

The New Frontier of Religion and Science

Religious Experience, Neuroscience and
the Transcendent

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1

Religion as Human Institutions

Rather than begin with any of the scores of definitions of religion offered over the years from different standpoints – sociological, anthropological, psychological, philosophical, theological – it will be more useful to begin with two important distinctions. One is historical, between pre- and post-axial religion, and the other, within the latter, between on the one hand the human religious institutions and, on the other, their living heart, for which we have no satisfactory name but which I shall call both spirituality and mysticism. Each term is appropriate when understood in a certain way, and each can also be misleading. I will clarify in the next chapter the way I want to use them.

Pre-axial religion

The axial age or era was first identified by Karl Jaspers (Jaspers 1953), who dated it from roughly 800 to roughly 200 BCE.¹ For millennia before that the implicit overarching human world-view had remained essentially unchanged, though with a gradual movement through what is today called primal or archaic religion to larger state religions expressing the same basic outlook.

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropologists, such as Edward Tyler, Robertson Smith, Andrew Lang, James Frazer, R. R. Marett and others, were able to observe primal societies in Africa, Australia, Central and South America and elsewhere before contact with the outside world had significantly affected them. The anthropologists found – and the same is true of early state religions such as that of the Aztecs – that primal religion was basically concerned to keep the existing order of things, the life of the tribe or state and its environment, steady and in balance. Humanity and the rest of the living world were seen as

a single whole, and for most purposes primal people seem to have been aware of themselves, less as autonomous individuals, and more as parts of the living social organism.

Humans have always had a sense of the numinous, the mysterious, and a tendency to experience the natural in terms of the supra-natural. This natural religiousness is indicated by the earliest known methods of burial, which suggest a belief in some kind of afterlife, and was also expressed in a sacralising of the environment, with mountains, trees, rivers, rocks, clearings, the sky inhabited by spirits, ancestors, gods who had to be served as local patrons or placated as dangerously unpredictable powers. Life was precarious, and the function of the tribal, and later national, rituals and sacrifices was to ensure that the seasons came round again, the harvest was abundant, the rains came when expected, the warriors were strong and the women fertile. Life was accepted as it is without any comparison with the idea of a radically better possibility. It was, in Stanner's phrase, 'a one-possibility thing' (Stanner 1979, 515).

Primal religion continues today as the underlying but living substrate on which, particularly in Africa, the world faiths of Christianity and Islam have later been superimposed. It preserves values that had been largely lost within the major traditions in their modern forms, but are still potentially present within them and are now beginning to be recovered in an increasingly serious awareness of our interrelationship with the rest of the world of which we are a part. This ecological concern has been demanded by the impact of global warming, the alarming depletion of the earth's non-renewable energy sources, the destruction of rain forests and the continuing elimination by humanity of other animal species. We are tragically engaged in cutting off the branch on which we are sitting. In this situation the gift of primal religion to the modern world is a reminder of our unity with the whole of nature and our continuity and kinship with all life.

The axial age

In a band of time centred around the mid-first millennium BCE – from roughly 900 or 800 to roughly 200 – in much of the world, from China to Greece, there was an extraordinary outburst of new spiritual insights embodied in great religious figures.² India produced the basic Hindu texts, the Upanishads, and, towards the end of this period, the *Bhagavad Gita*, perhaps the most widely influential of Hindu scriptures today, and Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, and Mahavira, the founder of Jainism; in China, Confucius and the *Tao Te Ching* (traditionally

attributed to the shadowy figure of Lao-Tzu), the basis of Taoism, and Mencius and Mo-Tzu; in Palestine many of the great Hebrew prophets, I and II Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea; and in Greece Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

However, the history is more complex than a narrow focus on the axial age would suggest. The Vedas are of earlier but of undated origin. Around 1375 BCE the Egyptian pharaoh Amunhotep IV imposed a form of monotheism in the exclusive worship of Aton, with himself as the son of Aton and taking the name Akhenaton. This did not, however, survive beyond his own life. Zoroaster, once placed within the axial period, is now thought to have lived much earlier, around 1000–1200 BCE. Behind the Moses saga there was probably an historical figure living around the thirteenth century BCE. Abraham, supposedly living sometime earlier in the second millennium BCE, is, however, much less securely historical – quite possibly a number of traditional stories from various periods became fused together under one name. But whether or not naming an historical individual, the figure of Abraham is often used to bring Judaism, Christianity and Islam together under a common ancestry as ‘children of Abraham’ (e.g. Kuschel 1995). This is a positive use; but it also has the negative side-effect of categorising the Abrahamic faiths over against the eastern forms of religion. There are in fact considerable overlaps there with the mystical strands of the monotheisms.

Some writers have wanted to extend the axial period forward to include Jesus and the rise of Christianity, and some to go yet further to include Muhammad and the rise of Islam. But this is a mistake. Within the last thirty or so years the profound Jewishness of Jesus has been rediscovered and made central to our understanding of him (e.g. Vermes 1973 and 1993; Sanders 1985; Charlesworth, ed., 1991). He was a radical reformer within the Judaism of his day, attending the synagogue, frequently referring back to the Torah, sharing the apocalyptic hope of many of his contemporaries and possibly – though not certainly – seeing himself as the expected messiah of the Jews. His teaching about a loving God and about how to live in relation to God was not new. But his influence has, of course, been truly immense, both because of the extraordinary power of his personality, the fame of his healings and the impact of his moral teaching and, after his death, through the Pauline understanding of him which successfully carried the transformation of the Jesus of history into the Christ of faith into the wider world, his presentation as the unique divine saviour of the world. Islam also stands firmly within the Abrahamic tradition, the Qur’an having its own versions of the stories of many biblical

figures, including Adam, Abraham, Aaron, Enoch, Isaac, Jacob, David and Goliath, Ezra, Ishmael, Elisha, Job, Jonah, Noah, Lot, Sheba, etc., with Jesus being revered as one of the greatest of the prophets: 'Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in this world and the next' (Qur'an 3:45). Muslims are taught to say, 'We believe in God and what has been sent down to us, and what has been revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their progeny, and that which was given to Moses and Christ, and to all other prophets by the Lord. We make no distinction among them, and we submit to Him' (Ibid. 2:136). Islam sees itself as a new and final chapter in this long religious story. The more recently founded Sikh faith draws heavily on both Hindu and Muslim sources, and the Baha'i faith on Islam, thus all having their roots, though at one or two removes, within the axial age.

