Spirituality in Counselling and Psychotherapy

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SAGE Publications
London ● Thousand Oaks ● New Delhi

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Introduction

Every so often something happens during a counselling session that affects the way I feel about my client. It occurs with middle-to-late adolescents as much as with clients in their fifties and it can only be described as a *mystical happening*. I feel a powerful bond of love for my client, which I sense is reciprocal, as though we are intuitively relating with each other on a different plane. It is as though we have become extremely fond of one another and that the words expressed are merely the means of communicating a spiritual attachment rather than the means of resolving a particular problem brought to therapy. It is as though there is a need to move from a customary mode of working to satisfy a vastly different requirement, a need that may be as obscure for my client as for myself. This book explores this dimension of therapy with two principal client groups: adolescent and mid-life clients. I will occasionally describe this *relational happening* as a numinous phenomenon or more commonly a spiritual experience.

Some may have reservations about viewing the counselling relationship in terms of love, attachment and bonding, but the love-relating I speak of has no sexual designs, the feeling of growing attachment has no latent parenting plan for a young person, or a hidden agenda to save a person close to my age who is in existential crisis. The feeling of bonding has no wish to transgress the essential ethical boundaries of professional psychotherapy. It is just that the feeling of love of one for another within the counselling relationship is the only emotion that conveys adequately the powerful dynamic of the interrelating of one with another.

Many therapists have reservations about addressing spiritual issues within counselling. This is largely because spiritual and related terms like religious, sacred and transpersonal are not often viewed as value-free terms. I hope all readers will bear with me and enquire further into this therapeutic landscape, not only because human spirituality is universally experienced but also because my treatment aims to be all-inclusive and impartial. Psychotherapists and counsellors have long recognised that their clients have *peak experiences* in life and that a heightened level of relating can emerge from the therapeutic relationship. Some think that the process of therapy itself is a spiritual activity.

Psychotherapy and Spirituality

There has been considerable interest recently in the spiritual dimension in therapy amongst psychotherapists and counsellors. Along with a few

stimulating books and articles on spiritual themes and religious issues in therapy, this book hopes to make a contribution by balancing two realities of experiencing which are often held to be in tension: there is a down-to-earth empirical outlook and then there is a mystical one. Various schools of psychotherapy give differing emphases to these realities, sometimes unwittingly. Psychodynamic, Jungian, existential, humanistic and transpersonal therapy, along with many integrative models, including pastoral counselling, have addressed religious, spiritual and humanistic themes, and have created a repertoire of approaches and interventions and applied them effectively in practice. This book will draw on this developing experience, but will present a rationale for working with religious and spiritual issues that recognises sociological accounts of culture together with the numinous or transpersonal dimension. These two realities are reflected in social discourse within a broad context of pluralistic values.

Spirituality and its derivatives will need defining in spite of its imprecise usage in common speak. Spiritually-centred counselling, as I understand it, and in the following pages will demonstrate, is a particular mode of interaction that calls practitioners to step aside from their preferred manner of working to engage in a therapeutic process of being with being, and to respond to their clients in a reciprocal engagement as though both are on a continuing journey of transcending Self (by capitalising self I stress the individual sense of personhood). The customary model of client and therapist, with all its variant poses, is temporally suspended to enter into a spiritually bonding relationship of mutual Self-growth. It is as though both feel the need to *centre* on their own sense of being; both become caught up within a *mystical moment* through relating within a different sphere of experience before resuming their customary focus on the presented problem.

Religion comes in many guises, and counselling has become popular in religious contexts. As the religious traditions have become humanised, however, personhood and what it means to be human have become central. Amongst those counselling within a spiritual context there are a variety of opinions as to whether there are therapeutic resources that are quite specific to the context. Some religious counsellors believe that their main resources can be found in scripture and prayer, whilst holistic therapists value meditation and centring on forces outside of Self. Some pastoral counsellors work within a religious ethos that is more implicit than explicit, whilst others bring religious matters to the forefront of therapy.

One characteristic of religion, which does not apply as much to spirituality, is the embodiment of a range of beliefs and assumptions which collectively become the worldview of the particular community. Such beliefs may remain intact irrespective of the fact that they may be unverifiable and beyond empirical testing. Atheists dispute the basis of religious belief-systems, but most people in postmodern times tend to position themselves at a less extreme stance, as is shown in randomised surveys that reveal a

high positive declaration for believing in God, or a higher power, superstition, elements of the paranormal, or omens of good and bad luck.

Psychotherapy has similar features to religion, and has occupied a role and position in modern society that was formerly held by the Christian Church. As the state has increasingly taken over from the Church as the secular counterpart in education and social welfare, so has the therapist replaced the priest as 'father-confessor' but without ceremony and without reference to the sacred. But there is another parallel. Psychotherapy is indeed a broad church of many denominations, and each school has a theoretical basis of belief about persons and their psychological functioning, which in some cases are unverifiable.

The various schools of psychotherapy subscribe to an underlying theory of working which is informed by a belief-system. Many practitioners of all schools of psychotherapy now respect the theoretical assumptions of other approaches in these days of integration and eclecticism, and I suspect, if pressed on the point, might even concede that their own theoretical constructs serve more as a working tool than as a basis of empirical fact. With reference to psychoanalysis, I am thinking of the evidence for the unconscious to consist of id, ego and superego, for the Oedipus complex, and for physical symptoms to be the cause of particular emotional blockages. Regarding Jungian analysis, I am thinking of the evidence for the collective unconscious, for the archetypes, and for dream content to be related to archetypical themes which have influence on emotional difficulties. And in respect to Rogerian therapy, I am thinking of the evidence that human beings have an innate, intrinsic Self that is submerged within environmental expectations but which can re-emerge within the context of a therapeutic relationship. Or that the individual may have become ill through faulty cognitions and may become healthy again through cognitive restructuring as held by cognitive therapy and REBT. We could go on, but the point is that belief-systems that regulate a person's living and functioning are not the sole province of religion, but exist in many professional walks of life, including those of scientists and psychotherapists.

Social Attitudes towards Religion

In addressing issues of spiritually-centred counselling, this book will not be dismissive of religion in spite of the tensions which may result. Various accounts will be offered as to why forms of institutional Christianity are in decline in Britain and other western democracies, whilst, paradoxically, spirituality and spiritual orientations have become popular and appear to be flourishing. For some traditional cultures, religion has become so embedded and monolithic that it would be unthinkable to presume that its relevance for modern times would be questioned. It is certainly not the case in multicultural, twenty-first century Britain, Australia, China, parts of Europe and the non-Bible belt region of North America.

Ask people what comes to mind when they think of religion and their responses will fall into two camps of opinion. If they are affiliated to a church, a mosque, a temple, or a fringe sectarian group and you further ask them of the value of being religious, they may well point to the benefits of living in some mystical harmony with a superior power. Those who consider themselves secular, or atheist, or humanist, or even postmodern, may express diffidence and regard the world-wide atrocities that have occurred in the name of religion as indefensible. The Crusading battles between Christianity and Islam, the Spanish Inquisition, the missionary movement, papal opposition to early science, or some of the military campaigns of the modern world, all illustrate the dark side of religion.

