	7	78	11	65
Listening to God	1	17	5	56	7	41
Meeting God	1	17	3	33	6	35
Hymns and Music	6	100	6	67	14	82
Spiritual Experience	0	0	2	22	2	13
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0

Question 12: How would you describe the worship in your church?

	Group 2		Group 1		Total	
		%		%		%
Intellectual	2	33	3	33	6	35
Emotional	1	17	3	33	3	18
Charismatic	0	0	1	11	1	6
Evangelical	0	0	1	11	1	6
Traditional	4	67	8	89	14	82
Socially Aware	5	83	3	33	8	47
Free	2	33	4	44	6	35
Formal	1	17	2	22	4	24
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0

Question 13: How much does the church worship involve Spiritual Experiences?

	Group 2	Group 1	Total
Involves	1	4.6	3.5
Encourages	3.5	4.6	3.9
Expresses	1.3	4.3	3.4
Is a Spiritual Experience	1.3	5	3.8

Note: Nine people responded in the positive to having Spiritual Experiences (Group 1), and six people responded in the negative to having Spiritual Experiences (Group 2). Two questionnaires were incomplete. The Total includes all seventeen questionnaires.

## Survey Results

### Positive Responses - According to Age Groups

#### Triggers for Spiritual Experience (Questions 2 & 3)

##### Places

Question 2: Where did the Spiritual Experiences take place?

	under 40 (1a)			40 - 65 (1b)				over 65 (1c)				
	A	O	TOT	E	F	M	TOT	B	C	H	L	TOT
Alone		X	1	X		X	2				X	1
With other people	X	X	2		X	X	2			X		1
In church	X	X	2		X	X	2	X		X		2
At home	X	X	2	X		X	2		X		X	2
In the country			0			X	1					0
Other			0			X	1					0

##### Activities

Question 3: What were you doing at the time the experiences occurred?

	under 40 (1a)			40 - 65 (1b)				over 65 (1c)				
	A	O	TOT	E	F	M	TOT	B	C	H	L	TOT
Prayer	X	X	2	X		X	2	X	X		X	3
Worship	X	X	2		X	X	2			X		1
Work			0			X	1				X	1
Relaxing		X	1			X	1					0
Thinking about God		X	1			X	1	X	X		X	3
Thinking about Life	X	X	2		X	X	2		X		X	2
Music			0		X	X	2					0
Art etc.			0			X	1					0
Other			0			X	1					0

## Influences on Faith and Life

Question 8: How much have Spiritual Experiences influenced you?

	under 40 (1a)			40 - 65 (1b)				over 65 (1c)				
	A	O	AVE	E	F	M	AVE	B	C	H	L	AVE
Understanding of God	4	-	4	6	5	10	7	5	10	-	8	7.7
Faith	7	-	7	7	8	10	8.3	6	10	8	8	8
Understanding of world	7	-	7	6	5	10	7	8	-	-	7	7.5
Worship	4	-	4	7	5	4	5.3	7	5	8	8	7
Type of Church	6	-	6	7	5	0	4	7	-	8	-	7.5
Lifestyle	2	-	2	6	5	4	5	8	8	8	-	8
Relationships	5	-	5	7	8	10	8.3	9	10	-	7	8.7

Question 9: How much has the teachings and traditions of the Church influenced you?

	under 40 (1a)			40 - 65 (1b)				over 65 (1c)				
	A	O	AVE	E	F	M	AVE	B	C	H	L	AVE
Understanding of God	3	8	5.5	6	7	10	7.7	9	8	-	8	8.3
Faith	3	6	4.5	6	5	10	7	8	10	-	8	8.6
Understanding of world	4	6	5	7	5	10	7.3	8	-	-	7	7.5
Worship	8	5	6.5	7	8	4	6.3	7	-	8	8	7.7
Type of Church	9	8	8.5	7	8	0	5	8	-	8	-	8
Lifestyle	5	8	7.5	7	5	6	6	7	10	-	-	8.5
Relationships	8	8	8	7	5	10	7.3	7	10	-	7	8

Question 10: How much has Scripture influenced you?

	under 40 (1a)			40 - 65 (1b)				over 65 (1c)				
	A	O	AVE	E	F	M	AVE	B	C	H	L	AVE
Understanding of God	7	9	8	5	8	6	6.3	8	10	-	6	8
Faith	7	9	8	5	8	6	6.3	8	10	-	8	8.7
Understanding of world	3	7	5	5	5	8	6	8	-	-	7	7.5
Worship	3	7	5	6	5	8	6.3	7	-	-	-	7
Type of Church	6	2	4	6	5	0	3.7	8	-	-	-	8
Lifestyle	5	9	7	6	5	4	5	7	10	-	-	8.5
Relationships	4	9	6.5	6	8	8	7.3	7	10	-	7	8

