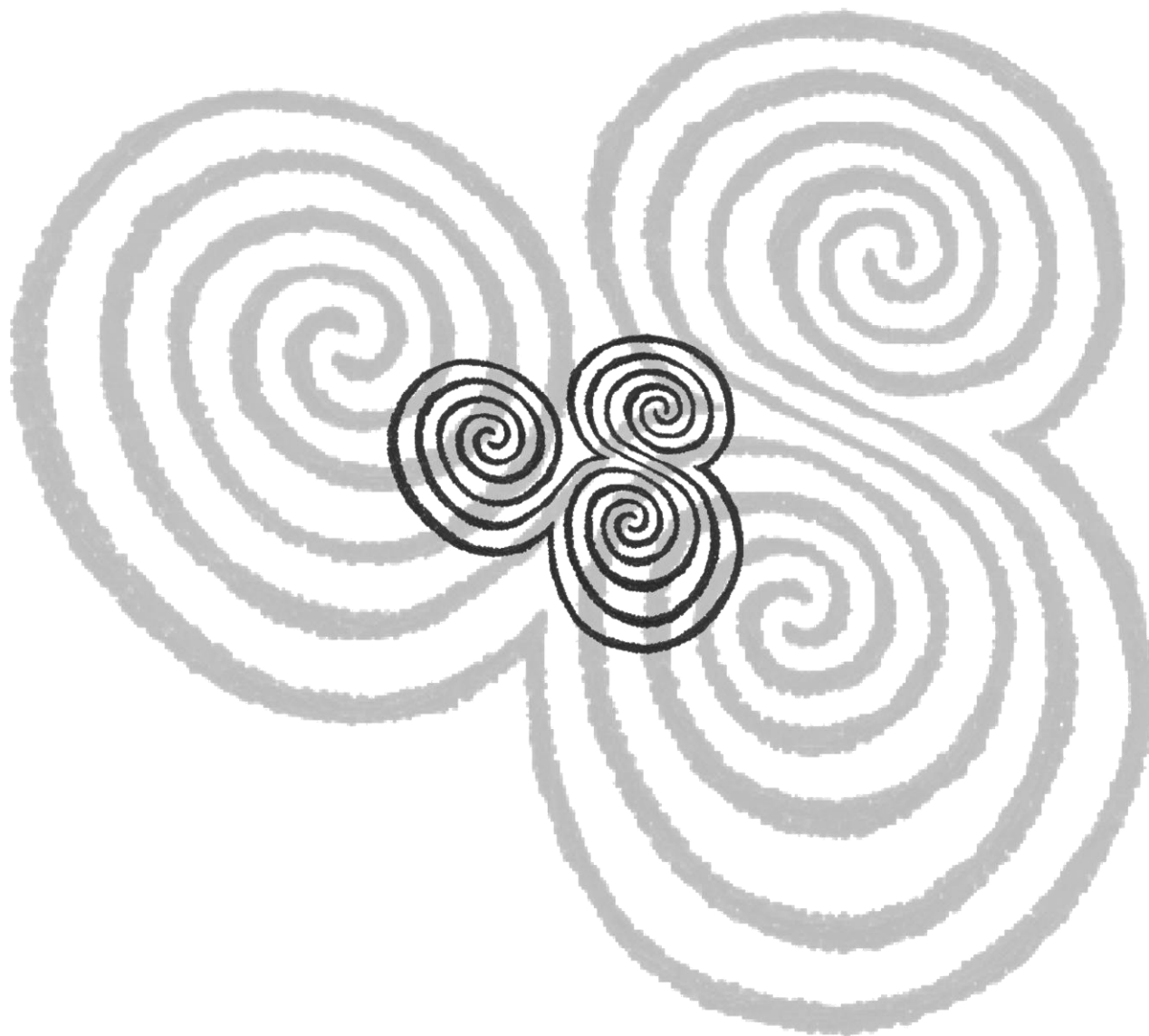


De Numine

The Magazine of the Alister Hardy Trust



Supporting the Religious Experience Research Centres
University of Wales Trinity Saint David
Bishop Grosseteste University

www.studyspiritualexperiences.org

Issue 78 Autumn 2025

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Please observe the following guidelines when submitting your item.

Copy deadlines:

Spring issue: 28th February

Autumn issue: 31st August

Submit contributions by email (as an unformatted attachment) to the Editor: **denumine@gmail.com**

- **Articles:** max 2,000 words
- **Book reviews:** max 1,000 words
- **Local group reports:** max 500 words

If these limits are exceeded, the contribution may be sent back for editing by the author before it can be accepted.

References: please **do not insert endnotes or footnotes**, but mark reference numbers in the text, and give a correspondingly numbered list of references after the text. Include author, date, title, place of publication, publisher, and page numbers.

Electronic references: give the date

when the reference was retrieved.

Book reviews: please give the **author, title, place of publication, publisher, date, number of pages, ISBN no. and price** at the top of the review.

Letters, accounts of personal experiences, poems, images, etc., are always welcome.

Please note:

1. **At the end of your submission** give **your full name, and brief biographical details** and **e-mail address** if you wish.
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The illustration on the front cover is taken from the Megalithic Spirals in the Inner chamber of Newgrange, Stone C10. Newgrange is an ancient site in the Boyne Valley, to the north of Dublin, Ireland.

Three lines form three double spirals, two of them an S-scroll, each centre connected to the other by one path and exiting to either side by the other. The S-scroll is enclosed by a line branching into a third spiral to the left to exit.

