

the debate in recent times are, G. Turner, 'He was Raised and Appeared: Evidence and Faith', *New Blackfriars*, April, 1977; F. Kerr, 'Paul's Experience: Sighting or Theophany?' *New Blackfriars*, July, 1977; M. Dummett, 'Biblical Exegesis and the Resurrection', *New Blackfriars*, February, 1977. I shall be more concerned with the arguments advanced by Prof. M. Wiles (on the 'relativist' side): 'In what Sense is Christianity a "Historical" Religion?' *Theology*, January, 1978, Vol. LXXXI, No. 679, (hereinafter called CHR); 'Does Christology Rest on a Mistake?' (CRM), *Religious Studies*, 6, 1970, pp. 69-76, and, *Working Papers in Doctrine*, (WPD), SCM, London, 1976, particularly chapter 14. See also, John J. Shepherd (representing 'minimal orthodoxy'): 'Criteria of Christian Believing' *Theology*, March, 1978, Vol. LXXXI, No. 680.

- 2 Op. cit. p. 85, see also Shepherd's 'The Essence of Christian Believing', *Religious Studies*, 12, 1976, pp. 231-7.
- 3 *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church*, pp. 137-138, Williams and Norgate, London, 1890, reprinted 1907.
- 4 *Downside Review* April 1978. A review of D. Z. Phillips' *Religion Without Explanation*.

Faith and Experience V:

Religious "Natural History"

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The Religious Experience Research Unit in Oxford embodies a brave and ambitious project devised by Sir Alister Hardy, to turn theology into a science comparable with other modern sciences.¹ As a biologist, Sir Alister is convinced that "religion" is a side of man's experience which can no longer be neglected by empirical science. He believes that there are scientific, as well as philosophical, grounds for attacking materialistic monism (DF p. 23); and he considers such an attack necessary, for otherwise "civilization may yet cut its throat with Occam's razor if it does not realize in time that materialism is ignoring a large part of the data of experience" (DF p. 228). In his Gifford Lectures of 1963-5, the second series of which make up *The Divine Flame* now happily made available

to us again in the RERU re-issue, and in *The Biology of God*, he indicates what form this attack might take, and it is a powerful and many-fronted attack. Sir Alister's own professional contribution, as a biologist, is essentially to be found in his evolutionary theory, in which he alleges that a purely mechanistic doctrine is untrue to the evidence. This means that the claim that religion and everything that might be meant by "spirituality" have been demolished by evolution is far from proven. The attack is furthered by evidence from a wide range of sciences, including psychology, neurology, social anthropology, and Sir Alister is particularly concerned to draw our attention to the claims of parapsychology. Obviously a lot of work remains to be done in all these fields, but a strong case can be made for saying that ideological scientism of the old school is not nearly as well grounded scientifically as some people would like to think. There are good reasons for refusing to treat mind and consciousness as mere epiphenomena, accidentally thrown up by a mechanical and mindless universe. And the evidence of religious experience is sufficient to suggest that there is *something* there which is real, whether or not it eventually turns out to be entirely or partly external to man and to the universe. What that something is and how it affects us and how we should respond to it, Sir Alister hopes we shall eventually be able to state with the same kind of precision that we expect of biological or other scientific propositions.

But before we can do that we must collect evidence. We must bring together "a vast natural history of religious experience" (DF p. 26). It is for this purpose that RERU was founded. As Sir Alister says in his Foreword to *The Original Vision*, "We are essentially playing the part of naturalists hunting specimens of human experience" (OV p. 4). This natural history will provide the basis for a scientific "natural theology", which is envisaged as "a science of man's religious behaviour" (DF p. 220).

The first stage in RERU's enquiry was to publish as widely as possible an appeal for autobiographical accounts of religious experiences. Over 4,000 replies were received, and it is on these that the first Studies in Religious Experience, apart from the re-issue of *The Divine Flame*, are based. *The Original Vision* is concerned with reports of childhood experiences; *A Sense of Presence* concentrates on what the author calls "vivid or ecstatic episodes" (SP p. viii). *Living the Questions* is a report of interviews and correspondence arising out of contributions sent in. *This Time-Bound Ladder* is, basically, a transcript of after-dinner conversations held between members of the RERU team and a variety of writers and theologians who had, it seems been allowed to see all or some of the contributions sent in.