The new axial insights

It was the transforming idea of a radically better possibility that emerged during the axial centuries. The great figures who launched the new movements that have developed into the world religions experienced an overpowering awareness of reality transcending the human and the material which brought with it the real possibility of a radical transformation of human life. These individuals did not of course spring up without the already existing context of a society ready for their message. The growth of cities, division of labour, the development of writing within cultures that provided opportunity for speculation and debate, all constituted environments in which new spiritually challenging and revolutionary claims could be heard. China, India, the Middle and Near East and Greece, the scenes of these paradigmatic moments of religious creativity, were alive with a turmoil of often conflicting ideas.

During this axial period, extending as it did over a span of centuries, the sense of being a unique responsible individual gradually spread from an elite, the kings and priests, to the many. Individual conscience and individual religious insight were often expressed in critical or prophetic stances over against the existing traditions and authorities. The idea of the dead persisting as hollow shades in a dim underworld was gradually superseded by the belief in an individual moral judgement beyond death, with the contrasting fates of heaven and hell. And this moral judgement applied to all alike, kings as much as commoners, serfs and slaves. Religious experience, which is to be our main concern, began to be more than the inner reflection of communal ritual orchestrated by priests and shamans. The new spiritual insights, released from

the confines of a tribal or national religion and made available to the individual, were now potentially universal in significance, thus making possible the great world faiths. But arising as they did within the existing religions their initial impact was inevitably as movements of reform within those religions.

This reform sometimes had far-reaching social implications. The Buddha rejected the caste structure of India, seeing all humans as equally capable of attaining enlightenment, and likewise rejected the priestly system of sacrifices; and the Buddhist emperor Ashoka (third century BCE) affirmed the equality of the different religions of his empire. Among the great Hebrew prophets First Isaiah (eighth century BCE) repeatedly criticised the Jewish establishment, preaching that the prevailing social injustices were an affront to God; while Amos (eighth century) and Jeremiah (seventh century) proclaimed the unpopular message that Israel and Judah's subjection to the Assyrian empire was a divine punishment, calling for national repentance. Jesus preached the imminent coming of God's kingdom on earth, with the end of Roman rule and of the power of the priestly elite in Jerusalem, thus becoming a dangerous influence who incurred the Roman death penalty. Muhammad attacked the prevailing polytheism of the Arabia of his time, thereby undermining the lucrative pilgrimage trade to the many gods of Mecca and thereby drawing upon himself the dangerous enmity of the ruling commercial elite, so that he had to flee with his first followers to Medina.

Religion as institution and religion as spirituality/mysticism

Remaining now in the post-axial period, the religions have both an outer and an inner aspect. The distinction was introduced into the modern discussion by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the Canadian historian of religion who founded the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard.³ The terms he used were 'the cumulative traditions' and 'faith', the former being what I have called institutional religion and the latter the inner aspect which is so hard to name. Roger Haight, SJ, likewise describes faith as 'a universal form of religious experience . . . that entails an awareness of and loyalty to an ultimate or transcendent reality . . . Faith in its primary sense is an intentional human response, reaction, act, or pervasive and operative attitude' (Haight 1999, 4). However, the word 'faith' seems to me, regrettably, to be too strongly associated in too many peoples' minds with holding beliefs not on evidence but 'by faith' (as in 'we believe that the world is round because of the evidence, but we believe by faith that God exists'); and so instead of 'faith' I shall use

'spirituality' and 'mysticism', though well aware that they too can carry unhelpful associations with them. But we have to make do with what we have.

The outer aspect of religion consists of contraposed socio-religious entities cumulatively developed by a multitude of cultural, economic, geographical, climatic, historical and political influences taking them far beyond their originating impulse. Pre-axial religion was already to some degree organised, but only locally. Referring to the world faiths that we know today, Cantwell Smith has shown that this conception of religions as organized institutions with their own fixed boundaries, related as potential or actual rivals, is a distinctively western and comparatively modern way of thinking.⁴ What he calls the cumulative traditions – institutionalised forms of religion – include not only scriptures, hierarchic priesthoods, liturgies, moral codes, political affiliations, but also creeds and theological systems, all of which inevitably show a range of human-all-too-human influences in their development over time. The fingerprints of our 'fallen' human nature are all over them. As a result they reflect not only the best but also the worst of human characteristics. And so we find that, as powerful players in history, they have not only contributed a great deal of good but are also responsible for a great deal of harm to humankind.

The institutional balance sheet

On the one hand the religions have been instruments of social cohesion, maintaining the unity of a tribe or a nation by providing communal rituals and shared identity-defining stories handed down from generation to generation. These stories, sagas and myths refer to specific strands of history but constitute for each community an all-encompassing 'grand narrative' which binds society and generations together, providing frameworks of meaning for the lives of hundreds of millions of people. The religions have also challenged their members with moral ideals, and have supported and comforted them in the sufferings and amid the anxieties and vicissitudes of life's recurrent personal and social crises. Further, the religions have constituted the foundation of civilisations and been instrumental in the development of language, education and science. They have been responsible for the creation of hospitals and universities, and have inspired literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture. So there is a great deal on the positive side of the balance sheet.