The motivations that led radicals to strike the Trade Towers and young martyrs to blow up innocents have as many political interests as religious ones, clearly, but the case for religion to come over as amoral and inhuman is reasonably strong. Religious apologists see evidence of a decadent society – soaring crime figures, sexual promiscuity, spread of AIDS, breakdown of the nuclear family, etc. – stemming from an erosion of traditional religious values, and further reason that without religion the world would not have been graced with such figures as Jesus of Nazareth, Mohammed, the Buddha, Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa or the Dalai Lama. But atheists counter-claim that venerated figures can be identified who are not driven by religious conviction but by humanistic values. The fact that corruption and vice can be found as much in religion as in society freed of its control illustrates the tension between religion and secularisation in modern western society.

What is meant by Spirituality?

Spiritually-centred counselling is meaningless without common agreement on what is meant by spirituality and how it may differ from similar, and possibly related terms, such as religious, existential, humanistic and transpersonal. Spirituality and religion are as old as humanity and are inseparable from early culture, so we are not only dealing with topics which reach back in the mists of antiquity but also as having crucial importance for a good many people and over a considerable period of time. When first planning this book, I thought it would be simple to create watertight definitions of religion and spirituality that were clear and universally acceptable. It seemed a natural enough starting point. After reflecting on what I understood by these terms, however, the task became virtually impossible. How can definitions of spirituality and religion meet the need to be fully inclusive and all-encompassing? I thought that with more reading, and after conducting workshops on the subject, it would make the job easier. But studying spirituality more extensively and after having engaged in dialogue with course delegates, the multiple insights drew a mist over the landscape, which left me feeling that precise

definitions were unattainable. Nevertheless, I have attempted to define religion and spirituality, if only tentatively, to serve as a working hypothesis. What philosophers and psychologists understand by Self also requires consideration. I raise in this book the question of whether our consciousness of who and what we are is innate or a constantly evolving construct shaped by our social environment.

If we were to ask folk what comes to mind when they think of spirituality, I suspect their replies would be as varied as their personalities. That is the problem with definitions of terms which have such a history of connotations and associations. What further confuses the issue is the relationship between religion and spirituality. Whilst religion may be related to spirituality, the latter is not dependant on the former, since spirituality has its secular dimensions in that the term has become generic in accounting for aesthetic and artistic creativity in transcending natural limits of personal being.

Religious people tend to view the Spirit as an ontological external agent, whilst humanists recognise the human spirit as an innate ability, shown as resilience in hardship and endeavour in achieving difficult tasks. A question this book poses is the relationship of the two. One underlying presumption for sceptics is that spirituality is somehow superior to religion, as though it antedates and may outgrow it, but this is unfortunate and suggests that the two are easily definable terms. This book draws on the rich narratives of clients' lived experiences, as reflected through therapeutic sharing, to reveal the substance of spiritual phenomena, and, although quantitative research is presented, in the main grounded theory of qualitative analysis underlies this study (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

What is crystal clear is that what we *choose* to see as reality cannot be separated from what we *the observer* can make sense of. In aiming to cover the vast topic of religion and spirituality within counselling and psychotherapy, it is imperative to declare openly my hand, and to inform you the reader of my formative experiences in youth, the cultural factors that have shaped my thinking and my current presuppositions, since bias will determine the selection of theorists I use in support of my position. In order to further expose my limitations, then, and in common with other authors on spirituality in psychotherapy, I present a brief biography of my spiritual development so that you may view my stance within its formative religious and cultural context.

My Formative Religious and Spiritual Experiences

My parents were not religious, at least in terms of taking me to a place of worship. My mother was a housemaid in a vicarage during her late teens before going into nursing during the Second World War, and I recall her becoming critical of religious hypocrisy after serving the clergy, but the

details of what had happened were kept from my brother and me. After serving as a soldier, my father was a factory worker in Birmingham for the rest of his life before passing away three years after retirement. Neither parent consciously led me towards a religious life, but they brought me up with a respect for discipline, good manners and hard work. The only religious influences I remember were occasional comments which served as moral imperatives, such as 'cleanliness is next to Godliness' if I went to bed with dirty knees, and 'God helps those who help themselves' if I was lethargic. My early spiritual inclinations were to be in the natural world, where I had a fascination for bird-spotting and animals generally – I recall spending hours in youth walking in the countryside looking for bird's nests.

My adolescence is largely lost to memory. There were a few brief dates and much time was spent making models, but at 15 I attended a Christadelphian youth club and Sunday School. The Christadelphian brotherhood is a small Christian sect that holds within its central belief-system the propositions that Jesus was not divine, but born a human, that he rose from the dead and would come back again to Earth as God's appointed Messiah. Christadelphians believe the Bible is inerrant. After my adult baptism, becoming initiated into this brotherhood gave me a new family and satisfied my ideological spirit. I preached in churches and ran the youth club, taking literally hundreds of young people camping during my twenties.

At 27, still single, I decided to have a career change from engineering to teaching, and I entered Newman College for teacher training. Here in a Catholic environment, I trained as a teacher of religious education and studied modern theological thought and higher critical methods of interpreting the Bible. At this point I found the beliefs of my former Christian brotherhood untenable and after a brief spell trying to modernise the community decided to move on in my spiritual journey. Catholicism gave me a new perspective of the Church and its role and place in history, though I did not become converted.

Approaching mid-life, I had a tragic accident and broke my neck from falling downstairs. The next ten months were spent in a spinal injury hospital for rehabilitation, and during this time I became depressed and once contemplated suicide. Strangely, my disabled condition did not shake my faith in a higher power, but presented new possibilities and an awareness of untapped inner resources. My spinal injury closed the door to teaching but offered an opportunity to become a school counsellor, and to learn to rely on others for life's basic needs.

My spiritual experience of the numinous (defined later) was fourfold. I felt a sense of awe in early youth when walking in the countryside feeling close to nature, and having a sense of the earth as a living being (Gaia). It felt pleasant to be in natural surroundings of birdsong and green pastures and to remain there, to feel the numinous of life in vibrant activity. Experiences of sitting high on the slopes of Snowdonia, musing in

contemplation as buzzards soared overhead, also rekindled a spirit of something Other, of a *presence* that seemed more than the sensual attraction of the pass, the tumbling waterfalls and the echoing wind to my face.

But the numinous was also experienced in a sense of belonging to a religious family, first in late adolescence when being 'converted' and enjoined with a community engaged in singing and hearing the scriptures come alive with existential relevance, and then during my thirties becoming enthralled by the symbols, the ritual and the worship in the *beauty of holiness* in a Catholic church or monastery. In such locations and settings the numinous becomes real in emotion if not in reason.

The mind-body-feeling link of holistic being, where tensions are as real as harmonies, was tested in the spinal injury unit where my existence seemed pointless and futile, and where the *dark night of the soul* introduced me to that aspect of the numinous that is revealed in existential nihilism. My sense of being was face to face with non-existence, and the deep *shadow* of non-being seemed more magnetic than the wish to remain alive.