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EDITORIAL



When I sent *De Numine* to print a year ago, I did not know just how apposite the theme of healing was to my own situation at the time. A month later I was awaiting an operation (my first ever), so I had

good cause to reread the articles in issue 77 and take some to the quotations I had added to heart. My recovery took longer than I had hoped, so the spring issue has been rolled into autumn, giving a double issue this time, and much that you might also wish to share and read again.

Continuing our rainbow-coloured covers, we arrive at indigo (or medium blue in this case). Indigo has been associated in modern times with the brow *chakra* (energy centre) from the ancient Veda texts of Hinduism. As explained in the article by **Laura Patryas**, this chakra is associated with intuition, imagination, the inner light and wisdom beyond the five physical senses. The article explores fascinating connections between recent psychotherapeutic practice, neuroscience and the chakra system.

Keith Beasley takes up the inner wisdom theme in his description of working with university staff and students on consciousness education, and shares his model for “strategic inner” work that he has developed at the University of Bristol.

At the moment it seems almost every day I hear or read something about Artificial Intelligence (AI), how it is supposed to make life easier in future or make whole professions obsolete, etc. **Paul Trafford** takes a welcome critical look at AI and focuses on what it lacks, with reference to spiritual experiences in the Alister Hardy

database. Holding firmly to the human imagination, **Jonathan Robinson** poses a set of What if... questions to inspire discussion of how we might change things for the better.

Members who missed the Memorial Lecture in 2023 can enjoy some of the lovely images that were shared in an exploration of Sacred Space and Spiritual experience by **John Harper**, who has kindly sent the full text of his presentation for this bumper issue. More recently the Spring 2024 Alister Hardy Conference featured the now published *Environmental Spirituality and Wellbeing: Integrating Social and Therapeutic Theory and Practice*. **Jeff Leonardi** gives a summary of the book in his article, A Sense of Wonder. (See also the Letters page for a reader’s response to this event.)

Some fascinating Welsh theological history is explored by **Terry McCormick** in Lampeter’s Spiritual Hinterland, an excerpt from his work in progress. Along with insightful book reviews, spiritual experiences, trustee reports and more, readers should have enough in this issue to keep them occupied and to share with others over the forthcoming festive season. Many thanks to all who contributed in 2025.

Looking ahead to next year’s *De Numine* (and a purple-coloured cover...), I will be seeking articles, images and experiences on the theme of unity and one-ness. Note the new deadlines of 28th February for the spring issue and 31st August for the autumn - see the back page.

Go well and peacefully into the new year.

Rhonda Riachi

ARTICLES

Curiosity, the Third Eye and Psycho-spiritual Healing

Dr Laura Patryas

The Ajna chakra, commonly known as the third eye, has been conceptualised for millennia across Eastern spiritual traditions as the seat of intuition, higher perception and wisdom that transcends the five physical senses¹. Located at the centre of the forehead, it represents an awakening to inner guidance and the dissolution of illusion. In recent decades, Western psychotherapeutic models have begun to explore concepts that resonate with this ancient wisdom. Internal Family Systems² (IFS), a model that views the psyche as a multiplicity of internal 'parts' led by a core Self, identifies qualities of this Self that align remarkably with the functions of the chakras³ (see image below).



The Chakra system and the 8 Cs of Self³.

This article examines the third eye chakra through a synthesis of the nondual facets of Tantra Yoga, IFS and contemporary neurobiology. It explores how the Self quality of *curiosity* corresponds to the Ajna chakra's function of clear seeing. The discussion delves into the chakra's neurological underpinnings, its vulnerability to psycho-spiritual trauma, and somatic pathways to healing. By bridging these disciplines, this paper illuminates the third eye

not merely as a spiritual symbol, but as a psycho-neurobiological reality - a gateway to wholeness that becomes accessible when trauma is resolved, and the psyche's fragmented aspects are reintegrated.

The third eye in yogic tradition

In Tantra Yoga the Ajna chakra is the sixth primary energy centre, serving as the command centre ('Ajna' meaning 'command' or 'perceive') that bridges mundane and spiritual knowledge. It is considered the abode of the *jīvātman* - the individual Self, a spark of divine consciousness that links the finite human to the infinite¹. This subtle centre is a portal through which two distinct forms of knowledge are accessed: *apara vidyā* (mundane or relative knowledge) and *para vidyā* (spiritual or transcendental knowledge). *Apara vidyā* encompasses the sciences, logic and practical skills needed for navigating the external world. *Para vidyā*, in contrast, is the wisdom that reveals the eternal Self and the fundamental truths of existence. A balanced Ajna chakra allows an individual to live effectively in the world while remaining anchored in deeper, spiritual awareness.

The functionality of this chakra is also linked to profound meditative states. It serves as the gateway to *savikalpa samadhi*, a state of deep absorption where the meditator merges with their object of focus (be it a mantra, deity or symbol) while retaining a subtle thread of thought and self-awareness. The term *savikalpa* translates to 'with thought,' signifying a transitional phase where the boundaries between subject and object soften, paving the way for *nirvikalpa samadhi*, a state of pure, objectless awareness. This positions the third eye as a critical nexus for moving beyond ordinary perception into direct, experiential knowledge of the infinite¹.