In *The Biology of God* Sir Alister Hardy asked critics of his

method to wait until they could make an examination of the first results produced by it (BG p. 17). Now that these results have been made available to us, I presume that we are being invited to offer our comments not just on them, but on the whole methodology. It is with this that I wish to begin.

It is, of course, notoriously difficult to circumscribe a topic like "religious experience". Both "religious" and "experience" are tricky words to pin down. Both Robinson and Beardsworth are aware of this. Beardsworth does not seem particularly bothered by "religious", but he recognizes at least part of the difficulty with "experience": "There is an ambiguity about the phrase 'religious experience', depending on how we take the word 'experience'. If we interpret it on the analogy of phrases like 'interesting experience' or 'harrowing experience', then we shall think in terms of episodes occurring at certain times and in certain places; we shall talk of 'a religious experience' or 'religious experiences'. On the other hand, one can argue, as a contributor did, 'Religious experience is not something to be tied down to definite times and places; it is a way of looking at the world (and oneself) which colours, or should colour, all one's thoughts and actions'" (SP pp. vii-viii).

Robinson refers to the difficulties William James had in finding a definition of "religious experience" even for his own limited purposes, and appears to accept as a positive asset the likelihood that discussion of religion will eventually turn out to be a discussion of everything (TBL p. 5).

For the purposes of the first phase of their research, RERU effectively shelved the difficulty; by appealing to the public at large to submit autobiographical reports, they passed on to their contributors the responsibility for deciding what was to count as "religious experience". But this means that, so far, they cannot really claim to be carrying out very fully the programme outlined by Sir Alister. Their evidence will not, strictly, be evidence of "religious experience", but of what people *count as* religious experience. An obvious question to investigate now is: why do these people count these experiences as religious? What is the significance of their wanting to use the word "religious"? How are these "religious" experiences related to the rest of their lives, to their social context, to their intellectual beliefs, and so on? Experiences which are phenomenologically similar may serve very different purposes and have very different significance in different situations and for different people. What is "religious" for one person may be non-religious for others. And even if two people have a similar experience and both call it religious, it may still be religious in quite different senses. (Glossolalia, for instance, may be regarded as a way of letting off steam, as a symptom of hysteria, as a religious ex-

perience of God, or as a religiously significant experience of demonic possession).

One way of developing the research is clearly to seek further evidence from contributors, and RERU have done some work on this, as LQ shows. But it would also be necessary to situate the material in a broader sociological context, and this does not appear to have been done yet.

One important part of such further investigation is indicated, inadvertently, by Sir Alister Hardy: "What steps are we taking, I am frequently asked, to test the honesty or validity of the accounts sent in? Apart from a small proportion from those who are clearly mentally ill, some are perhaps emotionally exaggerated and others may be written to give a swollen importance to the self, but no one with an unbiased mind, I believe, can read the majority of the accounts without being impressed by a feeling of their sincerity" (BG pp. 188-189). Is a "feeling of their sincerity" really sufficient? It is, alas, not difficult for a man to be quite sincere in an account he gives of himself, while being, in fact, wrong. The evidence given, for instance, by Richard Sennett in the first part of his book, *The Uses of Disorder*, reveals the extraordinary extent to which it is possible for people to be mistaken about themselves. It is possible for people, apparently quite sincerely, to regard themselves, even to experience themselves, as being content and at peace, when all the objective evidence suggests just the contrary. This means that if someone reports, for instance, that he finds himself relaxed and invigorated by his experience of God and prayer, it is not enough just to ask whether he is sincere. We must ask whether the evidence of his behaviour supports his contention. And it will not necessarily be enough just to carry out psychological tests on individual contributors. As is well brought out in Laing and Esterson's *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, the clues to the understanding of the psychology of an individual may have to be sought in his family, not in himself. (If this seems an obvious point, it is, unfortunately, a point which still needs to be made against what appears to be the prevailing orthodoxy of psychological atomism).

It is not necessarily a wholly bad thing that people should have myths about themselves. But research is needed into the relationship between a person's picture of himself and what he appears to be to others, if we are to know how to assess the significance of autobiographical reports of religious experience.