Finally, coming through that tunnel, there was the emerging light of opportunity of a new numinous *presence* through interrelating, in meeting real pressing needs of young people during therapy and by receiving support in my disabled condition. These genuine bonds were rich social interactions that endorse our human interdependence and social connectedness. All these numinous themes will be developed in what humanistic therapy views as *peak experiences* or as religious mystics see as *ineffable moments* of spiritual encounter.

Book Structure

The first three chapters set the context of spirituality and psychotherapy within the western postmodern world. This material is comprehensive, and readers may prefer to return to this heavily theoretical analysis after having first considered the nature of spiritually-centred therapy. I feel that therapists are better able to understand and contribute to their client's stories if they have a grasp of the intellectual framework that has informed the social outlook of their lives. After explaining key terms of secular society, the first chapter outlines postmodern consciousness as traced from the Enlightenment to our present time, where religious pluralism has become an ideal. We consider the rational mind as shaped by philosophy, critical theology and the sociology of religion. The following chapter asks in the light of declining interest in church attendance whether there is evidence of a spiritual revolution taking place in the West. After discussing the nature of inward spirituality, I present definitions of religion and spirituality to help pave the way to a clearer understanding of spiritually-centred counselling in practice.

The beginnings of psychotherapy and counselling can be traced within the altered social conditions of the industrial revolution. During this

period the various sciences were formed and psychiatry emerged within a rapidly changing religious and secular world. Treating the mentally ill became institutionalised as the health service delivered professional psychiatry and psychotherapy. The third chapter examines the religious and spiritual insights of Carl Rogers, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung as representatives of many clients in therapy whose discourses reveal constructs of reality which lie somewhere along an empirical-mystical continuum. When I ask what is an individual, a unique and inviolate separate consciousness, I am asking what is Self. It is clear that there are different images of the person underlying psychotherapeutic theory, and this will be considered in relation to transpersonal approaches which see as their central task the transcendence of Self.

Chapter 4 considers the indications for therapists to move into a spiritual mode of therapy. An indicator for young clients might be a need to share their experiences of the paranormal, and I shall ask whether such mysterious happenings, as related in discourse, are part of a developing integration of opposing poles of consciousness, evidence of an imagination running wild from uncanny sights and sounds, or an intuitive reception of the numinous. At the other end of life-span development, some clients become more confident in discarding superstition and those metaphysical elements of religion that served them in youth. Their certainties are brought into question. For many, cognitive disillusionment coincides with poor health and social change. Retirement forces them to redefine who they are, and to adjust to loss and changing roles as their children grow up and their loved ones die around them. Spiritual therapy is also indicated when a client's sense of being needed alters to being needy and where the time for their own decease becomes a daunting, fast approaching, reality. From client we next move to practitioner.

An attempt to specify the characteristics of a spiritually-oriented counsellor is the topic of Chapter 5, where I draw distinctions between pastoral and religious counselling, transpersonal and humanistic psychotherapy and spiritually-oriented therapy. Analogies of other mentoring guides are considered to help make clear how the therapist might align himself with the client in spiritual work. This chapter urges the need for practitioners to develop an internal dialogue of self-supervision, often in later reflection through listening and re-listening to recorded interviews, not as an alternative but as a complement to formal supervision. Such an exercise clearly shows where the practitioner's values and assumptions lie, and where the course of therapy and the nature of intervention are affected thereby. None of us are value-neutral, but being aware of our prejudices and predispositions undoubtedly enhances our effectiveness and avoids the pitfalls of unhelpful projections commonly associated with counsellor countertransference.

The next two chapters move into the process of therapeutic healing. Chapter 6 asks the basic questions of what might be happening in spiritual work, and what form of healing is likely to take place. If spiritual

work involves transcending Self, rather than bolstering an ego, an understanding of Self seems a necessary undertaking. Fragile senses of Self are considered through the discourse of four boys engaged in bereavement group therapy. The emotional turbulence and social instability resulting from the death of a parent can in part be restored through religious belief, and the transcript reveals fascinating insights of evolving cognitive structures that make sense of individual loss. Healing occurs amongst peers through shared social discourse to normalise individual experience. A further case is presented to help illustrate how Self may be transcended. Analysing discourse exposes the therapist's values, however subtly disguised, and through the brief selected transcript an invitation is given to detect my own leanings in order that others may practise such skills in their own work.

Chapter 7 opens another tier of counselling process through looking at the potential for the therapist to use metaphors of the spiritual journey through life. Religion has provided an invaluable library of journeying motifs, which will still have currency for many. In light of a loosening hold of religion for many living in a postmodern world, however, religious examples taken from scripture will have less import even if they carry psychological potential for growth. Enlightenment for the Buddhist and insight through psychotherapy are not dissimilar, but for those who find religion irrelevant to their everyday consciousness, I explore the possibilities of demythologising some traditional journeying motifs.

Chapter 8 deals with religious doubt through obstacles that often occur through misfortune, or through inner-questioning as life events and human experience become out of sync with religious accounts of reality. Such self-doubt takes place commonly, but not exclusively, during two phases of development. In this chapter, I examine doubt for mid-life clients. Two extended cases of an atheist and a devout Muslim are presented to illustrate how spiritually-centred counselling can facilitate both and yet open up for each new possibilities for transcending Self through integrating the opposite poles of thinking. These extracts cannot hope to illustrate the whole process as much as show where therapy can move. The chapter raises issues of faith and evidence by looking at the relationship of faith and mental health. Common obstacles lying at the heart of religion are examined before reviewing the therapeutic potential for clients to preserve a trust in life and in a transpersonal dimension.

Chapter 9 reviews a broader range of techniques and tools as used in religious and transpersonal therapies than have been illustrated in earlier chapters. The rationale for praying in session is discussed along with meditation and mindfulness. My intention in this book is to encourage all to consider integrating a spiritual mode of therapy in practice, and as such the approaches I have illustrated are not too enterprising. For the more advanced practitioners, however, I cover some of the holistic techniques regularly applied in body psychotherapy. A range of exercises of my own is presented to assist your clients in recognising their most dominant

mode of spiritual functioning. The chapter closes with a consideration of the mystical elements in counsellor relating.

The final chapter acknowledges the common difficulties in ending sessions, particularly for a style where there is no clear closure. The terminus point for most of the world faiths is salvation, variously conceived, but the different belief-systems were constructed in an age when metaphysical reality had more impact than it has today. As such, schemes of salvation have little hold on any but the religiously devout. I have not played off one belief-system against another, simply because these are held with conviction and are meaningful discourses for many. That said, I have offered in concluding this book five features of hope revisualised that may help to shape a pluralistic outlook that is necessary for the spiritually-centred therapist.

Throughout this book, theoretical principles and the mode of spiritually-orientated counselling are illustrated with case vignette material. Customarily, I present composite characters to protect client confidentiality, but, in giving spiritual therapy an authentic feel, I have asked a few of my mid-life clients for permission to represent their discourse verbatim. Transcript material is presented not only from 'clients in therapy', but also from discourse amongst fellows who have a profound interest in spiritual matters. Ethically, I am less troubled to relate spiritual issues of my client's material than I would be with more intimate details of their social relations. The teenage-to-late adolescent client material is exclusively taken from the secondary school where I serve in full-time employment, and my elderly clients were drawn from GP referrals and from private therapeutic practice. Some were either struggling over religious or spiritual issues, whilst others had profound insights and experiences of rich and relevant material. In all cases, extracts of verbatim narrative were shown to each contributor within context before going to print. Where clients stress their deliberations I have illustrated this in italics.