The third eye and curiosity in the IFS model

The IFS model, developed by Richard Schwartz, offers a psychological lens for understanding the inner world. It posits that the mind is naturally multiple, composed of various 'parts' (subpersonalities with their own beliefs, feelings and roles). These parts revolve around a central, undamaged core called the Self, which is characterized by '8 C qualities': curiosity, compassion, clarity, connectedness, creativity, courage, confidence and calm².

Building on this, an integration of nonduality and IFS, termed *duonity*³, expands the model. Here, multiplicity (both inner and outer) is not seen as fragmentation but as the diverse expression of a unified whole. Within this lens, the 8 Cs resonate with different chakras, with curiosity aligned with the third eye. Derived from the Latin *cūra* ('care' or 'concern'), curiosity can be understood as a tender form of attention: the capacity to meet both inner and outer worlds with openness, unclouded by trauma or conditioning. It enables discernment of truth from projection, reflecting the perceptive quality of the Ajna chakra - an invitation to stay 'curious, not furious.'

Nondual IFS³ extends this perspective further. Here, curiosity is not just an attentional skill but an intrinsic expression of nondual awareness itself. In this sense, curiosity becomes the lamp of the third eye, illuminating essence beyond form and name.

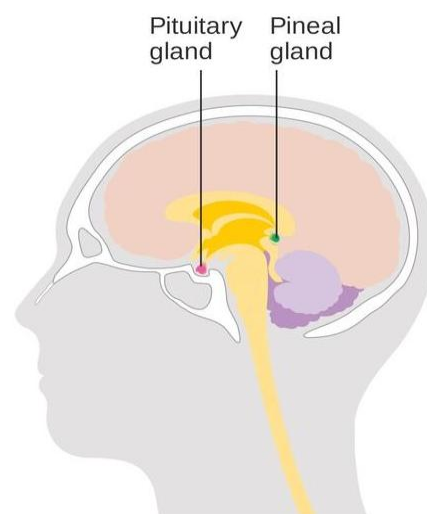
The neurobiological substrates

Ancient yogic science intuitively linked each chakra to a physical counterpart in the endocrine system. The Ajna chakra is associated with both the pituitary and pineal glands. The pituitary, often called the 'master gland,' regulates growth, metabolism and hormonal balance, orchestrating the body's physiological harmony. The pineal gland, a small endocrine structure deep within the brain, has long been considered the 'seat of the soul' or the organ of spiritual perception¹. It can be viewed as a neuro-symbolic correlate of the Self in IFS - not the Self itself, but a 'bodily seat' where Self

qualities (especially curiosity) become accessible.

From an evolutionary perspective, the pineal gland is a vestige of the parietal eye found in ancient reptiles, a photosensitive organ used to detect light and magnetic fields for orientation⁴. While humans lack a physical third eye, the pineal gland continues to function as a neuroendocrine 'antenna,' regulating circadian rhythms via melatonin secretion and maintaining connections to the limbic system - the brain's centre for emotion, memory and survival responses⁴. This pineal-limbic axis forms a critical bridge between instinct and intuition. It facilitates a deep, embodied wisdom that operates independently of cortical reasoning.

In states of balance, the pineal-limbic system supports coherence, intuition and clarity - qualities that closely parallel Self-leadership in IFS. Within meditative states, the pineal and pituitary glands (see image below) are believed to interact through a subtle energetic channel, distributing the inner light of awareness throughout the body¹. When this channel is open, it fosters clarity, curiosity and alignment with a higher purpose; when blocked or dysregulated (by stress or trauma) perception becomes clouded. Symbolically, the third eye's illumination (pineal) and the Self's qualities (IFS) both signify access to an awareness that embraces ordinary cognition while also extending into a deeper, more expansive mode of knowing³.



Pineal and pituitary glands.

The impact of psycho-spiritual trauma on the third eye

Third eye chakra trauma occurs when an individual's fundamental perception of reality is destabilised, leading to profound existential confusion and a fracturing of intuition¹. Such trauma can arise from various sources: the shattering of core beliefs through betrayal or disillusionment; overwhelming psychedelic or mystical experiences without proper integration; or chronic developmental trauma that systematically distorts one's sense of inner guidance and self-trust⁵.

This destabilisation creates a psycho-spiritual crisis that can polarise individuals into defensive coping strategies that disconnect them from intuition and curiosity. Some may adopt a nihilistic stance, rejecting all new knowledge to avoid further pain. Others may resort to rigid over-conceptualisation, creating elaborate intellectual frameworks to regain a sense of control and avoid the terrifying uncertainty of not knowing. Still others may oscillate between extremes, longing for control on one hand and surrender on the other, caught in an unresolved inner polarization.

From a neurobiological standpoint, traumatic stress throws the limbic system into a state of dysregulation, trapping the nervous system in cycles of hyperarousal (fight/flight) or dissociation (freeze)⁶. When these survival-based neural pathways are chronically activated, the intuitive faculties associated with the pineal-lymbic axis are effectively hijacked. Perception becomes distorted, coloured by past threats rather than present reality. This explains why trauma survivors frequently report a profound disconnection from their 'gut instincts' and a deep-seated mistrust of their own intuition. In IFS terms, protective parts step into leadership to prevent further harm, clouding the natural curiosity of the third eye and obscuring access to Self.

Somatic pathways to unblock the third eye

Because psycho-spiritual trauma is inherently embodied, healing requires more than cognitive and spiritual insight; it necessitates engaging the body directly. Traumatic memories are not

stored as neat narratives but as implicit somatic imprints - fragmented sensations, emotions and motor patterns encoded in the brainstem and limbic system⁵. For the open, gentle gaze of curiosity to be possible, the nervous system must first feel safe. Effective healing must therefore work at this subcortical level to restore regulation and coherence, creating the physiological foundation for curiosity.