A further complicating factor in the RERU programme is that their procedure to date can only yield evidence of what *certain people* call religious: people, that is, who respond to invitations to talk about their own experience. It would certainly be wrong to press the point too far, but I think it is pertinent to suggest that

this could be a seriously distorting factor. Many a priest has surely come to feel rather suspicious of people who want to talk about their own religious experience, because he has found that such people are likely to be religiously immature and unbalanced. Of course, there are cultural variables here: some cultures encourage, while others discourage, spiritual autobiography. But I am inclined to suspect that, in general, a significant proportion of those who like talking or writing about themselves will turn out to be people who like talking or writing about themselves in any context, people who find themselves interesting. If this is true, a sample consisting only of those who volunteer their own autobiographies is liable to be unrepresentative. (There may even be a class factor involved, if one of the characters in Rodney Garland's *The Heart in Exile* is right in saying, "The working class take life seriously, whereas the middle class take themselves seriously".)

The other main reason for wanting to describe one's own experience, and it will be this that motivates those who would normally maintain a decent reticence about themselves, is that some experiences are, by the normally accepted standards of our society, peculiar and puzzling, calling for interpretation. But this too will produce an unrepresentative sample, unless the religious is to be excessively identified with the abnormal.

The random evidence yielded by the first stage of the RERU investigation will have to be complemented by the evidence of those who did not see fit to volunteer any contribution. I understand that there is a plan at some stage to investigate a large sample of the population systematically, and it will be interesting to see what comes of this. But even here I anticipate one important difficulty. It is not clear what results this kind of enquiry could get from people whose religion is primarily something which is socially embodied, as in traditional Judaism and Islam and, I suppose, in some Catholic countries and in some tribal religions. The problem here is not quite the same as that raised by Michael Whiteman: "One's definition of 'religious' becomes rather futile if everything can be religious". The anonymous RERU interlocutor (whom I suspect to be Edward Robinson) replies: "Isn't that a rather fertile idea? Doesn't everything become religious for a religious man?" (TBL p. 184). In traditional religions which are socially embodied, it is not a matter of everything *becoming* religious: everything *is* religious. Nor is it a matter of "a religious man", but of a religious society. There is no occasion for people to have any experience of their own which *makes* everything religious. In such a situation, it would surely be impossible to pick out religious experience from secular, social experience.

It is not clear how wedded RERU as a whole is to Sir Alister's own view of religion as being, essentially, "experience"; but there

is evidently a difficult methodological point at issue here. If the public at large is, at least initially, to take the responsibility for defining what is meant by "religion", then surely it is scientifically improper for a "naturalist" of religion to ignore the fact that for many people the word "religious" does not immediately suggest the word "experience". It would rather suggest things like doctrine or cult or ecclesiastical communities. But once this kind of evidence is allowed in, the whole thing becomes vastly more complicated. For one thing, some experiences submitted as religious might be regarded as non-religious or even irreligious by the doctrinal standards of one or more religions. For instance, the account given in SP p. 7 of a vision of a dead dog would not be likely to be counted as religious by many Catholics. And I presume that most Catholics would regard it as downright irreligious to engage, say, in Temple prostitution or ritual cannibalism or the rather unsavoury masturbatory activities of some Gnostic sects, ancient and modern (masturbation is, I am told, an important religious rite for the modern Temple of Aphrodite).

Sir Alister himself is evidently not prepared to regard doctrinal systems as relevant to his enquiry, except tangentially. "Religion is essentially a matter of the spirit, belonging to the realm of emotion and feeling; and theology is *not* religion, but is the systematisation of the knowledge of religion and the theories put forward by the reasoning mind to explain it and the various kinds of belief" (DF p. 28). (Sir Alister is either unaware of the traditional christian distinction between doctrine and theology, or sees no reason to accept it or even discuss it). "All the ideas as to the possible nature of what man has called God have been based entirely upon interpretations of his past and present experience" (BG p. 20). "What we call God is a human *experience*. Any authority declaring the nature of God in the sacred writings of the various religions of the world is derived from the experience of the holy men of each of these particular faiths" (BG p. 183).