Regarding use of the terms psychotherapy, counselling and therapy, they are used interchangeably for style with no intention of being hierarchal, but I have tended to reserve the term psychotherapy and its derivatives when discussing founding figures or their theoretical reasoning. The gender of client is varied to reflect the whole male and female experience, but since my own casework is exclusively given the male personal pronoun for therapist is retained for ease of reading, again with no intention of being discriminatory.

Most of my teenage clients are drawn from secularised poor to middle class families, of an area designated as social priority (54 per cent of families on income support and 39.6 per cent of pupils eligible for free school meals) with the majority of pupils living in council accommodation of single-parented families, normally mothers (80 per cent of pupils receiving counselling have had at least one stepfather cohabiting within their life-span). My adult clients, in the main, were reflective educated people, both male and female.

The ethnic mix of the cultural area where I work is designated statistically as being 88 per cent 'white', 11 per cent 'ethnic minority' (5.1 per cent 'mixed race' and 3.2 per cent 'African Caribbean' being the larger groups) and 1 per cent 'not known'. These percentages do not reflect those of the city of Birmingham, since my clients are, arguably, more secular than those of the inner-city, where ethnic minority communities tend to be more religious. Christian, Islamic and Hindu experience is represented, and the voice of an atheist with humanistic values is heard. Though theoretical perspectives of Jewish and other eastern religious experience are covered, there have been no representatives of these persuasions. In the main, spiritually-centred counselling is demonstrated purposely with clients who have little to no formal religious affiliation.

1

The Enlightened Mind

The air above Jerusalem is saturated with prayers and dreams,
Like the air above industrial towns it's hard to breathe.

Richard Holloway

It ain't necessarily so
The things that you're liable to read in the Bible
It ain't necessarily so!

George Gershwin

This chapter addresses the intellectual climate of western society with reference to formal religion, leaving the intuitive legacy of religion and inward spirituality to Chapter 2. The modern outlook has evolved over a period of social and ideological change, principally from influential philosophers of the Enlightenment. The development of science in the West, together with literary criticism that questioned the inerrancy of the Bible, began a process of eroding faith in God, and this has led to a decline in Christian adherence and a drop in numbers regularly going to church. The sociology of religion drove a further nail in the ecclesiastical coffin by presenting a new discourse that robbed religion of its mystical impulse. The critical themes of rational and reductive enquiry, biblical criticism and the sociology of religion take up this chapter, in as much as these new sciences have affected the postmodern perspectives of clients in therapy.

Joy came for counselling over a six-month period because she could not adjust to retirement and felt she had lost life-meaning. She was diagnosed as having chronic fatigue syndrome by her GP, a condition he thought to be more related to psychological than to physical factors. She was divorced from her husband and after eight years had still unresolved issues of unfairness and belittlement. She had been an Occupational Therapist but when retired had become isolated, rarely seeing her ex-colleagues or her extended family. More importantly for her, she no longer felt she could attend church for social and spiritual support.

Joy: I've tried to go back to church. I'll sit at the back but the service passes over me. Nothing seems the same anymore.
Dennis: In what way Joy?
Joy: It's irrelevant. People come over and greet me; they're kind; they invite me to their homes, but I can't be doing with it. Perhaps I'm scared of being drawn in again, I don't know. Perhaps I'm anti-social … People say when you're older you turn to religion, but it's the opposite for me. A lot of my friends are not with us – I always seem to be going to funerals … I never questioned my faith before, but it doesn't seem real now. I want to believe in God. I dearly want to be part of it all again. But I just can't seem to swallow religion anymore, even though I should and need to … Why do you think this is?
Dennis: I'm interested in why you feel you *should* and *need* to 'swallow religion'.

Joy's experience is not untypical of many clients brought up within a faith community that in post mid-life fails to provide meaning in an age of heightened personal expectations. Western culture has passed through a modern period, where meaning was uniform and religiously determined, to a postmodern stage where all meaning is individually determined. Western culture is understood to be secular, postmodern and pluralistic.

Western Culture

Secularism

Secular is defined in the *Oxford Dictionary* as 'concerned with the affairs of this world, not sacred, not ecclesiastical, not monastic'. For the last one and a half millennia, western culture was defined within a Christian context, then for the last two centuries humanism made inroads. Today, countries like Britain have become multicultural with a social composition of broad opinion and adherence to many faith and non-faith communities of diverse persuasions. Many more people attended church regularly and had quite strong Christian convictions a few generations ago than is the case today. Young people need only to ask their grandparents about the influence of the Church on their lives and upbringing to see how times have changed. Even after the mass immigration of recent British history, the dominant outlook still remained Christian. Laws of parliament and much pageantry in Britain stem from the Christian worldview. Social values and moral conduct were exclusively biblical, as interpreted by the Church.

When campaigners voice disapproval on controversial topics such as gay and lesbian sexuality, abortion, euthanasia and the rights of going to war, it is not necessarily Christian but secular morality that underlies their convictions. Religious injunctions on how *we should live or behave* are no

longer binding and use of the Bible for swearing oaths has become largely meaningless. Christian teaching on every conceivable topic – Creation, existence beyond death, gender relations and sexual mores, etc. – has been replaced by humanistic non-religious beliefs and scientific paradigms. Even though scientific paradigms shift with new knowledge and cultural diversity (Kuhn, 1996 [1962]) they are compelling for those who live by them. This is secularism.

This book will reason that two conceptual frameworks – 'spiritual' and 'empirical' – co-exist in light of the paradigm shift from Newtonian physics to quantum physics, from fixed law theory to inherent indeterminism and chaos.

Postmodernism

Dictionary definitions of modernism and postmodernism fail to encapsulate the meaning of these terms as applied to philosophical thinking. The modern world at the turn of the last century was optimistic in the sense that there was a large-scale view that science would solve every conceivable problem. Science and technology were reshaping the modern world and were pushing the frontiers of the unknown forward, and at an unimaginable pace – this was modernism. A 'positivistic desire for absolute certainty' was the governing principle (Swinton, 2001: 13). Knowledge of human origins, physical and mental health, chemistry and materials, technology, manufacturing industry, atomic physics, commerce and communications, were undergoing relentless progress. Mechanical robots would replace human labour and leave everyone wealthy and free to indulge in every conceivable passion.

The disillusionment spread, however, and this heralded the postmodern period. Science had claimed too much (Gergen, 1999) yet religion remained unverifiable (Holloway, 2004). Research in science, religion and philosophy showed that the more that was known the more there was to discover. The underpinning of knowledge was also beginning to be questioned, recognising that the 'knowable' was only a reflection of the presuppositions of the 'knower', that hypotheses only self-reinforce, and that knowledge is relative. Philosophers and sociologists recognised that science could never be truly objective but was socially constructed, just like religion. The European world of the late nineteenth century had become postmodern and, in spite of recent signs of a return to a modernist spirit of dogmatism in some religious quarters, postmodernism is the current reality for the majority.