Several therapeutic modalities are particularly adept at this work:

Somatic Experiencing (SE): Developed by Peter Levine, SE facilitates the gentle discharge of traumatic activation by guiding individuals to develop a titrated awareness of their bodily sensations, allowing the nervous system to complete thwarted survival responses⁷.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR): This modality uses bilateral stimulation (e.g., eye movements) to help the brain integrate traumatic memories, restoring coherence between cortical and subcortical networks⁸.

Internal Family Systems (IFS): This model works by fostering a relationship between the core Self and wounded or protective parts. By unburdening these parts from their extreme roles, IFS restores inner harmony and allows the Self's natural curiosity to lead².

These bottom-up approaches help to re-regulate the nervous system, creating the internal safety that is a prerequisite for curiosity. When the body is no longer dominated by survival responses, the Self-energy of IFS can emerge. As trauma is integrated and parts are unburdened, we are no longer forced to react from a place of fear. Instead, a space opens for us to approach our inner world with the gentle, open attention of the third eye. Curiosity replaces hyper-vigilance, allowing for authentic insight and the compassionate integration of all our parts.

Conclusion

The third eye chakra stands at a profound intersection of ancient spiritual wisdom, modern psychology and contemporary neuroscience.

When viewed through the integrative lens of Tantra, nondual IFS, and somatic trauma theory, it is revealed as far more than a mystical symbol. Its core quality of curiosity functions both as a psychological resource and as an expression of fundamental nondual awareness. Psycho-spiritual trauma disrupts this clarity by fragmenting the psyche and dysregulating the nervous system, distorting perception and severing trust in our own intuition.

By working with our internal parts with curiosity and compassion, and by engaging the body's innate wisdom through somatic therapies, we can resolve the imprints of trauma. This process restores regulation to the pineal-limbic system, allowing for the re-emergence of authentic insight. As Self-leadership is cultivated, individuals can learn to distinguish trauma-driven reactivity from true intuition, embodying a grounded spirituality that unites instinct, insight and compassion. Ultimately, healing the third eye is about reclaiming the luminous 'inner light' - a wisdom beyond the senses, yet deeply and irrevocably rooted in the body.

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Sacred Space and Spiritual Experience: Alister Hardy Memorial Lecture 2023

John Harper

Just a few weeks before his death in 1985, at the age of 89, Alister Hardy wrote an account of his spiritual encounter with God in the open space of the natural world as a youth.

I came to know what I have always regarded as God when quite a boy; ...

... when out on country walks by myself looking for beetles and butterflies I would sometimes feel a presence which seemed partly outside and curiously partly within myself.

My God ... was like a person I could talk to and in a loving prayer could thank him for the glories of nature that he let me experience.¹

Hardy distinguished this kind of experience, which informed his lifelong quest, from the experience of church services and religious education. Let me contrast it with a very brief narrative set in an empty church. It comes from an interview with the novelist and retired Classics teacher, Lucy Beckett, published in April 2023.

My first experience of God was in a moment of understanding that a beloved teacher who had recently died was with God.

I was in a beautiful Saxon church, alone on my knees.²

A third passage is quite different. It is the description of a small, mobile house built predominantly out of cedar wood by Jay Shafer, artist, designer, and pioneer of the tiny house movement. He writes:

At about eight by twelve feet plus a porch, loft, and four wheels, the resulting house looked a bit like American Gothic meets the

Winnebago Vectra. ... In the tradition of the formal plan, everything was symmetrical ... There was a 7' x 7' great room, a closet-sized kitchen, an even smaller bathroom and a 3' 9"-tall bedroom upstairs. A cast-iron heater presided like an altar at the center of the space downstairs. In fact, the whole house looked a bit like a tiny cathedral on two, 3,500-pound axles.³

This last account represents a movement in North America that is rooted in the moral, ecological and social values of minimalism, a reaction to the materialism, personal ambition, and social injustice of late twentieth-century capitalism. It offers a different approach to the sacred from that of the religious. This is an approach which is founded in ultimate values.

Taken as a group, these short narratives are illustrative of three aspects of sacred space that run through this narrative – natural, communal and personal: the sacred space of the natural world; the constructed space made for people to gather together, especially for religious worship; and the solitary space.

The title invites exploration of four key words: sacred, space, spiritual, and experience. Each represents a concept that has been interrogated and continues to be interrogated by scholars from a variety of disciplines: anthropology, psychology, sociology, theology, and a whole range more. What can I bring to these fields as someone whose engagement with sacred space has been principally through the medium of music, and through an engagement with the nature of Christian liturgy and ritual? I am all too aware of stepping my way very gingerly through the fields of the work of eminent thinkers and scholars. But I am holding on, first, to the practice that has been at the heart of my encounters with sacred space and spiritual experience, and second, to my

¹ Alister Hardy, Templeton Prize acceptance speech, read by Crawford Knox, 14 May 1985.

² Lucy Beckett, interview printed in *The Church Times*, 14 April 2023.

³ Jay Shafer, *The Small House Book* (Boyes Hot Springs, CA: Tumbleweed Tiny House Company, 2009), p. 10.

continuing research in exploring the relationship of sacred building, community and ritual in the later Middle Ages.