In some sense, obviously, it is true that all doctrine derives from some kind of experience. But "experience" covers a multitude of sins. And one kind of experience which is widely claimed and which is, in some cases, totally determinative of the form a religion takes, but which Sir Alister seems unwilling to allow for, is the experience of revelation. Doctrinal systems may, if you like, be said to be derived from experience, but in some cases they derive from an interpretation of a particular experience or set of experiences as being experience of God declaring himself. Whatever our own view may be of the validity of alleged revelations, simply as naturalists we must distinguish between doctrinal systems which only claim to be the product of the human mind reflecting on life, and those which claim to derive from an authoritative divine pron-

ouncement. Islam would be the most extreme instance of this latter kind of system with Judaism and Christianity vying for second place; but a similar claim is made in a wide range of other religions, ancient and modern, primitive and sophisticated: it is found in several kinds of Hinduism, for instance, in much classical Greek religion, in much African religion, and in some versions of spiritualism. It is hard to see on what scientific grounds all this evidence can be disregarded by an impartial observer.

Sir Alister does, indeed, say that his natural theology "should never exclude Divine Revelation, surely that is its main subject matter" (DF p. 208). But he seems to equate this with not excluding "consideration of records of religious experience contained in the holy books of any religion," which seems to miss the specific point being made when something is claimed as "revelation".

Granted his dislike for doctrine, it is not surprising that Sir Alister is enthusiastic about various current developments in theology. There is no need here to comment on his appreciation of *Honest to God* or his tentative approval of process theology; but it is pertinent to the matter in hand to raise a difficulty about his comment on Professor Hick's demythologized christology: "It is an admirable step forward towards a progressive theology which, like science, is prepared to change its theories as new facts are revealed by scholarship" (BG p. 215). There may indeed be new "facts" revealed by scholarship, and theology must take them into account; but it is not clear to me that demythologized christologies are genuinely based on new facts, rather than on an accommodation of old facts to new *a priori* principles, which is a very different affair.

It is, of course, inevitable that in the course of any kind of enquiry we periodically find ourselves feeling "That I just cannot believe, *istud non stomachor*". But if our method is to be genuinely scholarly and scientific, we must not be too quick to accept our own indigestion as evidence. We may have real reasons for not being able to swallow something, and we may not always be able to state them all with total cogency; but we may just be suffering from intellectual prejudice or from overexposure to some *Zeitgeist*. It is important to try to discover which is the case.

I suspect that Sir Alister is using a criterion of "acceptability to the scientific mind" to distinguish between acceptable religion and unacceptable superstition (a distinction which he makes several times, without commenting on it), without being able to offer any scientific argument for the validity of such a criterion. And on this I think there are several legitimate comments.

The first is methodological. If we are to be genuine naturalists of religion, then we shall of course be interested to discover what kind of religion is acceptable to scientists towards the end of the

20th century. But we shall also be interested to know what kind of religion appeals to classicists and bottle washers and all manner of mortals. And it would surely be unscientific to assume that the kind of religion which is accepted as “scientific” by Sir Alister is necessarily a more important clue to the true nature of religion than, say, the kind of religion which is accepted by the devotees of the proliferating fundamentalist movements which are also characteristic of our era.

Secondly I should want to query the propriety of the remark made by one of the anonymous RERU interlocutors (probably Sir Alister himself) in TBL p. 85: “As a biologist I cannot accept the idea of a physical resurrection of a material body”. I am inclined to retort: “No one is asking you to accept it *as a biologist*. It is not a biological hypothesis”. If bodies were leaping out of tombs all over the place (as was alleged to be the case in the wake of the preaching of John of Vicenza), then there would indeed be material for biologists to work on, and I have no doubt that they would be able to trace certain patterns of regularity which could be formulated as scientific hypotheses. But a miracle (supposing one occurs), such as the resurrection of Christ, precisely because it is a unique or extremely rare phenomenon, of such a kind that it cannot at all be accommodated by solidly established scientific laws, is rightly left on one side by science. The cost to science, were it to attempt to devise new laws to accommodate the miracle, would be too great. So science quite properly leaves it unexplained. (It will be apparent that I am convinced by Richard Swinburne’s discussion in *The Concept of Miracle*, pp. 23ff.) But this does not entitle science to declare that the miracle could not have taken place.