Pluralism

Pluralism is probably self-explanatory. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines pluralism narrowly as 'holding more than one office (ecclesiastical) at a time'.

I spoke earlier of Christianity being the dominant worldview of the past, but as communications led to the global village and westerners began to brush shoulders with eastern peoples then communities became more cosmopolitan and competing religious and non-religious systems of knowledge have claimed equal validity. Many social communities within British culture are now as much Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh or New Age as Christian, and the non-religious beliefs of Zen Buddhism attract many thinking intellectuals of the western world. The implications of this social and ideological admixture cannot be understated. As I write, the demographic composition of citizens where I live in Birmingham, Britain's second City, has ethnic minorities as the majority culture, which makes ethnic minority a curious contradiction in terms. Added to which, the majority of my clients are from non-religious backgrounds. Inevitably, internal law (where people do what *they* judge to be right) supersedes religious morality, and the Court of Human Rights has become the determiner of social justice in Europe. Within this flux of religious and non-religious viewpoints, it is broadly recognised that no one belief-system can claim superiority. This social situation of integration combined with polarisation, apathy living beside fanaticism, atheism as co-existent with fundamentalism, and humanism sitting alongside religion constitutes what has become to be understood as pluralism.

When speaking of pluralism, I am not thinking of pluralistic relativism. Wilber's (2000, 2001a) preference for 'universal integration' appears too monolithic and synthesised, for, in what follows, I aim to validate each person's reality within their own cultural worldviews (Gergen, 1999), not to amend their perspectives to fit my preconceived programme. In therapy I invite clients to see things differently, yes, but to override their valuations, no. This book will promote egalitarian principles by valuing similarity and difference through re-viewing the philosophical issues of various truth claims and through looking at the possibilities of enrichment by validating differing discourses of meaning. The point is that each person's reality will be defined within a cultural dialogue of meaning-making (Gergen, 2001), but this is not to deny that there may exist a 'perennial philosophy', or universal quest, to transcend human finitude (Wilber, 2001b: 77–88).

Postmodern Discourses

Postmodernism is characterised by a range of discourses that collectively describe the way the world is viewed, and some are more prominent than others (Howard, 2000). There are discourses on duties and responsibilities, personal happiness, religion and politics. Social discourse has had and continues to have a profound affect on counselling and psychotherapy (McNamee and Gergen, 1992). Traditionally, religious discourse determined the worldview of the community, but since the Enlightenment competing discourses have had a marked affect upon religion and brought about a new understanding of Self.

Enlightenment

The overarching hold of religion for many people in the past, as it is today for Islam and Catholicism and for many fundamentalist sects and denominations, is partly due to its beneficial effects in binding a community together and partly to the absolute claims of its belief-system (Holloway, 2004: 124–7). But the postmodern climate of opinion has little tolerance for such claims, and the requirement for changing beliefs in the light of critical study and pluralistic ideals has had an affect upon counselling and psychotherapy in the transition from purist ideology to integration. Space will only afford a thumbnail sketch of the writings of influential philosophers, theologians and sociologists that have shaped the postmodern consciousness of the developed western world.

The Enlightenment is a classified period of European philosophical thought whereby the human spirit was raised above religious and imperial authority. Religious groups saw this wave of thought as a threat to the revealed truths of scripture. Such antagonism was caricatured as the elevation of man over God. The Enlightenment was evident in the birth and rapid development of modern science after a seventeenth century French philosopher, Rene Descartes (1596–1650), laid the philosophical building blocks upon which science was erected. Descartes reasoned the case for mistrusting the senses and for testing absolutely everything; to take nothing for granted unless it was self-evident or established by logical inferences from self-evident premises. He even advocated that we should begin by doubting our own existence and the existence of God. Happily, he concluded, since we are aware of our doubting then it is evident that we exist: 'I think, therefore I am' was his rhetorical certainty (*Discourse on Method* and *Meditations*). Proving God's existence was a little more tenuous and rested on the ontological argument (God's existence by definition is as real as the fact that a triangle has three sides) and a curious logic which reasoned that God would not allow human beings to be deceived. Commentators on Descartes' work have decried his absolute materialism and have supplemented the mechanical body with the soul, or *the ghost in the machine* (Ryle, 1990).

Liberating the human spirit created 'modernity' and formed the rational-industrial worldview that ushered in beneficial social changes, including the rise of democracy, the banishing of slavery, the emergence of liberal feminism, the widespread rise in empirical science, the systems and ecological sciences, an increase in life-span of almost three decades, the introduction of relativity and perspective in art and morals and science, the move from ethnocentric to universal morality, and the dismantling of social hierarchies (Wilber, 2001a: 63).

Towards Existentialism

Existential philosophers have left their mark on the public psyche. Existentialism is a way of assessing individual existence (Yalom, 1980).

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) believed that the only satisfactory proof of God's existence was the moral argument – I take this up with John in Chapter 8. This proof remains for many Christians the basis of human conduct, in spite of its anti-pluralistic implications for determining what is right and wrong, and the implausibility of how we can know. Kant reasoned that we can know what is right by critical and rational reflection but Sartre (1973) later disputed this (Lynch, 2002). Kant dismissed the belief in Natural Theology – that God's existence could be verified in the natural world – yet he did a great service to psychology, in formulating experience as being arranged in perceptual schemas, or categories of reality. His point was to illustrate that the human mind is not passive but active, that we unconsciously order reality within pre-developed concepts, and that all awareness of our environment is an interpreted awareness (*Critique of Pure Reason*).

George Hegel (1770–1831) described the tendency in scientific and philosophical thought to follow laws of a particular pattern of thesis, followed by antithesis, followed then by synthesis. The vitality for Hegel, his lifeblood so to speak, was faith, but the emerging situation is where philosophy is tested. So faith stands in tension with scepticism, Christianity with the Enlightenment, mysticism with rationalism, and the synthesis in his philosophy was found in the Spirit. In *Philosophy of Mind* (1807), Hegel wrote about the psyche (*Geist*) which for Paul Tillich (1976) is best translated as Spirit. Hegel saw the point of identity between God and man within the philosopher's mind: God becomes real in the self-consciousness of man, and the essential nature of man belongs within the inner-life of God. Speaking of 'finite-infinite', he claimed that the mind of God becomes actualised via the minds of his creatures. This is an interesting perspective of synthesising the empirical with the mystical within a social merging with the divine, and this has implications for spiritually-centred counselling, as we shall see.

Søren Keirkegaard (1813–1855) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) wrote extensively about the givens of human existence, about human hopelessness, giving Hegel's terms of 'alienation' and 'estrangement' a poignant significance in the human search for meaning. Existence is punctuated by human tragedy. The existential philosophers developed a new 'individualist' reality of living within a 'thrown condition'. The human situation is that of being-in-the-world, such as it is, and of having to face conflict with respect to the Self, others and the physical world (McLeod, 1993). Existentialism holds that we have to survive within the givens of birth, freedom, meaninglessness, isolation and death. These were the founding thinkers of Existentialism, from which a school of psychotherapy emerged. Existential therapy subscribes to a range of basic assumptions that help clients to clarify life meanings by confronting everyday existential paradoxes (van Deurzen-Smith, 1984). But one philosopher above all has had a profound influence on postmodern consciousness, and his name is Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900).