I do not want to get bogged down in the consideration of current studies of the concepts of the sacred, the spatial, the spiritual and the experiential. But we cannot ignore them, particularly at a time when there are such significant changes in values and philosophies from the modern to the post-modern, from the secular to the post secular. Sacred, space, spiritual, experience are words that each of us applies in our own ways, either singly or in combination. None can be tied down by a rigid definition.



Jay Shafer's Tumbleweed house in snow.
Photo: Jack Journey © Tumbleweed Tiny House Company 2008

Something of this can be found in a book by Gordon Lynch, *On the sacred* (2012). Though he is a professor of modern theology, this is a study rooted in cultural sociology. Lynch's first main chapter is entitled 'The idea of the sacred'. At the end of the chapter, he sets out a definition of 'sacred' that is to form the basis of his argument in the rest of the book.

The sacred is defined by what people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities that exert unquestionable moral claims over the

meaning and conduct of their lives.⁴

The Finnish professor of religious studies, Anttonen Veikko, has attempted a cognitive approach. He suggests that the word and concept 'sacred' will change according to its cultural context, either collectively or individually. In 2005 he wrote,

The idea of the sacred is founded on our bodily being and the mental representation of interior and exterior spatial coordinates. The word and the concept does not need to have a fixed point (a fixed agent to refer to) which defines its content. ... [I begin] from the human capacity for categorization and for investing special significance to categorical boundaries which enable transitions and transformations to occur.⁵

These considerations of the sacred are, of course, written in the milieu of contemporary, predominantly areligious, Western society. This is a society in which modernism has progressively pushed religion and faith out of the public space to the edge, where it has become overridingly individual, personal, even private; and Western society is a society in which public Christian observance and formal church institutions are generally in decline. At least since the Enlightenment we have lived in an increasingly secular age.

The question of the secular has been addressed by the eminent Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, in his magisterial book, *A Secular Age* (2007).⁶ In it he traces the roots of the dominance of the secular to the Protestant Reformation, itself informed by humanism that gradually emerged from at least the thirteenth century. Humankind becomes the focus; the

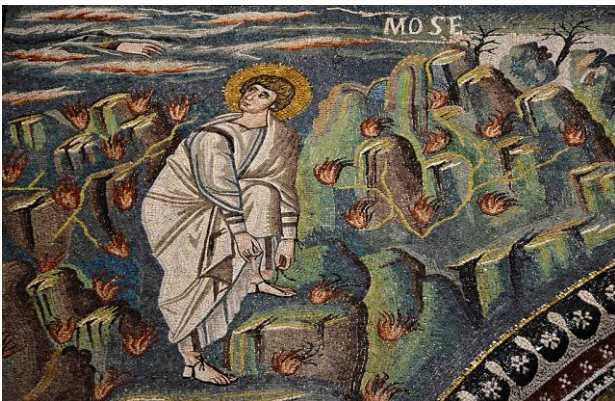
⁴ Gordon Lynch, *On the sacred* (Durham: Acumen, 2012; Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 33.

⁵ Veikko Anttonen, 'Space, Body, and the Notion of Boundary: A Category-Theoretical Approach to Religion', *Temenos*, 41 (2005), pp. 185–201; here pp. 197–98.

⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007).

rational becomes the pre-eminent quest; the intellect and the written word take precedence over the sensed and the experienced. Taylor also sees a change from the 1970s onward, a change that some identify as the post-secular, a period where the religious in all its diversity ceases to be so marginalised.

Rather than try to explore this in the abstract, let's turn to the visual and to the second word in the title – 'space'. 'Space' is a noun that is used in very varied ways: it may refer at the macro level to the seemingly limitless expanse occupied by stars and planets; at the micro level, it may refer the gap between two characters when typing. It may be physical in nature, or it may be temporal, or even a combination of the two – as for instance in meditation or worship.



Ravenna, San Vitale: sixth-century mosaic of Moses and the burning bush. Photo: Carole Raddato, Creative Commons Licence 2.0.

The way in which we have perceived space and represented space visually has changed significantly over the centuries in Western society. And, in this, there are parallels with the changing perception of wider culture. In approaching the consideration of space within its social and cultural contexts, I have been helped by a study made by the cultural geographer, Veronica Della Dora. In 2016, she published *Landscape, Nature and the Sacred in Byzantium*.⁷ A study relating to the first millennium may seem remote. But it is critical in understanding the way in which over the ages we look at, perceive and represent objects,

⁷ Veronica Della Dora, *Landscape, Nature and the Sacred in Byzantium* (Cambridge, UK: CUP, 2016).

people, and the space they inhabit – notably the landscape. The progression from the first millennium to the second millennium marks a transition in which the infinite Cosmos becomes the potentially measurable Universe; when the concept of God's Creation is replaced by the concept of Nature, and by stages leads to the rationale expressed in Darwin's *Origin of Species*.⁸ From Byzantine mosaic to medieval and early modern painting, the human form becomes progressively realistic, dominant and central to the representation.

Throughout the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, exceptional spiritual encounters occur in remote places, whether desert, mountain, riverside or sea. There are notable exceptions, of course: the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were set in urban surroundings; and most of his ministry took place in the towns around the north-west shore of the Sea of Galilee. So, it would be mistaken to suggest that rural or wilderness spaces are exclusive to these exceptional spiritual encounters; nor to suggest that extra-ordinary encounters are the only category of spiritual experience.