It is not as a biologist that anyone is asked to believe in the physical resurrection of Christ; if there is any scientific discipline involved, it is history. Sir Alister’s dismissal of the historical question in DF pp. 214-5 is, it seems to me, intellectually not quite honest. In BG p. 212 he is slightly less dogmatic; at least he allows that there is an historical question. But he is surely being over-confident and rather rude when he refers to belief in the physical resurrection as “the blind acceptance of supposed events in the past—events which cannot satisfy the accepted rules of evidence used in other fields of historical research”. It is not fair to require that all alleged historical events measure up to some absolute standard of evidence. It is in the nature of the case that different events should leave behind them different kinds and amounts of evidence. What kind of evidence should we *expect* to have of the resurrection of Christ? And can one really be as certain as Sir Alister would have us be that there is so little presentable evidence for the resurrection that acceptance of it must inevitably be “blind”?

I believe that it is important for a christian to be confident that the resurrection of Christ is at least not refuted by historical evidence. But we must then go on, surely, to add that the resurrection of Christ is in many ways a puzzling object of historical research. If all that was meant by the resurrection of Christ was the belief that his corpse was resuscitated and continues to live in exactly the same way that other human bodies are said to be alive, it would be clear what kind of historical event was being alleged, and the problem would simply be one of historical evidence. But it is a caricature of christian doctrine to talk of “the material body of Christ still existing as a true physiologically working body somewhere in outer space” (DF p. 215). Almost all our documentary evidence for the bodily resurrection is also evidence that the resurrected body is not quite like other material bodies—it can appear and disappear, for instance. And, so far as I know, no orthodox christian has ever maintained that the risen Lord is to be found “somewhere in outer space”. And if it is objected that it must be *somewhere* if it is a genuine body, all we can say is that, though we may have compelling reasons for wanting to talk about the risen Lord as being, in some sense, bodily, we also have compelling reasons for refusing to predicate of his risen body all that we normally predicate of bodies. It is all very unsatisfactory, no doubt, but have we any reason to demand that everything should be totally satisfactory? The risen body of the Lord is not the only puzzle in life.

One could have wished that Sir Alister had taken a little bit more trouble to find out what christians really believe, if only as part of his task as a naturalist, before eliminating it from his proposed scientific religion.

The third comment I want to make on the criterion of acceptability to the scientific mind concerns the problem of doctrinal authority. It is natural enough to feel that there is a tension between scientific method and appeals to doctrinal authority. But is it, strictly, unscientific to believe something on the authority of somebody else? When St John says, “No one has ever seen God; the only-begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he it is who has made him known” (Jn 1:18), he is not inviting us to abandon scientific or critical thought. He is warning us that we do not have independent access to God, and must therefore depend, for our knowledge of him, on the one who is in a position to know about God. This indicates, not that we must give up being scientific or critical, but in what way it is appropriate for us to apply our critical faculties. Unless we are to accept a rigorously Barthian view, we shall probably want to say that we do have a certain amount of evidence about God. This means that one of the things we must do in face of an alleged revelation of God through Christ,

is to test the compatibility of this revelation with our other knowledge of God. If the revelation survives this test, then we shall turn our minds to assessing our reasons for accepting the authority of Christ. And this is a perfectly rational procedure. It may be difficult to state all the reasons I have for believing what someone tells me, but it is quite clear that there is a difference between a rational trust in somebody and an irrational trust.

If it is true that there is nothing intrinsically unscientific or intellectually unrespectable in the idea of there being an authoritative dogmatic revelation, then it follows that no scientific enquiry into religion can take it as its starting point that there has been no such revelation. Sir Alister is, actually, quite frank: he informs us that he is a Unitarian. But what he does not seem to appreciate is that the Unitarian declaration, "We do not base our church life on the acceptance of particular creeds" (DF p.245) is itself only intellectually respectable if it is taken as a dogmatic utterance. Without the *dogma* that there has in fact been no authoritative revelation, the refusal of all particular creeds is unintelligible. And such a dogma is every whit as dogmatic and "arbitrary" as any other dogma.