But on the other side they have not only been instruments of social cohesion but also of social control by a dominant class. As a very minor but typical expression of this, in England in 1381 there was a Peasant's Revolt led by Wat Tyler ('When Adam delved and Eve span/Who was then the gentleman?'). The revolt was put down with ruthless violence and bloodshed, and the official chronicle of the time records that 'God sent remedy by the hand of the most renowned man, Sir William Walworth, the then Mayor... who by the favour of divine grace mortally pierced [Tyler] in the breast'. God was on the side of the powers that be. A thousand other examples could be cited. Again and again a ruling class has in effect claimed privileged access to the deity who has ordained their own earthly power – hence 'the divine right of kings'. Again, the religions have embodied, and in varying degrees still embody, the age-old male dominance over women. And they have divided people into rival groups, validating and intensifying almost all human conflicts, as we see so tragically in many parts of the world today. God has, according to those who claim his blessing, been on both sides of every war, perhaps the most recent explicit examples coming from the American Civil War (1861–65), of which one account is aptly called *Gods and Generals*, for the generals on both sides repeatedly appealed to divine guidance and intervention. Further, as well as inspiring so many valuable human activities, the religious institutions have also sometimes distorted or subverted them. The origin of modern science in Christian Europe is a classic case. It has been argued that this was made possible by the Christian teaching of the unity and intelligibility of nature as a divine creation. But this is doubtful, for that is equally the teaching of the other monotheisms, and in different ways of the non-theistic faiths as well. The rise of modern science in Europe seems to have resulted from a confluence of cultural streams, the existing Christian tradition and the Renaissance rediscovery of the ancient Greek spirit of free enquiry. But from the time of Copernicus, through the controversies about the age of the earth and biological evolution in the nineteenth century, the churches' united response to the self-propelling advance of science, as soon as its discoveries conflicted with established dogma, was always to oppose and seek to suppress it. Even today there is strong fundamentalist resistance to the teaching of biological evolution in some states of the USA.

Again, while the religions have produced and nourished a succession of great philosophers and theologians, the monotheisms have also restricted the search for truth and new understanding by threatening and punishing thinkers who failed to conform to accepted ideas.

Thus within Islam al-Hallaj was executed for his mystical teaching; and today reforming thought, though increasingly widespread, is still widely discouraged. Within Judaism Spinoza was excommunicated by the Jewish community of Amsterdam; and today Jewish Orthodoxy still often denies the validity of other branches of Judaism. Within Christianity heretical movements such as the Cathars were suppressed by the Church with pitiless violence; the internal struggles between Catholic and Reformed Christians were played out in Europe in the prolonged wars of religion, causing tens of thousands of violent deaths and the widespread destruction of towns and cities; thousands of innocent women were burned as witches; and even within the same sub-tradition Servetus was burned at the stake in Calvin's Geneva for arguing that the doctrine of the Trinity is not scripturally based. And in the twentieth century, with its escalating technology – the most violent century ever – the appallingly destructive wars have all been, with the exception of Japan, between the traditionally and still basically Christian peoples of Germany, Poland, France, Britain, Russia and the United States.

The 'Eastern' faiths of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism have generally been more peaceful and tolerant, but by no means entirely so. Gregor Paul has traced the themes of peace and war in classical Chinese thought, for in China there have been plenty of intra-Chinese wars, but 'in China, religious beliefs or religious zeal were never, or almost never, decisive, when it came to the question of war and peace. In more than 3,000 years of Chinese history, there have been no religious wars comparable to those that have occurred in Jewish, Muslim, Christian and Hindu history. In particular, there were no aggressive, or missionary, religious wars' (Paul 2004, 75). In the case of Buddhism, whose basic outlook and teaching explicitly excludes violence and hatred, the twentieth century has seen striking lapses from this. For example, the Zen form of Buddhism was used by some to justify Japanese aggression on the Asian mainland. 'Certain Zen figures supported growing Japanese militarism in the 1920s and 1930s by directing Zen practice as a preparation for combat, and a large meditation hall was erected in Tokyo for this purposes' (Ives 1992, 64), though other Zen figures, such as Ichikawa Hakugen, strongly criticised this (*ibid.*, ch. 4). In the long-running violent conflict between Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamils in Sri Lanka some Theravada monks have provided the Sinhalese government with a religious sanction (Schmidt-Leukel 2004). In modern Burma and Thailand also Buddhism has been involved in sanctioning war (Ling 1979). Within 'Hinduism' (a collective name for the many different streams of Indian religion) war is a familiar

topic. The *Mahabharata*, of which the *Bhagavad Gita* is a part, chronicles dynastic wars involving the gods, both male and female, as protagonists. The twentieth century saw relentlessly bitter and bloody conflict between Hindus and Muslims on the border between the Indian Punjab and Pakistan at the partition of India in 1947, and recurrent outbreaks of Hindu–Muslim communal violence have marred the subcontinent since, with a particularly damaging peak in the destruction by a resurgent Hindu nationalism of the Ayodha mosque in 1992. And yet at the same time the influence of the greatest peacemaker and practitioner of the power of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi, has exerted a still continuing influence far beyond India. Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, Lech Walensa, U Thant and very many less-well-known figures are among those who have acknowledged Gandhi’s powerful influence in their lives, and other major figures, such as Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu in South Africa and Thich Nhat Hanh in Vietnam, have lived out the same positive and healing insight into human nature.

However, if we try to arrive at a ‘bottom line’ in this complex profit-and-loss account, we find that the goods and evils flowing from religion are of such different kinds as generally to be incommensurable, so that it is not really possible to reach any straightforward verdict. We can only paint the mixed black-and-white picture which history displays. The world religions all teach love and compassion, each has its own formulation of the Golden Rule, each includes great examples of self-giving love for others, and yet each has been used to validate and justify large-scale violence and merciless atrocities.

But ‘large-scale violence and merciless atrocities’ have not always been connected with religion – one thinks of Stalin’s deliberate elimination of millions of Russian peasants and of his Gulag Archipelago for dissidents, Hitler’s attempt systematically to murder the Jewish population of Europe, Pol Pot’s Cambodian killing fields, Treblinka and other smaller examples.