Comparison of averages:

	Spiritual Experience				Doctrine				Scripture			
	1a	1b	1c	AVE	1a	1b	1c	AVE	1a	1b	1c	AVE
Understanding of God	4	7	7.7	6.9	5.5	7.7	8.3	7.4	8	6.3	8	7.4
Faith	7	8.3	8	8	4.5	7	8.6	7	8	6.3	8.7	7.6
Understanding of world	7	7	7.5	7.2	5	7.3	7.5	6.7	5	6	7.5	6.2
Worship	4	5.3	7	6	6.5	6.3	7.7	6.9	5	6.3	7	6
Type of Church	6	4	7.5	5.5	8.5	5	8	6.9	4	3.7	8	4.5
Lifestyle	2	5	8	5.9	7.5	6	8.5	6.9	7	5	8.5	6.6
Relationships	5	8.3	8.7	8	8	7.3	8	8	6.5	7.3	8	7.4

## Worship

Question 11: What is important for you about worship?

	under 40 (1a)			40-65 (1b)				over 65 (1c)				
	A	O	TOT	E	F	M	TOT	B	C	H	L	TOT
Prayer	X	X	2	X	X	X	3		X	X	X	3
Teaching/Preaching	X	X	2			X	1		X			1
Being with others	X	X	2	X	X	X	3		X	X	X	3
Holy Communion		X	1	X	X	X	3		X	X	X	3
Thinking about God	X	X	2	X	X	X	3	X	X		X	3
Thinking about Life	X	X	2	X	X	X	3		X		X	2
Listening to God			0	X		X	2	X	X		X	3
Meeting God			0			X	1		X		X	2
Hymns and Music			0	X	X	X	3		X	X	X	3
Spiritual Experience	X		1				0				X	1
Other			0				0					0

Question 12: How would you describe the worship in your church?

	under 40 (1a)			40-65 (1b)				over 65 (1c)				
	A	O	TOT	E	F	M	TOT	B	C	H	L	TOT
Intellectual			0		(X)		1		X		X	2
Emotional			0		(X)		1	X	X			2
Charismatic			0				0		X			1
Evangelical			0				0		X			1
Traditional	X	X	2	X	X	X	3	X	X	X		3
Socially Aware	X		1		X		1		X			1
Free			0	X	(X)		2		X		X	2
Formal			0				0		X		X	2
Other			0				0					0

Question 13: How much does the church worship involve Spiritual Experiences?

	under 40 (1a)			40-65 (1b)				over 65 (1c)				
	A	O	AVE	E	F	M	AVE	B	C	H	L	AVE
Involves	7	0	3.5	4	5	5	4.7	6	7	7	0	5
Encourages	6	0	3	4	5	5	4.7	9	8	-	0	5.7
Expresses	5	1	3	6	5	0	3.7	9	-	-	-	9
Is a Spiritual Experience	3	8	5.5	2	5	5	4	7	-	-	-	7



## Survey Results

### Negative Responses - According to Age Groups

#### Influences on Faith and Life

Question 8: How much have Spiritual Experiences influenced you?

	under 40	40 - 65 (2b)				over 65 (2c)			
		D	I	N	AVE	G	J	K	AVE
Understanding of God		4	6	7	5.7	-	-	6	6
Faith		6	6	5	5.7	-	-	5	5
Understanding of world		3	6	-	4.5	-	-	6	6
Worship		4	6	-	5	-	-	-	-
Type of Church		5	6	-	5.5	-	-	-	-
Lifestyle		2	6	-	4	-	-	-	-
Relationships		8	6	10	8	-	-	8	8

Question 9: How much has the teachings and traditions of the Church influenced you?

	under 40	40 - 65 (2b)				over 65 (2c)			
		D	I	N	AVE	G	J	K	AVE
Understanding of God		9	9	7	8.3	8	-	6	7
Faith		9	9	5	7.7	10	-	5	7.5
Understanding of world		6	9	-	7.5	8	-	6	7
Worship		8	9	-	8.5	10	-	-	10
Type of Church		7	9	-	8	10	-	-	10
Lifestyle		4	9	-	6.5	8	-	-	8
Relationships		7	9	10	8.7	6	-	8	7