Actually, ironically enough, Sir Alister himself gives us some support for regarding authority in a more friendly light. He mentions with approval C. H. Waddington's discussion of the difference speech makes to the human race, as permitting a new mode of transmission of information. Without speech, information is passed from one generation to the next biologically; speech makes possible a new method: tradition. But, as Waddington saw, this can only work successfully if the new generation is capable of receiving the information so transmitted. The new-born infant has to be moulded into "an information-acceptor". It is of considerable evolutionary importance that human beings became "authority acceptors" (DF p. 47). But if Sir Alister is right to accept the "capacity for belief" as an important tool evolved by man, it is not clear why he should prefer a religion that does not, basically, accept authority or tradition.

It is time now to move on to another problem. Sir Alister expresses a hope that his scientific natural theology will demonstrate "that there is a certain consistent pattern in the records of religious experience" (DF p. 26). He himself is convinced of this consistency. He remarks on the "extraordinary similarity in the nature of religion in its simplest form among whatever people—primitive or sophisticated—it may be found" (BG p. 87). But I suspect that this similarity is due more to the method used than to anything that is really there in the material. Religion "in its simplest form" is found to be homogeneous largely because homogeneity is taken as the identifying characteristic of the "simplest form" of religion.

After quoting a very Unitarian statement from H. W. Garrod, Sir Alister says, "I find that statement of the essence of Christianity one which corresponds most closely to the picture I see emerging from the natural history of religious experience as far as it has gone" (DF p. 214). It does not seem to occur to him to check the proposed "essence of Christianity" against the evidence of Christianity.

I am not really sure why we should be particularly concerned with finding any "essence of Christianity" anyhow. If it is hoped that somehow the quarrelsomeness and fragmentation of Christianity can be overcome by distilling its simple essence, it needs to be remarked that there is good evidence (as given by Bryan Wilson, for instance, in his writings on sects) that the normal result of any appeal to "the simple gospel of Christ" is that yet another quarrelsome sect appears on the scene. Nor is there, to date, any evidence that syncretistic religions "reflecting the truer parts of all the great faiths" (DF p. 240) fare any better. This may, of course, be due to the unregenerate stubbornness of men. But it is just as likely to be due to a fundamental inadequacy in the whole programme of basing a religion on the simplest, most universal element common to all faiths.

Be that as it may, it is still far from proven that the alleged similarity between all religions really exists anyhow. Modern anthropologists seem more concerned to stress the diversity to be found even in primitive religions, and are very reluctant to engage in grand Frazer-like theories about the origin of religion (cf. J. Bowker, *The Sense of God*, pp. 44ff). And the perennial philosophy alleged by Huxley has been severely criticized by such scholars as R. C. Zaehner. Sir Alister acknowledges the criticisms made of "arm chair anthropologists", but seems quite prepared to resort to arm chair oecumenism. The texts cited at the beginning of DF chapter IV to show the "universality" of the sense of "dependence on a spiritual Power" can do so only by being isolated from their own distinct settings in different religious and philosophical systems. Any serious study of religion must take into account the systemic integrity of each religion, and not abstract bits that happen to resemble each other. Comparisons between religions can only be useful if they take into account the complex ways in which the individual elements in each religion are related to their own context. Before patterns of consistency can be traced, diversities must be respected wherever they are found.

Sir Alister's own version of the "essence" of all religion is interesting chiefly because of the way he relates it to evolutionary theory. Otherwise it is rather thin gruel. "Primitive man felt something, whether he called it Mana, Waken or by any other name, something which gave him power, strength and encouragement to

overcome difficulties and achieve aspirations; and this . . . is at the heart of all religion” (BG p. 173). Towards this Power “we have a feeling, no doubt for good biological, or psychological, reasons (linked with the emotions of an early child-parent affection, but none the worse for that) of a *personal* relationship” (DF p. 9). It is a curious mixture of pietism and muscular christianity! It is fascinating to discover from Sir Alister the possible roots of such a religious attitude from studies in the ethology of animals. His account of the apparently “masochistic” element in religion as being essentially akin to the surrender procedures observed in many different animal species, and so at most only tangentially related to sex, is attractive and well-argued (DF p. 161ff). And the suggestion that our attitude of devotion to God is ethologically and biologically akin to the way in which dogs have learned to transfer their devotion from parent to human master and then maintain it throughout life (even passing through a conversion experience on the way) is quite delightful (DF p. 173ff; BG p. 154ff). But the difficulty about taking this as constituting the heart of all religion is that it does not seem to account for anything like all the main religions found in the world. It would be difficult to fit Theravada Buddhism into this pattern, and even more difficult to cope with the kind of modern Western Buddhism which is, in part, inspired precisely by a desire to escape from the Christian doctrine of grace. And, for a quite different reason, I think it would be difficult to fit Judaism and Christianity into the scheme. Far from being problem-solving devices, a lot of Judaism and Christianity is rather problem-causing. A basic thrust of Old Testament prophetism, for instance, is aimed at disrupting systems that were operating too comfortably. It may be that, ultimately, this kind of kick in the pants does make for a better life and a better society; but the recipient of it is hardly likely to *experience* it as a kindly, sustaining response to his own call for help. It is difficult to imagine someone like Amos talking benignly about “Our Great Companion” (DF p. 237).