The ‘scientific’ study of religion

Religion as institution is the subject-matter of the academic study of religion. The historians of religion, and the anthropologists and sociologists who study religion, necessarily focus on its outer and visible aspects. Emile Durkheim, for example, studying Australian aboriginal societies in the late nineteenth century, concluded that its totem functioned as a symbol both for its god and for the tribe itself as a reality greater than and having authority over the individual, and concluded

that god was society in the guise of the sacred totem (Durkheim 1963). His analysis of the religion of a particular primal tribal society is convincing but he, and many others after him, made the mistake of generalising it to explain religion as such: the overarching authority and power of society have been projected by the religious imagination as the idea of God. However, this theory does not explain either such non-theistic and basically individualistic faiths as Buddhism or the important element of prophetic challenge to society among both them and the monotheisms. Such oversimplifying generalisation is indeed characteristic of all the various reductionist sociological and psychological theories. They have a valid insight into some one particular aspect of religion and then uncritically assume that they have thereby discovered the essential nature of all religion. Thus Freud, believing that we need to personalise the forces of nature in order to be able to deal with them (Freud 1961, 16–17), saw God as a buried infancy memory of one's father, so that 'at bottom God is nothing other than an exalted father' (Freud 1955, 147). It is no doubt true that a good father – but not all fathers are good! – provides a child's first model of the heavenly Father. But Freud forgot, or was barely aware of, Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism, etc. It is of course a sound psychological insight that religion often functions as a comforting myth; but it would be a gratuitous mistake to generalise this into an explanation of religion as such. Much in the great world faiths is far from comforting, much is profoundly challenging, and much is by implication socially revolutionary.

Again, anthropologists and sociobiologists have explored very fruitfully the ways in which religious belief systems and their accompanying practices have been affected by geography and climate. For example, the nomadic herding communities of the ancient Near East tended to think of the divine as male, while the settled agricultural communities of ancient north-west India tended to think of the divine in female terms, as mother earth. And so the great monotheistic religions that originated in the Near East have worshipped a male God, while the Hindu traditions see the ultimate reality of Brahman as manifested equally in male and female deities.

There are also innumerable sociological studies of particular religious communities around the world, examining them as historical phenomena. It is appropriate that they should do so, and it is natural that such work should constitute the bulk of the academic study of religion in the universities. This often includes belief systems as well as patterns of behaviour. But valuable, fascinating and indeed indispensable though this is, it does not touch the inner side of religion. If we

think of the Buddhist idea of likening belief systems to fingers pointing to the moon, so that to focus on the pointing finger is to miss the moon itself, we can say that the entire history and phenomenology of religions is our academic study of the finger, or many different fingers – but not of the moon, the religious reality itself. For the inner side of religion, to which we turn presently, is not open to this kind of study, although psychologists have sought to explain it, and now the neurosciences have become highly relevant, as we shall see. But among historians of religion the relatively few who have sought to take serious account of its inner as well as outer aspect include some of the greatest, such as Mircea Eliade, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Annamarie Schimmel.

To conclude, since the axial period it has been possible to distinguish between religion as institution and communal practice, and the inner mystical or experiential dimension of religion. And it is within this mystical dimension that we must look for the kinds of religious experience in which we are to be interested here.

2

Spirituality and Mysticism

But this institutional aspect of religion, so ambiguous in its value, is only half the story. The other aspect comes under the general heading of spirituality and mysticism. The general twentieth-century concentration on the remarkable and extraordinary in this area was heavily influenced by William James's monumental *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This continues to be an indispensable and highly accessible and fascinating book, as widely read now as when it was first published over a hundred years ago. But we do not need today to focus to the same extent on those more dramatic cases.

'Spirituality' and spirituality

Within the Anglo-American analytic philosophical tradition today it is barely acceptable to speak of spirituality but quite permissible to speak of mysticism, concerning the epistemology of which a good deal of work has been done.¹ This is focussed upon the rare and extraordinary experiences of some of the great mystics. But the range of religious experience is much wider than this, and to encompass it we shall also have to make use of 'spiritual' and 'spirituality', even though they are today used so extremely loosely. One meaning is that used by the sociologists, where

Survey after survey shows that increasing numbers of people now prefer to call themselves 'spiritual' rather than 'religious'. Terms like spirituality, holism, New Age, mind-body-spirit, yoga, feng shui, chi and chakra have become more common in the general culture than traditional Christian vocabulary. Even a cursory glance around the local bookshop or a stroll around the shopping centre leaves little

doubt that Christianity has a new competitor in 'the spiritual marketplace'. (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 1)

This is clearly an aspect of what Charles Taylor calls 'the massive subjective turn of modern culture' (Taylor 1991, 26), and which historians trace to the influence of modern philosophy since Descartes's 'I think therefore I am', focussing on the individual self. In fact, I think, that many other social and economic factors have also affected the intellectual history of the modern world, with philosophers reflecting rather than creating the subjective turn.

I am going to refer to this New Age spirituality as 'spirituality', to distinguish it from what I mean by the inner aspect of religion, by which I mean the individual's response to the Transcendent. Although this remains to be argued for later (chs 11 and 12) I am assuming here for our present purpose that there is such a reality.

To gain an objective assessment of the prevalence of 'spirituality' today in one country, Britain, two sociologists, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, with a team of assistants conducted an empirical survey of the 'spiritual' and 'religious' life of a particular community, Kendal, a flourishing town in the north-west of England.