Question 10: How much has Scripture influenced you?

	under 40	40 - 65 (2b)				over 65 (2c)			
		D	I	N	AVE	G	J	K	AVE
Understanding of God		9	5	10	8	8	-	5	6.5
Faith		9	5	6	6.7	9	-	8	8.5
Understanding of world		5	5	-	5	6	-	7	6.5
Worship		9	5	-	7	8	-	-	8
Type of Church		9	5	-	7	8	-	-	8
Lifestyle		8	5	-	6.5	8	-	8	8
Relationships		8	5	10	7.7	6	-	8	7

Comparison of averages:

	Spiritual Experience			Doctrine			Scripture		
	2b	2c	AVE	2b	2c	AVE	2b	2c	AVE
Understanding of God	5.7	6	5.8	8.3	7	7.8	8	6.5	7.4
Faith	5.7	5	5.5	7.7	7.5	7.6	6.7	8.5	6.8
Understanding of world	4.5	6	5	7.5	7	7.3	5	6.5	5.8
Worship	5	-	5	8.5	10	9	7	8	7.3
Type of Church	5.5	-	5.5	8	10	8.7	7	8	7.3
Lifestyle	4	-	4	6.5	8	7	6.5	8	7.3
Relationships	8	8	8	8.7	7	8	7.7	7	7.4

## Worship

Question 11: What is important for you about worship?

	under 40	40 - 65 (2b)				over 65 (2c)			
		D	I	N	TOT	G	J	K	TOT
Prayer		X	X	X	3	X		X	2
Teaching/Preaching		X	X	X	3				0
Being with others		X	X	X	3	X	X	X	3
Holy Communion		X			1	X	X	X	3
Thinking about God		X		X	2	X			1
Thinking about Life				X	1			X	1
Listening to God					0			X	1
Meeting God					0			X	1
Hymns and Music		X	X	X	3	X	X	X	3
Spiritual Experience					0				0
Other					0				0

Question 12: How would you describe the worship in your church?

	under 40	40 - 65 (2b)				over 65 (2c)			
		D	I	N	TOT	G	J	K	TOT
Intellectual		X			1	X			1
Emotional		X			1				0
Charismatic					0				0
Evangelical					0				0
Traditional		X	X	X	3	X			1
Socially Aware		X	X	X	3	X		X	2
Free				X	1		X		1
Formal					0			X	1
Other					0				0

Question 13: How much does the church worship involve Spiritual Experiences

	under 40	40 - 65 (2b)				over 65 (2c)			
		D	I	N	AVE	G_	J	K	AVE
Involves		4	0	-	2	-	0	0	0
Encourages		5	0	9	4.7	-	-	0	0
Expresses		5	0	-	2.5	-	0	0	0
Is a Spiritual Experience		4	0	-	2	-	0	-	0

### Comparison of Responses - According to Age Groups

#### Influences on Faith and Life

Question 8: How much have Spiritual Experiences influenced you?

	under 40		40 - 65		over 65	
	Group 2a	Group 1a	Group 2b	Group 1b	Group 2c	Group 1c
Understanding of God		4	5.7	7	6	7.7
Faith		7	5.7	8.3	5	8
Understanding of world		7	4.5	7	6	7.5
Worship		4	5	5.3	-	7
Type of Church		6	4.5	4	-	7.5
Lifestyle		2	4	5	-	8
Relationships		5	8	8.3	8	8.7

Question 9: How much has the teachings and traditions of the Church influenced you?

	under 40		40 - 65		over 65	
	Group 2a	Group 1a	Group 2b	Group 1b	Group 2c	Group 1c
Understanding of God		5.5	8.3	7.7	7	8.3
Faith		4.5	7.7	7	7.5	8.6
Understanding of world		5	7.5	7.3	7	7.5
Worship		6.5	8.5	6.3	10	7.7
Type of Church		8.5	8	5	10	8
Lifestyle		7.5	6.5	6	8	8.5
Relationships		8	8.7	7.3	7	8

Question 10: How much has Scripture influenced you?

	under 40		40 -65		over 65	
	Group 2a	Group 1a	Group 2b	Group 1b	Group 2c	Group 1c
Understanding of God		8	8	6.3	6.5	8
Faith		8	6.7	6.3	8.5	8.7
Understanding of world		5	5	6	6.5	7.5
Worship		5	7	6.3	8	7
Type of Church		4	7	3.7	8	8
Lifestyle		7	6.5	5	8	8.5
Relationships		6.5	7.7	7.3	7	8