One very sad consequence of this anti-doctrinal, emotional picture of religion is that it leaves no room for the gnostic, neotic element which is such a pronounced feature of most religions, at least most developed religions. Religion is not allowed to contain any truth which can fascinate and fulfil the mind. This is probably in part due to a belief, inherited from the doctrinaire scientism which Sir Alister Hardy normally repudiates, that man’s mind belongs to science. There is an interesting text from Durkheim quoted in *The Divine Flame* which rather suggests this: “The real function of religion is not to make us think, to enrich our knowledge, nor to add to the conceptions, which we owe to science, others of another origin and another character, but rather, it is to make us

act, to aid us to live” (DF p. 68).

It is far too early to say what RERU may eventually achieve; there is no reason to suppose that they are unwilling to come to conclusions quite different from those foreseen by their founder, and he himself would be the first to welcome this possibility. (There is already evidence that a noetic element has been recognised as important in many of the contributions received by RERU). But if the work is to progress usefully, I would suggest that even at this stage of naturalist specimen-hunting, certain points must be attended to: evidence must be sought more widely; there must be a proper anthropological concern to situate claimed experiences in their whole personal and social context; the evidence of institutional religion must be taken seriously. Then in due course far more cross-cultural investigation will have to be undertaken. And the whole way through there will have to be careful sensitivity to detail and to differences.

I should be sorry if these criticisms and comments were taken to indicate a predominantly negative reaction to the work of Sir Alister Hardy and his Research Unit. Their investigations will almost certainly increase enormously our understanding of man as a religious animal, and this will be of inestimable benefit to theology. And it is most encouraging to find that scientists are prepared to bring their various kinds of expertise to bear on religious matters. If Sir Alister can succeed in convincing the world of science that the issue of religion is by no means closed, he will have performed an invaluable service to our whole civilization.

But we still ought to heed the warning given by C. S. Lewis in his essay *Religion and Rocketry*: “Each new discovery, even every new theory, is held at first to have the most wide-reaching theological and philosophical consequences. It is seized by unbelievers as the basis for a new attack on Christianity; it is often, and even more embarrassingly, seized by injudicious believers as the basis for a new defence” (*Fern-seed and Elephants*, p. 86). We should be quite humble enough to receive any help we can get from anyone; but we must not expect anyone else to do our work for us, whether as christians or as believers. Peter Baelz is conceding far too much when he accepts the claim of a RERU interlocutor (almost certainly Sir Alister) that Sir Alister’s kind of scientific natural theology “would be the only respectable kind of theology”. It may sound “entirely proper and right” to Professor Baelz, but it certainly does not sound so to me (TBL pp. 83-4). Theology, at least christian theology, cannot just abdicate its responsibilities like that.

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Of the three first publications of RERU, Beardsworth’s *A Sense of Presence* is the one most obviously appropriate to the

current state of the investigation. His aim is simply to present and classify one particular kind of evidence received by RERU. He makes no attempt to disentangle what is or is not "religious", allowing visions of dead dogs and American Presidents to keep company with visions of Christ and of our Lady. And he promises to abstain from "sweeping explanations whether reductionist (e.g. 'It's all sex') or transcendental ('God moves in a mysterious way') (p. viii). (He does not, in fact, keep this promise: his final chapter does offer a fairly sweeping explanation in terms of "intense need" of "the Other's presence"; but this does not interfere with the presentation of the evidence). In the present state of play, this declared purpose is surely the right one: what the reader expects and wants is a clear presentation of the evidence for particular kinds of experience, classified as far as possible on the basis of phenomenological similarities. Even if the classificatory scheme has later to be scrapped, some way of organising the material has to be found. Even if biologists no longer turn to Speusippus or Aristotle for their classificatory categories, they can still appreciate their debt to the pioneers.