Nietzsche

'All postmodern roads lead to Nietzsche', said Ken Wilber (2001a: 55). It is to Nietzsche that the existentialist term of *nihilism* is to be applied, and whilst the Scottish philosopher, David Hume (1711–1776), has made a contribution, it is to the thoroughgoing radical frankness of Nietzsche that humanism and atheism find an authority. Nietzsche contracted syphilis in his student days and suffered a mental illness before his death – some fundamentalist Christians view his demise as an act of God. Nietzsche wrote about the need for us to stand upon our own two feet and to face the world in confidence without appealing to higher authorities and beneficiaries to help us get through. Though judged negatively by some, he spoke of his love for mankind and said 'yes to life' through man's *Will to Power* and *The Superman*.

Nietzsche discussed the nature of truth. 'What is truth?' asked Pilate of Jesus. Nietzsche's reply was that no truth is discoverable except the truth which *you yourself are.* There is no sense or meaning in the world except the truth *you yourself give it* (Hollingdale, 1969: 25). The answer to Pilate's question is that truth is the will to overcome the nihilistic devaluation of life; it is the arrival of the Superman of self-authority, and this, in turn, led to the death of God.

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1969 [1883–5]), Nietzsche, ingeniously, turns the biblical teaching of revelation on its head through his prophet Zarathustra (the founder of Zoroastrianism). Moses and Elijah came down the mountain with a revelation from God, just as Jesus delivers his Sermon on the Mount. Zarathustra likewise goes into the mountains for solitude but then descends with a gift because 'he loves mankind'. He meets an old man collecting roots in the forest and speaks to him. He learns that he is a saint who lives in a holy hut and that he continually praises God in song. When they part, Zarathustra reflects in his heart: 'Could it be possible! This old saint has not yet heard in his forest that *God is dead!*' (1969: 41).

A graphic account of the death of God is recorded in his next book, *The Gay Science,* in which a madman goes in search of God in the marketplace at night with a lantern. He shouts incessantly, 'I am looking for God'. But his mocking bystanders suggest that God may have got lost like a child, or gone on a voyage. The madman yells in anguish: 'I shall tell you. *We have killed him* – you and I. We are all his murderers' (Hollingdale, 1969: 14).

I have given more space to Nietzsche because I think his work, whilst unheeded in his own day, has had an enormous impact upon the intellectual perspectives of modern times. One criticism of long drawn-out styles of psychotherapy is the tendency to pamper Self through excessive introspection. Extensive therapy can foster narcissism for individuals who are so absorbed with themselves that they fail to see that healing may require them to seek an engagement with others. At this point, however, it is worth noting that much of the movements of human rights, person- and

child-centredness, self-fulfilment and humanistic morality against religious teaching are the natural outworking of Nietzsche's teachings of personal autonomy. One clear strand of the anti-religious authority of postmodern consciousness that serves as the basis of atheism is that God is presumed to be dead, and this creed lies at the basis of Jean-Paul Sartre's (1973) deduction that we have to live our lives in the self-evident fact that God does not exist and 'that there are no ultimate values' (Lynch, 2002: 37).

From the Enlightenment through to modern times science has been heralded as the salvation of mankind, particularly for those who have abandoned religious faith. In spite of two World Wars, the Holocaust, and the enlightened mind of postmodernism (Howard, 2000), reality for western peoples is embedded within a causal scientific paradigm. Descartes is regarded as the father of modern science through creating the intellectual culture from which a methodology of hypothesis, experimentation and measurement could thrive. Isaac Newton established the fixed laws of gravity and the planetary orbits, upon which the reality of certainty beyond perception could be framed. Galileo and Darwin made observations that would challenge orthodox Christian belief of God as the Creator and of Genesis being a historical account of the origin of the universe. Existentialism liberated the closed mind to find expression in great literature, poetry, art and the modern-day novel. The human spirit was free of constraint and through drama and the expressive arts, individuals like Michelangelo and Blake dared to challenge the establishment (Schaeffer, 1972). Michelangelo's frescos represent Catholic traditions through the eyes of the human subject. Through Renaissance influence and humanism, he retains the divine as transcendent but through human concerns and connectivity (see Figure 1.1).

The most significant feature of Existentialism in terms of psychology, however, was the emergence, or re-emergence, of the psychology of individual Self.

Philosophical Perceptions of Self

Self, according to Heraclitus, is an illusion since everything is flux, change, process, continually becoming something else. I am not some solid essence: *I cannot step twice into the same river.* A great intellectual gap exists between Augustine's divine-Self-consciousness and David Hume's scepticism. Augustine's God was in continual dialogue with him and served as his personal counsellor, and so he made a deity of my Self. Hume, when looking inwards, could not catch his Self that would be separate from his perception. John Locke was the last serious philosopher to suggest that Self could be observed directly (Howard, 2000). Rousseau advocated a return to nature as the map for finding Self, whilst Hegel postulated an essentialist doctrine of Self that was integral with absolute Spirit, the unifying Agent of all reality. For Schopenhauer, Self was a

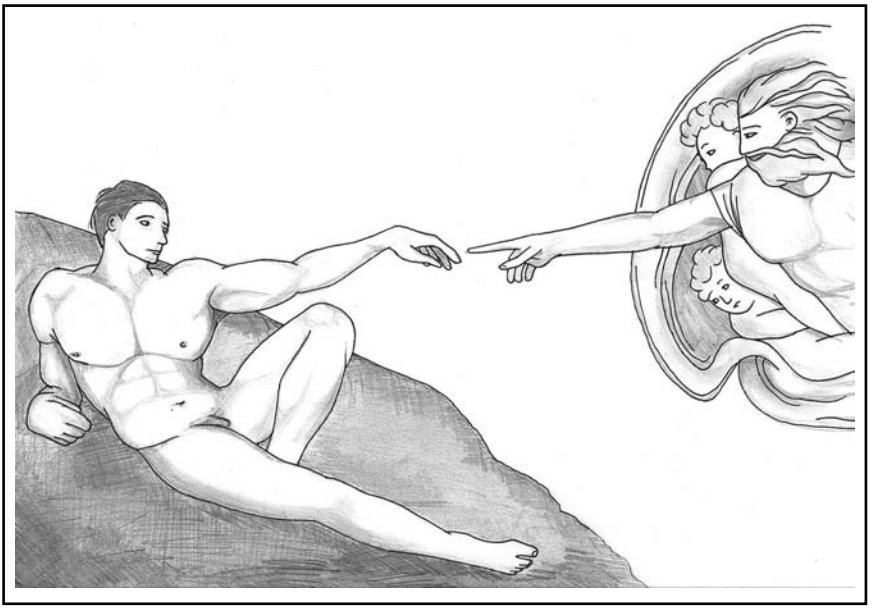

Figure 1.1 Michelangelo's 'God creating Adam', Sistine Chapel, sketched by Nathan Marsh

noumenal subject, not a phenomenal object, and as such could not be observed – *there is no separate Self; we are all an expression of the one subject*. Kierkegaard, along with other existentialists, believed that Self could not be found so much as be created. Self development was a process of continual becoming to reach intrinsic potential, either being grounded with, or released from, the religious Object:

> Kierkegaard's existentialism consisted in finding oneself within and before God. Nietzsche's self was a bridge leading to 'superman'. For Heidegger, self was inextricably interwoven with, and emergent from, its larger context. Hegel's self was part of the absolute idea. For Sartre, self was similar to Descartes' self, but without God. Self, for Sartre, was its own God. (Howard, 2000: 341–2)

Western philosophers have wrestled perpetually with understandings and conceptions of Self, and Alex Howard (2000) has made a valid point when highlighting the importance for counsellors to consider this vast corpus of material when forming their own understandings of Self and therapeutic theories. In summary, he writes: 'From Hume onwards, naive ideas about a simple core self have become increasingly implausible' (Howard, 2000: 357) and feels that the modern tendency to individualise and psychologise Self has been damaging to society. Our examination in what follows will take on board this observation, yet will explore psychological constructions of Self more through analogy and metaphor than through the logic of reductionism.