## Worship

Question 11: What is important for you about worship?

	under 40		40-65		over 65	
	Group 2a	Group 1a	Group 2b	Group 1b	Group 2c	Group 1c
Prayer		100	100	100	67	75
Teaching/Preaching		100	100	33.3	0	25
Being with others		100	100	100	100	75
Holy Communion		50	33	100	100	75
Thinking about God		100	67	100	33	75
Thinking about Life		100	33	100	33	50
Listening to God		0	0	67	33	75
Meeting God		0	0	33	33	50
Hymns and Music		0	100	100	100	75
Spiritual Experience		50	0	0	0	25
Other		0	0	0	0	0

Question 12: How would you describe the worship in your church?

	under 40		40 - 65		over 65	
	Group 2a	Group 1a	Group 2b	Group 1b	Group 2c	Group 1c
Intellectual		0	33	33	33	50
Emotional		0	33	33	0	50
Charismatic		0	0	0	0	25
Evangelical		0	0	0	0	25
Traditional		100	100	100	33	75
Socially Aware		50	100	33	67	25
Free		0	33	67	33	50
Formal		0	0	0	33	50
Other		0	0	0	0	0

Question 13: How much does the church worship involve Spiritual Experiences?

	under 40		40 - 65		over 65	
	Group 2a	Group 1a	Group 2b	Group 1b	Group 2c	Group 1c
Involves		3.5	2	4.7	0	5
Encourages		3	4.7	4.7	0	5.7
Expresses		3	2.5	3.7	0	9
Is a Spiritual Experience		5.5	2	4	0	7

## APPENDIX 4

The symbol ... indicates a pause or hesitation.  
The number indicates the section of the transcript.

### **Spiritual Experiences: Annabel**

#### A.1. Healing as a result of Prayer (Reference Questionnaire)

The earliest I remember was when I was about 14 and a close family friend had had a cycle accident and was in intensive care. I prayed during the church service and I felt completely at ease and 'knew' that he would be OK ... and he was.

#### A.2. The finding of the medal (Reference Questionnaire)

Another experience was while I was para-ascending as a Ranger (Girl Guides). One of the participants lost in this 'huge' field a religious medal the Pope had given her. She was quite distraught ... I and a friend prayed and convinced a group of girls to look for it. They were naturally very reluctant. But after no more than 5 steps we found it - it was like finding a needle in a haystack ... a spiritual experience I'll never forget.

The experience was described more fully in the discussion (38):

And it was really strange and I was just saying like prayers that they would be answered, and I remember talking to my friend about this and then we were in this situation and this girl was absolutely bereft, she lost this medal from the Pope. She was absolutely distraught, and she had been para-ascending and she'd fallen and dropped it and this huge, huge, huge field where this landrover had gone up and down, gone up and down, gone up and down and anyway she had to go off to hospital and the last thing we said to her as she went off was that we would look for the medal, this medal that she had got from the Pope. The others just, like, wet themselves laughing, and I said, "Oh no, all you have to do is pray, all you have to do is pray", and insisted that me and Marion prayed and then had to really bully the rest, there was about ten girls, to come and look for this medal. And I said "I've prayed and I know I am going to find it, and so I just need you to help me." And none of them were having any of it at all. And I promised that we wouldn't do it for more than five minutes, because it was a huge, huge field. And we took no more than a couple of steps and found it. And they couldn't believe it and that was it and Marion just believed in the power of prayer and it was just really tragic. She became a Christian.

### A.3. The Presence of her Grandmother (Reference Discussion 22)

I can remember when I was on a retreat and that I had just recently lost my Grandmother and I was going through this place and I felt very strongly that Grandmother was with me and it overpowered me such that I had to sit down. And it was very strange - I did not know what it was and I could smell her really, really, clearly, and I rushed back to the retreat, in a complete state, really upset, and I had to go and see a nun, (it was at Taize) and it was one of the nuns, and she said what did you feel? And I felt just that I smelt her, and it was flour. There was a flour place across, just behind the trees and I hadn't seen it, and it was the waft from that. But I have had experiences like that and I felt that it was very much like it was a coincidence. And I felt that through that time, it was a really hard time for me, ... Normally it would be an answer to a prayer, but there have been other times when it has come upon me.