This Time-bound Ladder is one of a number of books published by Alister Hardy's Religious Experience Research Unit in the mid and later 1970s, mostly at the instigation of Edward Robinson.⁹ It consists of transcriptions of a series of conversations between Edward Robinson and those engaged in some way with religious experience. Among them is a conversation with the Orthodox priest and scholar, Kallistos Ware, later to become a bishop.¹⁰ In it, Kallistos Ware reflects on the spiritual experience of his parishioners attending worship in his Orthodox church in Oxford week by week. He distinguishes

⁸ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (London: John Murray, 1859).

⁹ Edward Robinson worked with Alister Hardy from almost the beginning of the enterprise, and succeeded him as director from 1976 to 1986, when he retired to work as an artist.

¹⁰ Edward Robinson, ed., *This Time-bound Ladder* (Oxford: Religious Experience Research Unit, 1977), pp. 107–123.

that recurrent experience from the written accounts of the exceptional and often singular experiences submitted to the Religious Experience Research Unit. It would never occur to one of his parishioners to submit an account of that regular spiritual experience of the liturgy in their sacred space – a liturgical space which is both physical and temporal. To such a person, it was just part of the pattern of their normal religious observance: it was, in the best sense, 'ordinary'. And I would suggest that there is a case for giving attention to 'ordinary' religious and spiritual experiences as there is to 'extraordinary' RSEs.

And so to the third and fourth words of the title: 'spiritual' and 'experience'. Again, there is an enormous literature available across the disciplines, and I want to make only brief, general comments on each.

First, 'spiritual', placed in the context of thinking about both the sacred and the secular. Sacred and secular are neither necessarily opposed, nor necessarily complementary; they may also be regarded as independent of one another, depending on the context and usage. They are, insofar as I understand current cultural thinking, comparable in their concern for absolute, even moral, values. In this, that moral value might be extended to the spiritual. It might therefore be argued that a more suitable antonym for 'spiritual' is 'material'; and we observed a trait of that in Jay Shafer's description of his minimalist home, with its underlying respect for aspects of the sacred.

Second, 'experience'. Let me offer a practical example. Visitors to a stately home, an art gallery or a great historic church may go there simply because they are on holiday and need to do something on a wet day, or simply just need to do something. They may wander from space to space with no sense of what to look at or look for. To have an experience requires initial engagement, which emanates, whether consciously or intuitively, from an individual. That may lead to encounter – physical, emotional, intellectual, visual, aural, tactile or a combination of factors. That engaged encounter enables experience. Of course, that process may be simultaneous, and not intellectually

considered: it is felt and recognised and not ignored.

From this exploration of the individual elements of the title, it will be possible in Part Two to explore more specific examples of space recognised as having the quality of the sacred, and experience that belongs to the spiritual in relation to a range of individuals and groups in different centuries and different environments.

In the first part of this essay, I considered 'sacred', 'space', 'spiritual' and 'experience' separately – ending with the point that an individual has to be open to and willing to engage with both the space and the experience, rather than ignore it.

With that in mind, I want to look at extracts from two poems, which both narrate in quite different ways a spiritual experience in a sacred space. The first example is by Philip Larkin, poet, principal librarian at the University of Hull, and an atheist. Despite that absence of faith, he was drawn to visit churches. In his poem 'Church going' (1955), [1] we can observe that gradual process of engagement, encounter and experience – even a hint of spiritual experience. Larkin gets off his bicycle, tries the door of the church, and, finding it open, cautiously walks in. He senses 'a tense, musty, unignorable silence, / Brewed God knows how long'. After walking around, even standing at the lectern to pronounce 'Here endeth ...' and being embarrassed by the unexpected echo, he comes to leave, and then reflects on the experience. Towards the end of the poem, he writes:

... though I've no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete, ...

From his atheist stance, he senses the significance of the space, even its enduring sacredness. Not only has there been engagement and encounter, this has been an embryonic spiritual experience.



Walden Pool, June 2012, Creative Commons Licence 1.0

For the second example, I want to go back to the end of the eighteenth century, and one of William Wordsworth's best-known poems published in the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798. [2] Wordsworth is walking in the Wye Valley in his later 20s. He recalls the impact of a visit some five years earlier. 'Lines written some miles above Tintern Abbey' is not a record of being in the Wye Valley itself. It is about the lasting experience, a spiritual experience, of the abiding memory and reliving of being there five years before. It describes very precisely the physiological, emotional and intellectual responses to the memory of that experience. It is an experience of Nature, re-encountered in the confines of a small room, on his own, in a city. Some way into the poem, after he has set us in the Wye Valley, he starts to reflect on the experience.

... These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration:

... Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight

Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened: ...

— that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

The overriding impact of this relived experience leads to the consideration of mortality, and insight into that moment: quiet, harmony, joy, and entry into the core of the fullness of life. Forty years later in New England, the writer, thinker and naturalist, Henry David Thoreau, undertook an experiment. He moved a few miles out of his home town, Concord, Massachusetts, to live in the woods beside Walden Pond. As he famously wrote in his account of that experience,

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. [3]

The opening and closing parts of the sentence are key: 'I went to the woods because I wished to live ... and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.' So too are two other words: 'deliberately', 'essential'.



Reconstruction of Thoreau's hut, Walden Pool, August 2010, Creative Commons Licence 3.0

Thoreau set his experiment against the materialism, the consequent necessity of paid work, and the absence of joy in living that he saw around him. He discovered an alternative. 'For more than five years I maintained myself thus / solely by the labor of my hands, and I found, that by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of living.' [4] He had sufficient to live frugally, 'deliberately', but to the full.