Beardsworth's scheme is very simple. He analyses his material into five classes of experience: visual (with six subdivisions), auditory, tactile, inward sensations and sense of presence. As a rough and ready scheme, this seems quite reasonable, though it is a pity that olfactory experience is not treated separately. Even if RERU have as yet only come across few claims to this kind of experience (cf SP p. 13), the amount of evidence for "mystical" smelling is impressive enough to suggest that a file ought to be opened on it. (Apart from St Catherine's ability to smell sinners, and Padre Pio's famous habit of projecting smells all over the place, fragrance is widely mentioned in the early church as a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit).

The real trouble, though, is not with the classes, but with the way the material is put into the classes. Under the heading "Visions" we find material that is not clearly visionary at all (e.g. "I imagined God was watching me", (p. 1); nos. 7 and 8 on p. 3 seem to be only about a feeling of presence, which is supposed to be a separate category; nos. 15-20 make no visionary claim at all). Ib ("Illumination of surroundings") does not distinguish between claims to see light, and inner experiences of something describable metaphorically in terms of light (the latter being clearly the case in no. 9 and probably in nos. 13 and 14); Beardsworth is aware of the difficulty, but apparently did not see fit to take the obvious steps to remedy it. Ic is supposedly concerned with visions of particular light or lights, but no. 2 clearly belongs in Ib. It would be tedious to go through all the evidence of misclassification; let me just mention that Ie ("Out of the body experiences")

has been made to include the very different phenomenon of feeling that one is off the ground *in the body*, which is sufficiently commonly claimed to deserve separate attention. And 2c (“Being spoken through”) fails to make the vital distinction between being “spoken through” in a state of trance or ecstasy, and being “spoken through” in a state of normal consciousness.

Apart from this fairly persistent tendency to put things in the wrong boxes, Beardsworth shows himself to be insensitive in other ways too to the texts he is dealing with. On p. 37 he takes “an appeal for help from outside” to mean that the contributor was engaged in helping someone else, when it clearly refers to asking for help *from* someone else. And he must have quite misunderstood the stories in the bible about supernatural visitants telling people not to be afraid: he cites these in connexion with contributors’ reports of lack of fear (p. 91), but the biblical stories all presuppose that the person having the experience *was* afraid. On p. 65 curious evidence is adduced to show that orthodox christianity thought that the body was “nothing to be proud of”: after referring to “if thine eye offend thee”, which has nothing to do with the case at all, Beardsworth says “St Paul was particularly down on it (‘the flesh’ tends to be mentioned in the same breath as ‘the Devil’)”. I presume that he is thinking of “the world, the flesh and the devil”, but that is nothing to do with St Paul! If this kind of thing can pass muster as exegesis, perhaps we should not complain to find that Plotinus is cited as an “early christian” on the same page.

Little attempt is made to relate the modern material to anything else; what little attempt there is, is vitiated by the kind of lunatic exegesis already referred to, and by a colossal vagueness. I do not find it illuminating to be told that visions were “common enough in Biblical times” (p. 1). Nor is the cause of scholarship greatly advanced by notes like “Cf. Upanishads” (p. 107).

Before we leave SP it is perhaps worth noting that even if the attempted classification had been successfully carried out, it would not, of itself, tell us anything at all about *religious* experience. The paranormal is not necessarily religious, nor is the religious necessarily paranormal.

(To be continued)

- 1 *Studies in Religious Experience*, published by The Religious Experience Research Unit, Oxford. *The Original Vision*, by Edward Robinson (1977); *A Sense of Presence*, by Timothy Beardsworth (1977); *This Time-Bound Ladder*, ed. by Edward Robinson (1977); *Living the Questions*, by Edward Robinson (1978); *The Divine Flame*, by Alister Hardy (1978). Reference is also made to *The Biology of God*, by Alister Hardy (Jonathan Cape, 1975). In this article, the titles are abbreviated as follows: OV, SP, TBL, LQ, DF and BG.