And I felt at that time and I suppose as well maybe I was thinking, "I wasn't in prayer" and well the examples I was giving were very much like answers to prayer - at that time it was a week of retreat and what do you do but reflect all the time and so maybe I was in that heightened state - like I was thinking all week. It was such for me at that time - it was such a time that I was nursing and was encountering death all the time - I was working in a coronary care unit - intensive care and was meeting it all the time but I had never had anyone near me die. It was always a fear for me, because often I would say to someone, "I believe they have gone to a better place" thinking would I ever have the courage ... So during that time, she died suddenly with a heart attack and all I thought was that she had gone to a better place and I honestly thought that when it came to my turn that I would experience a death that I wouldn't have that fear - so it was a real reassurance for me. And that experience and I honestly thought in the back of my mind "I won't think that, I will just be bereft and won't be able to think of Grandma anywhere else because I will just lose faith - and I didn't I just felt lots of reassurance that my faith was really important to me then.

### A.4. The Experience of Worship (Reference Discussion 114, 120, 122)

... there was a really beautiful service about a month ago that was a spiritual experience. The minister was off sick, I think he was suddenly off sick - he was, he was ill and the congregation ... and it was just absolutely fantastic - not that I don't think the minister's sermons aren't very good, they are very good, very thought provoking, but it wasn't to do with that - people stood up and just simply said what were their favourite hymns and why they liked them. And, to me, I just found that totally enlightening and I just loved it. That was a spiritual experience but I think it was because the congregation were giving of themselves and so I just absorbed all that and I thought that was just brilliant.

And I was talking to people about it afterwards and I think there was one bit that was particularly nice. One of the men sung a hymn. No we all sung a hymn and he sung the verse in the hymn ...

To me this was a real element of it - he was singing, we all sung this hymn. I think it was because people were explaining why it was important, so that was something that normally nobody would say, would they really? You were getting an insight into people. But this was just absolutely beautiful. We were all singing ... when you are singing - normally I don't sing the hymns, actually, I just stand at the back, because I am not a big singer, and it is such a small room that you are very wary that you are singing totally out of key. Half the time I don't sing, I just stand there. I read the words, which is beautiful, but I don't sing. But you felt obliged to sing because you wanted to sing for that person. And then as this bloke was singing his hymn, but we knew he was going to sing a verse by himself, and he started to sing just as it was his verse, he said to one of the other men in the congregation "Carry on A", and the two of them sang it together. And to me, that was it, you know that there was nothing false about it there was nothing ... I think it was because it was spontaneous that he said "Carry on A" and the two of them just sang it together and I was just blown away by it really, and I just thought it was just beautiful.

... they were sharing what was important to them about their spiritual ... I mean it is just like a hymn, isn't it. It is just about a hymn but you know, everybody would explain why that hymn was important to them.

### **Spiritual Experiences: Carrie**

#### **C.1. The Dream (Reference Discussion 11)**

When my husband was very ill I used to pray and ask the Lord what is best and what I should do and one night I dreamt that I saw this figure in like a white robe. Well I have got to say it is a dream. And this person said to me "Do your best - you can't do anything else but your best." So I woke up and to be honest I was frightened, because I was wondering where this person going to. And that is it. So sometimes if you explain something to someone ... Well, since then I keep wondering if there was a person. When we went to bed we locked up everything, nobody couldn't get in. So I said "Well it's a dream" - I dreamt that I seen this person in this white robe and this person said to me "Do your best". Well I always say, "Lord what to do - to do with him" Because I really did my best and leave myself and see that he is OK and sometimes he will say to me have you had your breakfast yet, but I liked staying with him because I see that he is going down. So I dreamt that I saw this figure who said "Do your best". And that is what I really did - my best.



Well, I don't think that it was an angel that would show themselves to me so clearly, I had to say it was a dream. So I got a friend, I was telling her about it. She said it was an angel. I said I am not that worthy that the Lord would send his angel to appear to me. So she said "Don't say that - you never know." I remember her saying that to me.

I felt real nice when I had that dream. I felt so light and I said to myself, "Everything is going to be all right as the person, or whatever, said to me "Do your best." And that was what I was doing - my best.