They distinguish between what they call 'subjective-life spirituality' and 'life-as religion'. The former includes acupuncture, the Alexander technique, aromatherapy, art therapy, astrology, chiropractice, circle dancing, flower essences therapy, GreenSpirit groups, herbalism, hypnotherapy, inter-faith groups, massage, the Iona community, pagan activities including contemporary witchcraft, palm reading, play therapy, osteopathy, psychic consultancy, rebirthing, reflexology, reiki, crystal gazing, Sai Baba groups, Sea of Faith groups, spiritual healing, Tai chi/Chi kung groups, Tarrot card reading, walking labyrinths, women's spirituality groups, Wild Women groups, yoga and more – a very wide spread. And by 'life-as religion' they mean organised religion based on belief in a God who is worshipped and whose will is sought to be discerned – though with wide variations of outlook and practice within the churches. Their basic distinction is thus between 'spirituality' as therapy, self-improvement, seeking happiness in a variety of ways, without any transcendent reference, and 'religion' as relation to the Transcendent (conceived as a personal God) and occurring within organised ecclesiastical bodies.

This classification has, however, its limits, because there is considerable overlap between the two categories. Some of the practices listed above – the social engagement of the Iona community, the

thinking of the Sea of Faith movement, inter-faith activity and services of healing – are also present within the churches, and indeed mainly so in the case of the Iona Community; and there must be many church members who also participate in a number of the other listed ‘spiritual’ activities, some now often part of mainstream medical practice – such as acupuncture, use of the Alexander Technique, massage, osteopathy and chiropractice.

The Kendal project involved first identifying the places of worship of all the denominations represented in Kendal, Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, United Reformed, independent Evangelical, Mormon, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christadelphian, Salvation Army, Spiritualist, Christian Scientist, Quaker and Unitarian; and the various places where ‘spiritual’ groups met, concentrating particularly on Infinite Tai Chi, Rainbow Cottage and Yoga at the Kendal Leisure Centre, though recognising that ‘spirituality’ in their sense is found much more widely than in these venues, with small unnamed groups meeting in private houses and also many one-to-one therapy sessions. They visited and participated in the activities of selected ‘spiritual’ groups and churches, and then issued an extensive questionnaire. The detailed results with statistics and analysis are published in Heelas and Woodhead’s *The Spiritual Revolution*.

Some of the statistics from the Kendal project are interesting. From the questionnaire addressed to those involved in the ‘spiritual’ groups:

In answer to the question ‘Do you believe in any of the following?’ the greatest number of respondents (82.4 per cent) agree with ‘some sort of spirit or life force pervades all that lives’, with 73 per cent expressing belief in ‘subtle energy (or energy channels) in the body’. Presented with a range of options and asked to select the statement which best describes their ‘core beliefs about spirituality’, 40 per cent of respondents equate spirituality with ‘love’ or being ‘a caring and decent person’, 34 per cent with ‘being in touch with subtle energies’, ‘healing oneself and others’ or ‘living life to the full’. Spirituality, it appears, belongs to life-itself (‘subtle energy in the body’ which serves to keep us alive) and subjective life (‘love’, ‘caring’). It seems that spirit/energy/spirituality is understood to dwell within the life of participants, an interpretation that is supported by the finding that very few associate spirituality with a transcendental, over-and-above-the-self, external source of significance. Just 7 per cent of respondents agreed that spirituality is ‘obeying God’s will’. It appears, then, that rather than spirituality serving to dictate the course and nature of life from beyond the self, it is experienced as being integral to

life: 'pervading' or flowing through life, bringing life alive. (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 25)

So the basic distinction between what Heelas and Woodhead think of as spirituality and what they think of as religion hinges on the absence or presence of reference to a transcendent reality. But this is not as clear a criterion as it may seem. Belief in 'a transcendent reality' is equated in the above quote with 'obeying God's will'. This limits transcendence to the God of much traditional Christianity, whereas for many today 'God' often functions simply as place holder for a higher Reality of some kind.

The participation numbers in Kendal showed that on the particular Sunday in 2000 when a precise count was carried out 2209 people (adult and younger) attended the 25 churches and chapels, constituting about 7.9 per cent of the population of the town; and on a count spread out over a longer period Heelas and Woodhead reckoned that in a typical week about six hundred people took part in 126 separate New Age or holistic activities, constituting 1.6 per cent of the population.

This shows a much larger participation in what they call 'religion' than in 'spirituality'. However, their time-flow conclusion, including also wider evidence from the United States and other available sources, was that 'we have found robust evidence of a pattern: a correlation between subjective-life spirituality and growth on the one hand, and between life-as religion and decline on the other' (*ibid.*, 9). There are other researchers who have concluded that while a genuine concern for the deeper issues of life and death and the meaning of our existence are as widespread as ever, they have largely migrated outside the churches. The BBC's 'Soul of Britain' survey in 2000 found that 76 per cent of the population were prepared to say that they had some kind of spiritual experience.² But according to another, 1992, survey church members were less likely, at about 53 per cent, to report spiritual experiences than the public as a whole.³ This is bad news from an ecclesiastical point of view. But, again, much depends on what is to be counted – is the ecstatic experience of the participant in a Pentecostal church a spiritual experience? And is this 'mainstream'?

But 'spirituality' is also very commonly used even more widely than Heelas and Woodhead's understanding of it. At the time of writing I find a report of the closing of a Jaguar car factory in Coventry UK in which the factory is described as 'the spiritual home of Jaguar' – because it had been there so long and had become a symbol of the Jaguar brand. A catalogue of new books, under the heading 'Explore your spirituality'

advertises one on the meaning of the stars for your life. More sinisterly, a newspaper report refers to the 'spiritual leader' of a Satanist cult in Milan, calling itself The Beasts of Satan.⁴ On another day a headline runs 'Hate campaign awaits Bin Laden's "spiritual ambassador in Europe"'.⁵ When stretched this far, the word becomes so vague and indefinable as to be of no serious use.