Higher Criticism of Scripture

In the 1940s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned by the Gestapo after an attempt to assassinate Hitler had been foiled. It was not that he was personally involved, but more that he was suspected of being part of a conspiracy. Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran theologian, and from his cell he wrote a remarkable series of letters that collectively became an uncanny forecast of modern times. In one letter he wrote: 'We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore' (Bonhoeffer, 1970: 279). This prediction has a ring of truth for religion, but not necessarily for spirituality, as we shall see.

The absolute certainty that kept the old religious order intact was based upon religious authority. For the Catholic Church this was an infallible papacy, tradition and the biblical scriptures, and for Anglicans, from the Reformation onwards, it was the Bible and the Christian believer's relationship with God. The religious authority for Muslims is the Qur'an and the Hadith (sayings and deeds of the prophet) whilst for Judaism it is the Torah, the Prophets and the Mishnah. The authority for Hindus is the Vedas, for Buddhists it is the Pali Canon, and for Sikhs it is the Guru Granth Sahib.

Many of these sacred scriptures are based on revelations during altered states of consciousness, which are described by Grof (Bray, 2004) as holotropic experiences (oriented towards wholeness), and which are claimed to be repeatable (Grof, 1996). The Bible, particularly, has been the first sacred text to have been subjected to higher criticism to expose human elements behind divine inspiration (Lines, 1995b). The Talmud has had a long tradition of interpreting the Law and the Prophets, but the Qur'an has received little public scrutiny (Manji, 2004). In the interests of brevity, I trace a few milestones of Christian scholarship through New Testament literary criticism.

Ruddolf Bultmann (1952, 1953) began a controversial debate in 1948 on Christian mythology by demythologising the New Testament (the resurrection and ascension of Jesus) and by reinterpreting the Christian message in existential terms, following the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. A group of British theologians in 1997 confronted orthodoxy by disputing biblical inerrancy and by questioning the historicity of the incarnation (Hick, 1977). These theologians followed a reputable line of German and European scholars who dismantled Christian authority right at its core, the infallible nature of holy writ. Don Cupitt (2001) has attempted to reformulate Christianity, but on the whole the absolute authority of sacred scripture interpreted literally is now judged to be untenable by biblical exegetes.

Postmodern biblical scholars discount any claims that the Bible is inerrant (Lines, 1995b) if by such terms is meant that scripture presents absolute truths of history (i.e. what is written *actually* happened) and science. Although the trend has occurred a little less in Judaism and hardly at all in Islam, it is feasible that higher criticism will be applied to

almost every religious text in the not-too-distant future. The corollary is that no one sacred text can be claimed to have the whole truth – an obstacle many clients wrestle with in therapy.

The postmodernist ideology abandons the notion of a single absolute truth that can be found with objective certainty, in favour of relative, conditional truths, even to the acceptance of paradox (McNamee and Gergen, 1992: 8–15). The old 'Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm' we must now abandon, argues Edwards (1992).

Apart from the challenge of religious authority through higher literary criticism, there are three assumptions that the new spiritual paradigm of postmodernism cannot tolerate (Lines, 2002):

- From the sociological perspective, the religious organisation is prone to exploit the individual's spiritual needs without satisfying them, and to create a hierarchical system that pursues power and control (Lines, 1995a). Religion has often lost touch with its spiritual sources and become a secular institution, a 'benign social custom' or, at worst, a 'pathological reflection of infantile ego development' (Boorstein, 1996: 182).
- Secondly, the 'chosen people' concept of divine election (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) is reprehensible in the modern world. Some religious writings were once thought to be the authorisation rather than the product of the 'holy community', having no bias or propagandist motives. Primitive, homogeneous societies reinforced their sacred truths through group cultic acts and through communal ceremony, which collectively became their reality. Thus, individual identity was synonymous with cultural identity and was ratified by membership of the 'religious community'. Such exclusivity must now give way to universalism and pluralism (Hick, 2001).
- Finally, the Enlightenment gave birth to the individual (Tillich, 1976), and Freud identified the various drives that underpin the Self (Freud, 1933). But this division of community and of Self has become outdated and is becoming superseded by a new reality that stresses the relationship of parts to wholes.

Sociology of Religion

One major discourse of postmodernism is the sociological account of religion. Nearly every political, religious and ethical discussion of the modern period will contain a strand of opinion which is influenced by this outlook. Whether the debate centres on Islamic–Christian relations, homosexual clergy, voluntary euthanasia, etc., communications are at cross purposes when one party reasons from a 'revealed insight' perspective and another from one that views religion as a product of social influences.

Karl Marx (1818–83) was the most influential social scientist in history, yet Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) and Max Weber (1881–1961) have had a considerable influence on the religious outlook. They were classical theorists writing in agrarian societies; both were reacting to the initial

stages of the industrial and democratic revolutions, and both visualised many of our modern structures and problems.

Durkheim (1933) coined the term 'anomie' to describe the dissolving of regulation and the breakdown of norms within society which religion had established over the centuries. The advance in capitalism during industrialisation required individually led citizens to detach themselves mentally from tradition, but, for Durkheim, this would lead to a society where 'individualism' would lead to a breakdown of mutual dependence and an increase in deviant behaviour. Durkheim forecast what today we call a 'dog eat dog', 'every man for himself', mentality, but he was not predisposed towards religion. Durkheim robbed religion of its numinous content and reasoned that religion was not supernaturally inspired but the product of society, 'something eminently social' (Thompson, 1982: 125). He studied the cultural history of the *sacred* and the *profane,* and reasoned that both serve a complementary social function. Regarding religious experience, Durkheim acknowledged that 'it does exist' but 'it does not follow that the reality which is its foundation conforms objectively to the idea which believers have of it' (Bellah, 1973: 190).