#### C.2. Hymns and Prayers (Reference Discussion 31)

I cry in hymns - it depends on the words. I really feel touched by them, and they bring back memories. When we were back home, as kids, we had to go to church every Sunday, and Sunday evening my mother didn't like going back at night so what we did we would have, like songs of praise, like songs of praise. We had a very big table and we would all get around the table and everyone would say, "Dada" and the Father had a quatro. So we would say "Dada, play this hymn for me". And we would sing. And what I have noticed now, since I've lost my husband if when I went to church one evening we sung "the day thou gavest Lord is ended" that was always my father's closing hymn. And the last time I went to church in the evening the tears were down my face because it brought back memories. So things like that makes me cry. On the day that I was confirmed we sang "O Jesus I have promised to serve thee to the end", and that makes me cry as well. Well if we sing it in the ancient tune, make me cry. But if we sing it in the new bouncy tune I don't cry. I don't know why, but as I say if we sing it in the ancient tune I do cry. And I felt really nice that day. So when we sing it in the old tune it brings back the memory of that day. And if I don't cry at the beginning I cry at the end. But if we sing it in the modern tune I don't cry.

### **Spiritual Experiences : Eric**

#### E.1. Junior Church preparation (Reference Questionnaire)

When preparing Junior Church lessons there have been many occasions during the years when I have been somewhat at a loss as to how to present the lesson and its content. However "something" was always there to give me strength and guidance to the way through these situations.

#### E.2. The Boys Brigade (Reference Discussion 8)

I used to be in the BB - And I was an officer in the BB and sometimes I will pick up a lesson for Sunday. And sometimes on a Tuesday or whatever day

you read something up and you think that is good, but actually by the Friday you don't know what to do but you seem to get the answer.

### E.3. The Preacher (Reference Discussion 8, 12)

There is a time on a Sunday morning service, when you hear a reading and the exposition tells you something that you didn't know about. Is that a spiritual experience? The preacher has a special way about him and that impresses you. You can see the cross in church but the preacher can be communicating that to me. As you look through the Bible you can be communicating to you as alive today.

There was a situation when I remember that I had this type of experience - a particular preacher from Wales - perhaps four or five times now - I have never felt anything like it because he would lean across and he used to challenge us. - We digress. This preacher he had the ability (whether it is right in this context) we used to have some rousing hymns and so forth, and when it came to the lesson, and this was something that always stood out, I don't know if he ever made notes for his sermon at all. But he just dealt with the lesson and that was his inspiration. But this guy could quote long lengths of texts. He would probably open it up and, yes, and then he would shut the book up and then away he would go. And 30 years on I can still remember this. There is one of the chaps that I do the books with down at [the church] and we had one or two discussions about this and I used to sit there and think that it was that type of thing, you know. We said that we should find out what this guy is about - he is obviously something special.

## **Spiritual Experiences: Felicity**

### F.1. The Anger of Death (Reference Questionnaire)

A sense of peace and completeness. A feeling of looking in on myself.

An "awareness" - not sure of what exactly but a feeling of something changing around me.

The experiences were described more fully in the discussion (61):

Well the two instances were when my mother and my father died. My father died ten years ago and my mother died five years ago. So they were very different and I have explored it many times- how I feel about their respective deaths - and the time between - the five years between, were very very difficult for me because my mother was very disabled with arthritis, and my father looked after her for years and years, died suddenly of cancer which we didn't know he had, and I became her prime carer then, and when I say we had a

difficult relationship - I was so angry. This is what I say when I say I know myself well, I understand how I felt about it. I was so angry with her, not with him (that does happen so often). I was so angry about everything and how it dominated my life and how helpless my mother was, which she was. We had a very difficult relationship. So we had a five year period when I found things very, very difficult. Fortunately, the last sort of 8 months of her life, things were dramatically different. She was in hospital for four months, in a home for four months and became a different person. I mean she never mentioned my dad once in that five years. She couldn't. It was too painful. I understood all that, but I needed to talk about him you see. So these times I have related here were - I mean I could think of one specifically was on a Christmas day, when it was like... My dad died in October, sort of very sorry about your dad, but you have got to get on and look after your mum. You had to put it away and get on. And that Christmas day after that, which was three months sort of later, I just went to pieces in the church because a particular piece of music triggered that and a particular hymn. Now fortunately because I was where I was, everybody understood what it was about and of course the support was there. And that was one of the experiences. And it was like when you pull the plug out of a sink, everything rushes out. And then you can fill it up again. That was one of the experiences actually. It was a lot more complicated than I have just related it. But again it was about emotion, personal emotion, feeling out of control, but other people helping me through it. I definitely felt that was a spiritual experience, no doubt about that. And if I sit and think about it, I can feel it.