Further, the 'shift from religion to spirituality' runs alongside a continuing widespread professed belief in God. This varies from country to country. In the USA a Harris Poll taken in 2003 found that 79 per cent of Americans believe in the existence of God: of these 66 per cent are 'absolutely certain' of this; 9 per cent do not believe in God; and 12 per cent are not sure. Among those raised as Protestants 90 per cent believe in God, among those raised as Catholic 79 per cent, among Jews 48 per cent. Within these overall figures there were a number of variations. In the USA belief in God is highest in the Midwest (82%) and the South (82%), lower in the East (75%) and the West (75%). Belief tends to increase with age from 71 per cent of those aged 25–9, to more than 80 per cent for the age groups over 40, including 83 per cent of those aged 65 and over. (This may account for the fact that while there are few young people in many churches, those churches nevertheless continue, though diminishingly, to renew their congregations with older members.) Women (84%) are more likely than men (73%) to believe in God; African Americans (91%), Hispanics (81%) and whites (78%). Of those with no college education 82 per cent are more likely to believe in God than 73 per cent of those with postgraduate education. The Harris Poll reckoned that its results have a 95 per cent accuracy for the total population, plus or minus 3 per cent.⁶ The Poll also found that far fewer attend the churches than profess belief in God – only about 26 per cent of believers in God in the USA every week, 36 per cent once a month or so, and 55 per cent only a few times a year.

In Britain the proportion of believers in God is much lower. A British Social Attitudes Survey by the National Centre for Social Research in 1998 found that 21 per cent have no doubt that God exists, 23 per cent have doubts but nevertheless believe, 14 per cent sometimes do and sometimes do not believe in God, 14 per cent believe in a Higher Power of some kind but not a personal God, 15 per cent are agnostic, and 10 per cent are atheists (and 3% unknown). The situation is probably much the same in other west European countries.

But it is important to remember that much depends on what people mean by 'God'. Certainly those classified as believers do not all believe

in the same God, in the sense of having the same, or even a very similar, concept of God. But even in today's western Europe some kind of reference to a transcendent reality, predominantly thought of in personal terms, does still seem to be very common.

Spirituality/mysticism

The spirituality that I want to discuss in this book is not that described in the Kendal project, although there is an overlap at some points. What I want to examine is the 'inner aspect of religion' in the sense of religious experience or mysticism. The term 'mysticism', however, also needs some clarification. The writings of the great mystics of each tradition sometimes consist in their attempts to describe their own experiences, and sometimes in developing a mystical theology or philosophy. It will be enough to give one example of each within the Christian tradition. In spite of the fact that his name is largely unknown outside scholarly circles, the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, thought to have been a Syrian monk writing around 500 CE, have probably been more influential than any other within the Christian tradition apart from St Paul. He wrote in the name of the Dionysius, or Denys, the Areopagite, who was converted by St Paul (Acts 17:34), thereby giving himself a near Pauline authority. (This is not the only example of such authorial concealment among Christian and also Jewish writers of the period.) Such was his influence that he was cited as an authority by Aquinas some 1700 times; and the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, the period recognised by Bernard McGinn in his multi-volume history of western mysticism as *The Flowering of Mysticism*, saw a 'Dionysian renaissance' (McGinn 1998, 86). Dionysius's writings show a strong neo-Platonic influence, and it was this that made Martin Luther reject him as the impostor whom Erasmus had already suspected. But the relevant point at the moment is that this great Christian mystic, whose 'influence on the Latin West was to be more powerful than that of any other Eastern [i.e. Eastern orthodox] mystic', as McGinn says (Ibid., 157–8), did not offer descriptions of mystical experience, but wrote several fairly slim volumes of mystical theology, emphasising in particular the total ineffability of the ultimate divine reality. And Christian mystics generally, prior to the thirteenth century, typically produced works of biblical exegesis in which they sought to bring out the mystical meaning of the texts but did not usually speak of their own mystical experience. In Dionysius's case, he does hint at 'experiencing the divine things' (Lubheid [trans.] 1987, 85) and writes of the moment when the mind 'is

made one with the dazzling rays, being then and there enlightened by the inscrutable depth of Wisdom' (Ibid., 109). But there is no developed account of his own experiences.

In contrast to this, the late-fourteenth- and early-fifteenth-century English mystic, Lady Julian of Norwich, in her *Showings or Revelations of Divine Love*, describes in detail her powerful experiences, beginning with an initial vision when a priest held a crucifix before her as she lay ill and thinking herself close to death: 'suddenly I saw the red blood trickling down from under the crown, all hot, flowing freely and copiously, a living stream, just as it seemed to me that it was at the time when the crown of thorns was thrust down upon his blessed head'.⁷ She describes this as a 'corporeal sight' (130), distinguishing it from the 'spiritual sight' of

something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, and I perceived that it was as round as any ball. I looked at it and thought: What can this be? And I was given this general answer: It is everything which is made. I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that it was so little that it could suddenly fall into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it: and thus everything has being through the love of God. (130)

She continued to have a series of visions, some external and some inner, over several days, some comforting and some frightening, but together giving her an overwhelming sense of the love and goodness of God as mediated through the figure of Jesus. There are two versions of her book, the Short Text written soon after the experiences, and the Long Text written some twenty years later in which she repeats her account of the experiences but adds her own very interesting reflections on them. As to their basic meaning, 'do you wish to know your lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love'.⁸ Her reflections in the Long Text are brilliantly original and radical.⁹ Whereas she had been taught that humanity lies under the wrath of God and can be pardoned only by Christ's atonement to appease the divine anger, she says that 'for anything that I could see or desire, I could not see this characteristic [of wrath] in all the revelations . . . I saw [God] assign to us no kind of blame . . . our Lord God cannot in his own judgment forgive, because he cannot be angry'.¹⁰ She also broke with the long (and still continuing) tradition of speaking of God as male: 'As truly as God is our Father,

so truly is God our Mother', and she even spoke of 'our true Mother, Jesus'.¹¹ She also hinted at a belief in universal salvation,¹² carrying to its logical conclusion her famous refrain, which recurs several times in her text, 'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.'