The quality of that experience of living in a landscape permeates his narrative. Bathing at dawn in Walden Pond, he began each day in 'simplicity and ... innocence with Nature herself. ... There was something cosmical about it ... the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world. ... awakened by our own newly-acquired force and aspirations from within, ... instead of factory bells. ... That man who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred and auroral hour ... has despaired of life ...' [5]

The 'aspirations from within' emanated from his encounter with the natural surroundings. The view from his hut at Walden was not the grand landscape across the Wye valley: it was contained. 'I was so low in the woods that the opposite shore, half a mile off, like the rest, covered with wood, was my most distant horizon.' [6] And then in the conclusion, he directs his reader to the inner, sacred space of the imagination, to explore, to find and to know:

Direct your eye right inward, and you'll find
A thousand regions in your mind
Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be
Expert in home-cosmography. [7]

The greater part of his time at Walden Pond was solitary, deliberately distanced from nearby Concord society. Nevertheless, he retained his connection with his home community. He visited and was visited by his mother and sister, and he went to see his friends in Concord from time to time. But for the most part he had physical and temporal space alone.

Following on from this brief encounter with Thoreau, I want to explore two very different contexts. The first emerges from a recent article by Lydia Willsky-Ciollo, a historian of religion in

America. [8] This is one of a number of recent writings on Thoreau and the spiritual. [9] Ciollo systematically sets out the spiritual dimension of Thoreau's engagement with each of the five senses, based on the scientific observation of nature and the knowledge of self that he undertook. In a summary, she writes,

Thoreau believed in the essential unity of the five senses and privileged each as a source of wild and divine knowledge. ... The knowledge gained from each sense built on that gleaned by the other four, thus creating a full picture that might result in a true approximation of God in and beyond nature ... Further, Thoreau treated each sense not only as a source of divine knowledge but as a site of theological discourse ... Thus, the senses were the practical entry point to Thoreau's theological system, which was concerned with the discovery and redemption of internal 'wildness' and reconnection to the mysterious, divine source of that wildness, to the unaccountable in nature. [10]

If that is the first aspect to explore in a different context, the second picks up the theme we identified at the very beginning and also see in Thoreau's experiment – the individual in relation to three categories of sacred space: natural surroundings, the community, and solitude. And it's that theme I want to begin with, and in the context of modern engagement with one of the forms of monastic and religious life that emerged in the long twelfth century.



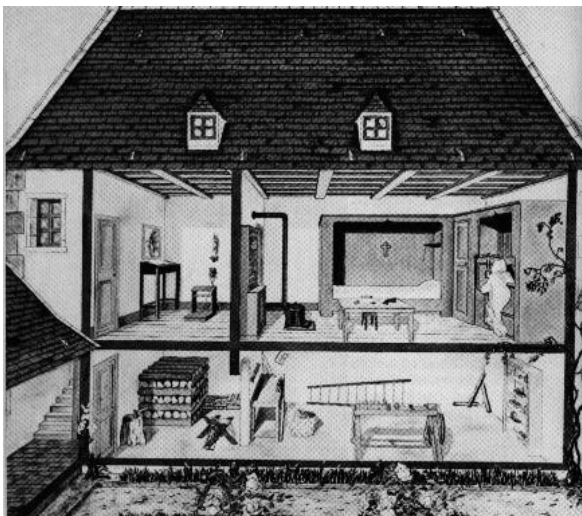
The mountainous setting of La Grande Chartreuse, July 2002, public domain

In 1084 Bruno of Cologne with six companions established a new monastic community in a

remote, mountainous location in the lower French Alps – the Chartreuse, north-east of Grenoble, and it remains active today. These Carthusians lived alone in separate cells but gathered in an oratory. In this they echoed the early Christian monks who lived in the wilderness of desert in the Middle East in the fourth and fifth centuries. Each lived and prayed alone in his own cave but gathered together under a leader at least once in the week, thus three states of sacred space – alone, in community, and in natural surroundings.



Chartreuse de Portes, Bénéonces, April, 2014. Creative Commons Licence 3.0

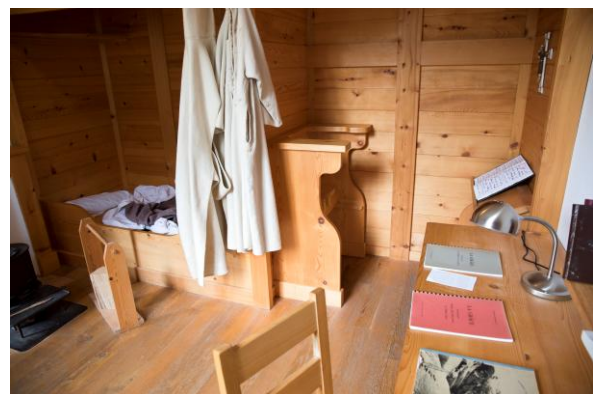


The layout of a Carthusian cell. Creative Commons Licence 3.0

The monks and nuns of the Carthusian Order have never been as prolific as the Benedictines, Cistercians, Franciscans or Dominicans; but the Carthusians have not only persisted but have seen a number of new foundations. Of a total of 21 Carthusian monasteries active today, nine have been newly founded since 1960. Each is set in its own ‘desert’: for instance, in rural Vermont in the United States and in South Korea. Within the natural setting, there is the monastic enclosure, often physically walled; this is the communal setting. The community of monks or nuns gathers two or three times each day for prayer in the church. Only on Sunday and on special feast days do they eat together – in silence – for a midday meal. And only after that Sunday meal do they talk, generally going out for a walk in pairs. Otherwise, life is silent, except for the chants, readings and prayers in church. But the greatest part of a Carthusian’s life is solitary, spent in their cell. Each cell

consists of a small dwelling with its own walled garden. In one principal room they pray, study, eat, and sleep. Generally downstairs, there is a place for manual work, and a garden. Food is cooked collectively in a single kitchen and delivered to each cell through a hatch.