## F.2. The Discussion (Reference Discussion 133)

I remember one day very well, I am talking, what, fifteen years back now, somebody - I can't remember who - just started a discussion about abortion. We worked with a lot of people who had multiple disabilities, learning disabilities, mental health problems, severe physical disabilities, and something I would think had been on the telly, and it sparked it off. And this discussion went on all day. And people came and went and had a coffee and brought their lunch and carried on. Now that was a most fantastic experience to me and I could easily say I can see the hand of God in that, although there wasn't much religion around, if you like. But that was a very spiritual experience for many people because for the first time many people looked at that issue and really thought it through. And that used to happen quite a lot - that sort of thing, you know. You would make a casual remark and he would say "Well, why do you think that then?" And you would be off. But that was very enriching you see because it was challenging and stimulating and it made people think about the philosophy of things, you know. It was excellent, and although he would say, "I am an atheist".

### F.3. Villa Park (Reference Discussion 115)

Some of the experiences I have had where I have felt really on a high, moved, challenged, whatever, whatever words you want to use, have not necessarily been in a strictly church setting. I mean, for instance, there is a lot else to take into account there. When Mission England was here, we went down at the Villa, and we were in the choir there, I found that experience of singing in a choir of a thousand people really uplifting. It was really, really special to me. But that isn't necessarily spiritual experience. I could of easily said it was spiritual experience.

#### **Spiritual Experiences: Lucy**

##### L.1. The Operation (Reference Questionnaire)

I was a patient in hospital to have a triple by-pass. I had a temperature the Dr's did all the test possible and they could not find out what the problem was and I could not have the operation unless I had the all clear. So my surgeon decide to have me down the following morning before the operation to have a scan done which was very frightening. So the night before the morning of the scan I said my prayers as usual and I prayed to God to let my operation be a successful one and if he see that I should not have it please do not allow them to do it and I felt he would be at my side, morning came and they took me had the scan done my surgeon came up and he told me I cant allow you to have the op. Your lungs not strong enough to keep you 3 or 4 days on the ventilator so I going to do my next best he did 3 sterit implants. I know its the Lords answer my prayer and I all ways put my trust in him he never fail me yet. Thank God.

#### **Spiritual Experiences: Mike**

##### M.1. Sunday Evening Worship (Reference Discussion 12, 26)

It is funny - last night [the minister] was ill last night and basically we had a service where everybody did their bit, and because it was very very short notice we decided what we would do - six of us would pick a hymn and decided why we would do this. And my choice was "How lovely are thy dwellings fair", which is in Congregational Praise, Psalm 84, because that to me means a great deal. It probably means absolutely nothing to anybody else. And out of that I was able to describe several things that had reminded me through life, in terms of what I have drawn out of that particular experience. Now that was just a 'one off', but I don't think a day goes by without finding something that is of spiritual importance.

Well, let's go back to Psalm 84. I mean a guy that I work with very very closely, we were driving back over the North Yorkshire moors and we got lost,

because the cattle had turned all the signposts around. So we got totally lost. So I just stopped, said, "let's have a look at this" and we were just outside of Rodesdale and it was at that time that he said he actually understood why I believed and that to me was a spiritual experience.

I mean we could ramble on all night. For me it happens on a daily basis. It doesn't happen in a dynamic way - it may happen in a dynamic way but it doesn't happen in a dramatic way.

#### M.2. The Cliffs of Dover (Reference Discussion 14)

Yes, I mean, today, ... my boss had cause to criticise his son on a particular aspect of what he had done and my conclusion is that "yes, he is absolutely useless in the area of communication." But when you say that kindly and with understanding that, then, for me, becomes a spiritual experience. A couple of examples that I used last night relative to this ... because it was just a question of ... I regret that the word "lovely" has fallen out of the Christian language because it takes away a lot of what people do. But one of the things that I remember, it is really quite barmy, I was over in Holland and I drove back to Eindhoven and to come back to England and it was snowing and the airport was shut, so I said "I will go to Maastricht and get a plane there" because Maastricht was not shut. And it was snowing, so I went to the pub and it was still snowing. The next morning I flew out on an early flight into Gatwick and it was absolutely lousy. You couldn't see a thing. And we actually came over the White Cliffs of Dover and the sunlight was there and there were only about 25 of us on the plane and they all walked over and looked down at the White Cliffs of Dover. And I said to the people last night that I couldn't believe this - looking at the White Cliffs of Dover. They have probably seen them ten thousand times, I don't know. But it was just so lovely and so wonderful that you felt like ... I would describe that very much as a spiritual experience. It is a realisation. I have been lucky in life that I have been able to look at things, if you like, from a great height. You look at it and you can't fail to be in awe of what takes place, over what there is.