Julian was part of the new phenomenon of women mystics who based their teaching on direct religious experience. Bridget of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, Catherine of Bologna, Catherine of Genoa, Margaret and Christina Ebner in the Rhineland, Collette of Corbie and Joan of Arc in France, Hadewijch of Antwerp, Marguerite Porete in northern France, Margery Kempe as well as Julian in England. There were also major male mystics – Meister Eckhart, John Tauler, Ruusbroec, Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle, Ramon Lull – who, however, wrote mainly in the area of mystical theology. The anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* is a work of mystical theology and the anonymous *Theologica Germanica* is devotional, though also containing profound mystical thinking. Whereas earlier, women's voices were seldom heard, in this period they played a leading role in the emergence of experiential writing. This also brought them under suspicion, not only because of a deep-seated patriarchal culture but also because a claim to direct experience of God bypassed the Church's teaching authority and gave them an independent standing outside ecclesiastical control. Most were watched suspiciously by the Church. Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake. Quite likely Julian of Norwich escaped censure because her writings were not widely known in her life time.

Unitive mysticism

William James says that 'overcoming all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we are aware of our oneness' (James 1979, 404). Or in Christian, Jewish and Islamic terms, union with God. In some sense of 'union' or 'oneness' this is undoubtedly correct, but it is not easy to define this sense. If we press questions which were not in the minds of pre-modern writers, it is clear that within the monotheisms 'union' has almost always been intended in a metaphorical rather than a literal numerical sense. Indeed, I shall question later whether it is logically possible for a literal numerical unity to be experienced in this life.

For the clearest example of the unitive claim we turn to advanced advaitic Hindu practitioners. The Advaita Vedanta philosophy is well

summarised by the modern Hindu scholar Radhakrishnan: ‘The ego belongs to the relative world, is a stream of experience, a fluent mass of life, a centre round which our experiences of sense and mind gather. At the back of this whole structure is the Universal Consciousness, Atman, which is our true being’ (Radhakrishnan 1953, 91). And the Atman is itself finally identical with the ultimate and eternal reality of Brahman. The great advaitic (non-dualist) Shankara (around 700 CE) used the famous analogy of empty jars. If you break the jars what remains is the air no longer divided by the jars. In *The Crest-Jewel of Discrimination* Shankara (or possibly one of his disciples, because the book’s authorship is not certain) says, ‘The air in the jar is one with the air everywhere. In like manner your Atman is one with Brahman’ (Shankara 1978, 80). And he describes the unitive experience:

His mind was completely absorbed in Brahman. After a while, he returned to normal consciousness. Then, out of the fullness of joy, he spoke: The ego has disappeared. I have realized my identity with Brahman and so all my desires have melted away... The treasure I have found there cannot be described in words. The mind cannot conceive it. My mind fell like a hailstone into the vast expanse of Brahman’s ocean. Touching one drop of it, I melted away and became one with Brahman. And now, though I return to human consciousness, I abide in the joy of the Atman. (Shankara 1978, 113)

The reason why I question this and other similar accounts, when taken literally, is that to lose one’s individual identity completely, like a drop becoming part of the ocean – a familiar simile in mystic literature – would be to lose the individual continuity of consciousness and memory in virtue of which the mystic would later be able to report the experience. How could someone remember being in a state in which he or she no longer existed as a distinct individual? There must, surely, have been a continuing strand of consciousness to enable them later to speak about it, while still enjoying something of its bliss. Is it not then more likely that having passed beyond the ordinary self-centred state to an ego-transcending awareness, the mystics’s consciousness is filled with the ultimate universal reality which, according to the advaitic philosophy, we all are in the depths of our being? And they speak metaphorically of the experience as ceasing to exist as a separate consciousness while being totally merged into the infinite? This is indeed compatible with Shankara’s account, for he says that ‘it cannot be described in

words... The mind cannot conceive it', and then there follows the simile of the hailstone dropping into the ocean.

I suggest, then, that the unitive language of Advaita Vedanta is not to be construed literally, as reporting a total extinction of the individual memory-bearing consciousness, but metaphorically, as expressing a usually brief but vivid awareness of the limitless reality in which we are rooted, an awareness whose quality is a profound *ananda*, happiness, and whose continuing effect is a considerable degree of liberation from the domination of the ego. This profound happiness of the experience is affirmed again and again by Shankara as he speaks of 'the highest bliss' (39), 'the Atman, which is endless joy' (103), and of the liberated person being 'illumined when he enjoys eternal bliss' (104). It is a liberation from ego-concern. This is important because, as we shall see in the next chapter, it is not only the intensity of the experience at the time but also its long-term effects in the experiencer's life that characterises what the religions regard as authentic experience of the Transcendent.

I believe that a similar analysis must apply to unitive mysticism within the monotheistic traditions. Within Christian mysticism the language of union is freely used: Pseudo-Dionysius, who we have already met, writes of 'the most divine knowledge of God, that which comes through unknowing, is achieved in a union far beyond mind' (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 109); the ninth-century John Scotus Eriugena speaks of 'ineffable unity' (McGinn 1994, 116); the fourteenth-century Meister Eckhart says that God 'is light and when the divine light pours into the soul, the soul is united with God, as light blends with light' (Eckhart 1941, 163); and his disciple Henry Suso says that the mystic 'disappears and loses himself in God, and becomes one spirit with Him, as a drop of wine which is drowned in a great quantity of wine' (Underhill 1999, 424); while yet another fourteenth-century mystic, John Ruusbroec, speaks of 'unity without a difference' (Ruusbroec 1985, 265).