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber (2003 [1905]) explained the shift from traditional to rational action in the religious and economic systems of many civilisations. He came to believe that the rationalisation of action can only be realised when traditional ways of life are abandoned, as occurred in the Industrial Revolution. After careful study, Weber came to the hypothesis that the Protestant ethic broke the hold of tradition and encouraged men [*sic*] to apply themselves rationally to their work. Calvinism had developed a set of beliefs around the concept of predestination. It was believed by followers of Calvin that a place in heaven could not be earned by good works or acts of faith, since people were either among the 'elect', or they were 'damned'. However, wealth for a person was taken as a public sign that they were elected by God; thereby the acquisition of money as a Christian virtue was promoted. The Protestant ethic therefore sanctioned a spirit of rigorous discipline, and encouraged all to strive to become prosperous.

Weber asked why capitalism did not occur in other non-western and pre-industrial societies when some of them had the technological infrastructure and other necessary preconditions for economic expansion. One significant reason was the absence of something akin to the Protestant ethic. He did not believe that the Protestant ethic was the *only cause* of the rise of capitalism, but thought it was a powerful force in fostering its emergence.

This analysis of the cause and continuance of religion being attributable to natural factors within society is widespread for many today, and has appeal for those who believe in the power of society to mould the minds of its citizens. Essentially, the sociology of religion states that 'the gods whom people worship are imaginary beings unconsciously fabricated by society as instruments whereby society exercises control over the thoughts and behaviour of the individual' (Hick, 1990: 30). Religious feelings

evoked by the numinous are delusions since no supernatural Being exists; it is society's environing reality. And the supposed demands made upon worshipping subjects is society's moral imperative of its subjects, since we are social beings through and through.

Not withstanding, John Hick (1990) remains unconvinced that the sociological account of religion is proven, for the following reasons. If the call of God has to be translated as 'only society imposing upon its members forms of conduct that are in the interests of that society', then how are we to account for those charismatic individuals who are led by a developed conscience to speak out against the confined interests of the social group? Where does the creative vision to innovate change from the moral norm come from? What inspired the insights of the great religious reformers – such as the biblical prophets like Amos and Hosea – to denounce the ways of their own people? If it is society, then there is a contradiction (Hick, 1990). Kenneth Gergen (1999) proposes a socially constructed reality, but Wilber (2000) questions absolute constructionist accounts of reality: if there are no worldviews that are not socially constructed, how can the 'socially constructed worldview' be the true reality? It must be socially constructed – it is to argue in a circle (Wilber, 2001a: 56).

Towards Religious Pluralism

A central question that concerned me during the religious idealism of my early twenties was the tension between a parochial belief-system and universal salvation; whether only those of my religious denomination might be saved on the last day or whether God's grace would extend to all mankind. I could not see how a simplistic notion of 'salvation only in Christ' could mean anything for the many millions in India who are brought up as Hindus, or for the tribes in remote parts of the world who had never even heard of Christ, let alone have become Christian. Such questions seem irrelevant for me today, but in that early period of staunch religious conviction, where the decisions for right and wrong living had eternal consequences, it was crucial. One philosopher of religion who has addressed the implications of religious pluralism is John Hick (1990, 2001). Hick (1976) argues for universal salvation with an intriguing theory of post-death consciousness developed from the Tibetan *Bardo Thodol*, or *The Book of the Dead*. Hick's major interest, however, is in finding a common language for different religious concepts.

Redemption in Judaism comes through the covenant relationship of Yahweh with the Jews as the chosen people, as revealed in the Torah. Muslims believe that salvation depends entirely upon the graciousness and merciful nature of Allah, as self-revealed in the Qur'an. Christians believe their salvation rests in Christ alone, as revealed in the atonement through the cross, and through the conferring of eternal life for the believer, as declared in the New Testament. The Buddhist sees salvation

quite differently, as surrendering and releasing the ego, as reaching Nirvana by being absorbed within the unity of Brahmin. These salvation claims of different religions compete with one another, as though one is superior to the rest; one holds pre-eminent truth and the others are by definition secondary, or even erroneous. Hick maintains that if we move away from a model of conflicting truth-claims towards a model of seeing different religions as different concrete manifestations to humanity of the ultimate divine reality within varied cultural settings, then we begin to embrace a more rational philosophy of universalism where there is no conflict. Reality is known to the Christian through the love and forgiving nature of Jesus who is worshipped as Lord, and whose salvation is celebrated through the Eucharist in bread and wine. But Reality for the Muslim might equally be evident in the holy Qur'an, as a strictly unitary Being, who responds to the supplicant in the pattern of prayer, fasting, alms-giving and pilgrimage as required in the Qur'an. As Hick reasons:

> We have here something analogous to different maps of the religious world … But that one map is correct does not mean that another, drawn in a different projection, is incorrect… For when we try to map the infinite divine reality in our finite earthly human terms we inevitably distort it, some of us within one theological projection and some in another. (Hick, 2001: 200)

If we are to address God as *the Real*, then, reasons Hick, we must recognise that *the Real* in itself lies beyond the range of our entire network of concepts, other than purely formal ones. We can only conceptualise it within our human terms, following Kant. The religious traditions thus stand between us and *the Real*, constituting different lenses through which we are aware of it (2001: 191).

Hick prefers the title for God as *the Real* rather than such equally suitable alternatives as Ultimate Reality, the Transcendent, the Divine, mainly because the English term *the Real* is not only acceptable within Christianity but also because it corresponds sufficiently with Sanskrit and Arabic terms for God. The basis on which we know *the Real* will be differently formed within the different traditions. But we can never be conscious of the deity or of the absolute in general, for it has to be personal, as concretely experienced (in Kant's language, schematised) in historical time and within a culture. Take, for example, Jewish history and the Torah. God is intimately part of their history but the Bible knows nothing of the peoples of China or India or the Americas, just as the God of over one thousand names in the Vishnu is restricted to India, with no apparent awareness of the Jews, and so on.

Finally, Hick draws the necessary distinction between the numinous experience of *the Real* and the everyday experience of the senses in the world. One is a transcendental phenomenon and the other is a natural phenomenon. Experiencing the wind in my face, as I view the mountain

and drink the cool water from a mountain stream, is a phenomenon available to me in my senses in the natural world. But if I stand in the presence of God and feel the closeness of his being, then this experience is not available to me through the senses, and it is likely that this awareness has occurred not intuitively but because I have been introduced to God through teaching or through the medium of religious worship – the knowledge of the mountain experience is not compatible with the knowledge of God (Hick, 1990).

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the social and ideological effects of the philosophical liberation brought in by the Enlightenment, by biblical scholarship and by the sociology of religion. Although Britain is a multicultural society, the dominant though diminishing discourse is still Christian in spite of numbers meeting to worship every Sunday morning being in decline. The postmodern worldview in the main is pragmatic and scientifically centred and sociological accounts of religion are persuasive to many clients entering therapy.

The implications of religious pluralism for spiritually-centred counselling cannot be underestimated. In closing this chapter we have seen that rival religious truth-claims are merely different theological projections of the ultimate divine reality. Already, metaphors have been used without qualification, such as maps and lenses, but as we begin to focus more on the language of spirituality in counselling and psychotherapy, *differing discourses* will employ personalised metaphors. Although this book will embrace Hick's pluralistic values, when referring to the divine I shall not adopt his preference of *the Real* but will speak of 'the numinous', so as not to exclude my colleagues and clients who have difficulty in accepting the existence of a divine Being, but who nevertheless wish to engage in spiritually-centred counselling.