#### M.3. Church Buildings (Reference Discussion 16, 20, 67)

a) Yes, I mean, if you want something down to a religious level. Time and time again, you have been to services in different places. I suppose, I don't know, I think I was in Nigeria worshipping in the Cathedral in Abba which was at the end of the Biafran situation and was an experience. But equally worshipping in Park Street Congregational Church in Boston where they kept all the gunpowder to blow up the Brits, was also a different story. And you could go on and go on and go on. It is never ending.

b) Yes, .... I suppose, (it isn't what you want to hear), I suppose those experiences are limited unfortunately through the actual church building. I can give you examples of that. When I got married, we went on honeymoon. We

did a grand tour of Europe. The night before we went on the grand tour, we went to church at the City Temple, in London. I can't remember who the preacher was. But that was pretty close. I felt pretty close in the Sacré Coeur in Paris which I find very different. There are many churches ... I have to say they are mainly confined to buildings. We went to Turin, many years ago, and went to see a copy of the Turin shroud and I found that to be pretty dynamic.

c) I don't think I have ever been to Paris without I have visited the "Sacré Coeur" and I look upon this and wonder upon the fact that you have actually got services in eight different languages, including things like Japanese, who presumably ain't Christians anyway. You just can't get away from that, it is just an incredible experience.

### **Spiritual Experiences: Ozzy**

#### **O.1. God's Presence (Reference Questionnaire)**

An incredibly profound sense of God's presence and guidance after focusing on Him and talking with him. A great sense of boldness and power and inner strength follows for anything from an hour to a few days. Sometimes quite overwhelming and very emotional at times to the point of tears.

## APPENDIX 5

### Summary of Classification of Spiritual Experiences from Questionnaires and Discussions According to Different Scholars

		Experience	Davies	Donovon	Glock	Hardy	Hay
Annabel	1	Healing as a result of prayer	Regenerative	Regenerative		6b, 7u, 9b, 11d	Answered prayer
	2	Finding the medal	Regenerative	Regenerative		7u, 8c, 9b, 11d	Answered prayer
	3	Presence of grandmother	Regenerative	Regenerative		4, 7f, 8c, 9a, 11q	Awareness of dead
	4	The experience of worship				2d, 11e	
Carrie	1	The dream	Quasi-sensory, revelatory	Paranormal	Comforting	2b, 7c, 9a, 10, 11m	Awareness of a sacred presence
	2	Hymns & prayers	Regenerative			7b, 11e	
Eric	1	Junior Church & BB preparation	Interpretative			7d, 9c	Synchasis
	2	The preacher	Numinous	Charismatic		2c?, 11c	
Felicity	1	The Anger of death		Regenerative		6a, 7b, 7r, 11r, 12a	
	2	The discussion	Regenerative			7b, 7u?	Presence of God
	3	Villa Park	Regenerative, interpretative			7b, 11c	
Lucy	1	The operation	Regenerative	Regenerative	Comforting	7a, 7u, 11p	Answered prayer
Mike	1	Sunday evening worship				7b, 11c	Synchasis
	2	Cliffs of dover	Regenerative	Mystical		1d?, 7e, 11a	Nature
	3	Church buildings	Numinous			7e, 7u, 11b	Awareness of a sacred presence
Ozzy	1	God's presence	Regenerative	Regenerative	Ecstatic	7v, 11d, 12a	Presence of God

**Summary of Classification of Spiritual Experiences from Questionnaires and Discussions According to Different Scholars (cont.)**

		Experience	James	Kelsey	Laski	Paffard
Annabel	1	Healing as a result of prayer	Happiness		via Purgativa	
	2	Finding the medal	Happiness		via Purgativa	
	3	Presence of grandmother	Inner peace	Revisited memory		Revisited memory
	4	The experience of worship			via Unitiva	Charismatic
Carrie	1	The dream	Mystical		via Illumitiva	
	2	Hymns & prayers		Revisited memory	via Illumitiva	Romantic emotion
Eric	1	Junior Church & BB preparation	Happiness	Intuitive		
	2	The preacher				
Felicity	1	The anger of death	Inner peace			Revisited memory, unattended spirit
	2	The discussion	Happiness			
	3	Villa Park				Romantic emotion
Lucy	1	The operation	Happiness			
Mike	1	Sunday evening worship		Revisited memory		Romantic emotion
	2	Cliffs of Dover	Mystical		via Purgativa	Nature mysticism
	3	Church buildings	Mystical		via Unitiva	Mystical
Ozzy	4	God's presence	Saintliness	Meditation		



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