However, I believe that the notion of unity is nevertheless being used here metaphorically, not literally. For Christian belief maintains a fundamental distinction between the eternal Creator and the creature. The unity experienced by the mystics is not a unity of being but a union of wills in which the human is fully conformed to the divine. As Bernard of Clairvaux explains, 'The union between God and man is not unity... For how can there be unity where there is a plurality of natures and difference of substance? The union of God and man is brought about not by confusion of natures, but by agreement of wills' (Butler 1967, 114). And many of the mystics who use the language of

unity also warn against a literal understanding of it. Thus Ruusbroec says, 'Nevertheless, the creature does not become God, for this union occurs through grace and through a love which has been turned back to God. For this reason the creature experiences in his inward vision a difference and distinction between himself and God' (Ruusbroec 1985, 265). Suso likewise says that the human person's 'being remains, but in another form, in another glory, and in another power' (Underhill 1999, 424). And St John of the Cross insists that the soul's 'natural being, though thus transformed, remains as distinct from the Being of God as it was before' (St John of the Cross 1958, 182).

Walter Stace maintained that in such disclaimers the Christian mystics who used unitive language were submitting to 'the menaces and pressures of the theologians and ecclesiastical authorities' (Stace 1960, 232). He believed that the mystics' experiences themselves would have led them to affirm a strict numerical identity with God but that the orthodox doctrine of an ineradicable distinction between Creator and creature, reinforced by the all-powerful authority of the Church, prevented them from drawing the logical conclusion from their first-hand experience. However, I agree at this point with Nelson Pike (Pike 1992, 211–12) that it is much more likely that they were sincere in their disclaimers of literal unity, for the mystical moments which they report occurred within the context of a religious life in which they were daily praying to God as their creator and as one with whom they lived in an I-Thou relationship of love, adoration and obedience. In their 'unitive' experience, structured as is all cognition by the experienter's own conceptual resources, their consciousness was completely filled by the divine presence – but it was still their own individual human consciousness. The poet W. H. Auden was right when he said the theistic mystics are presumably 'trying to describe . . . a state of consciousness so filled with the presence of God that there is no vacant corner of it detachedly observing the experience' (Woods 1980, 385). But they never suppose that they have literally become identical with God.

And the same is true, although there is no space to develop this here, of the very fruitful theology of the Eastern Church, originally influenced by Neo-Platonism, in which humanity's divinisation or deification (*theosis*) is seen as the purpose of the spiritual life. We do not literally become God, but are to progress from what Irenaeus called the 'image' of God, which is our rational moral personhood, to the 'likeness' of God, which is our ultimate complete spiritual transformation.

We find a similar situation within the Sufi mystics of Islam. The tenth-century CE al-Hallaj used something like the drop in the ocean simile when he wrote in one of his poems,

Thy Spirit is mingled in my spirit even as wine is mingled in pure water.
When any thing touches Thee, it touches me. Lo, in every case Thou art I.

(Nicholson 1979, 151)

This could be construed in various ways, but when he proclaimed, ‘ana al-haqq’, I am The Real, or the Truth, that is, God, he was executed for blasphemy. Or was he? A leading authority, Annemarie Schimmel, says that ‘political and practical problems certainly played an important role’ (Schimmel 1987, 174). There has also been much debate as to exactly what he intended by these words. He (with an earlier Sufi, al-Bistami) *may* have been affirming unity with Allah in the sense of a strict numerical identity. But even so, al-Hallaj is not evidence for Stace’s theory, since he did not bend to community pressure to express himself more acceptably. Another great Sufi poet, Rumi, also used the wine and water simile:

With Thy Sweet Soul, this soul of mine,
Hath mixed as Water doth with Wine,
Who can the Wine and Water part,
Or me and Thee when we combine?

(Underhill 1991, 426)

But I think it is clear that such poetic language is not to be understood literally. Even in *fana*, the full self-naughting which is the end of the mystical path, the conscious person still exists in this world: as Rumi says, ‘The spirit becomes joyful through the I-less-I’ (Chittick 1983, 193). Another tenth-century Sufi, and great Islamic theologian, al-Ghazali, says that the mystics,

after their ascent to the heavens of Reality, agree that they saw nothing in existence except God the One . . . Nothing was left to them but God . . . But the words of lovers when in a state of drunkenness must be hidden away and not broadcast. However, when their drunkenness abates and the sovereignty of their reason is restored – and reason is God’s scale on earth – they know that this was not actual identity. (Zaehner 1957, 157–8)

Further, Sufi mysticism is essentially love mysticism – God’s love for us and our answering love for God – so that al-‘Arabi can say that ‘the greatest union is that between man and woman, corresponding as it does to the turning of God toward the one He has created in His own image, so made him His vice regent, so that He might behold Himself in him’ (al-‘Arabi 1980, 275). And mutual love presupposes two personal centres of consciousness. I think that this, together with the manifestly poetic mode in which the Sufis always expressed themselves, supports al-Ghazali’s reading of them.

The Jewish mystics have been less influential within Judaism than the Sufis within Islam, though in the medieval period they achieved great heights. The mystics of the Kabbalah proliferated into many schools and strands of tradition which defy any unitary characterisation. Some of them undoubtedly used the language of unity. Thus the thirteenth-century CE Abraham Abulafia declared that ‘he and He become one entity’ (Idel 1988, 60). And Rabbi Isaac of Acre used a variation of the familiar simile of the drop and the ocean: the soul and God ‘become one entity, as if somebody poured out a jug of water into a running well, that all becomes one’ (Scholem 1955, 67). There is, however, disagreement about whether their unitive language should be understood literally or metaphorically. I suspect, metaphorically. If literally, the counter-argument that I offered above in relation to advaitic Hinduism will also apply here. But Gershom Scholem, a leading authority on Jewish mysticism, warns that ‘Even in this ecstatic state of mind the Jewish mystic almost invariably retains a sense of the distance between the Creator and his creature’ (Scholem 1955, 60).

It seems to me, then, that while it could be, as many strands of mystical thought teach, that our ultimate state will be one of total absorption (or re-absorption) in the Ultimate, the Real, this must lie far beyond this present life.