This exceptional way of life is adopted by fewer than 400 individuals worldwide; yet it offers a clear, if radical ongoing model of the relationship between the wildness of nature, the mutual support of the enclosure and community, and the solitary, individual space. Each is a layer of spatial separateness, with a constant focus on the spiritual – and, in this Christian context, the engagement, encounter and experience of God.



A modern Carthusian Cell, Grande Chartreuse, July 2018. Photo: © Nico Angleys

Though many of these examples have related to Christian context, some to the distant past, I hope that it is apparent that the underlying points are not dependent either on religious

belief or practice and remain relevant today. Sacred does not necessarily imply religious, let alone Christian.

By way of brief coda, I want to touch on the architecture of buildings themselves, and some modern and post-modern thinking by architects. There is a considerable interest in the sacred qualities of architecture. We saw it right at the beginning in Jay Shafer's design of tiny houses; but it extends to the consideration of the sacred dimension in outside, communal spaces as well as the interior of buildings. Here, I just want to mention the rather different work of the Tunisian architectural scholar, Nasrine Mansour. [11] Her doctoral thesis explores the virtually sacred. She investigates the experience of the sacred in a three-dimensional digital world, the world typical of computer gaming. Her specific interest is the impact of light on spiritual experience when encountering sacred buildings in a digital environment. With a sample of over 1,000 participants, she has analysed the levels of spiritual experience evident in responses to a questionnaire. Those interested to explore this further can find her thesis online, as also other articles on light in digital investigation by Mansour and her mentor, the Israeli architect, Anat Geva. I only wish to signal here a dimension of the spatial which so many of us take for granted. Most of us experience it daily on television, computer or tablet screens of varying sizes. Indeed, when this essay was presented as a lecture, some experienced the spatial in person in The Friends' Meeting House in Oxford, others online on a screen in their own home.

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- [1] Philip Larkin, *The Less Deceived* (Hessle: Marvell Press, 1955; London: Faber, 2011).
 - [2] [William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge], *The Lyrical Ballads* (London, 1798).
 - [3] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854; this edition, New York: TarcherPerigree, 2016), p. 94.
 - [4] Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 72.
 - [5] Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 92–3.
 - [6] Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 84–5.
 - [7] Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 337.
 - [8] Lydia Willsky-Ciollo "‘May we not see God?’: Henry David Thoreau's doctrine of spiritual senses", *Harvard Theological Review*, 114 (2021), pp. 265–87.
 - [9] Cited by Ciollo in 'May we not see God?', pp. 266–8.
 - [10] Ciollo, 'May we not see God?', p. 268.
 - [11] Nasrine Mansour, 'Virtually Sacred: effect of light on the spiritual experience in virtual sacred architecture' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Texas A & M University, 2019). Online at <https://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/187535> last accessed 23 August 2025.
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Lampeter's Spiritual Hinterland

(extracts from a work in progress: 'The Poetry of Soul')

Terry McCormick

Religious Revivals

During the 18th and 19th centuries Southwest Wales birthed a sequence of powerful spiritual events. Howel Harris, Daniel Rowland and William Williams Pantycelyn were the midwives of this spiritual outpouring, which was mystical, emotional, and courageous in its first explorations.

In 1735 Daniel Rowland was praying the words 'By thine agony and bloody sweat'.¹¹ 'These words affected the whole assembly so much, that they almost all wept and wept loudly... Many in the congregation were really convinced and converted...'¹² Howel Harris described a gathering of Methodists with Daniel Rowland in Llangeitho in the winter of 1743: 'Tis very common when he preaches for Scores to fall down by the Power of the Word, pierced and wounded or overcome by the Love of God and Sights of the Beauty and Excellence of Jesus...The Spirit almost bursting the House of Clay to go to its native Home.'¹³

Then William Willams Pantycelyn published a new hymn book which stirred another revival in Llangeitho from 1762-64 and in 1779, Daniel Rowland preached in the uplands above Tregaron near Soar-y- Mynydd, and 'numbers who had been so far hearers only became deeply concerned for their everlasting safety'. In 1780 'The whole chapel seemed as if it was filled with some supernatural element and the whole assembly was seized with extraordinary emotions...' In 1797, 'During the sermon something happened; some heavenly power descended on the whole congregation...'. A

¹¹ 1662 Book of Common Prayer

¹² This account is indebted to D. Geraint Jenkins summary of revivals: Llangeitho & Welsh Revivals (walesawakening.org), consulted 16/11/2023

¹³ Rees, D. Ben, **The Saga of a Revival: Early Welsh Pentecostal Methodism** (Liverpool, 2010) p.13

revival began in 1812 in Lledrod and spread to Swyddffynnon, Tregaron, and Llangeitho. 'Ebenezer Richard, Tregaron, preached at Llangeitho with such power and heavenly unction, that 28 were pricked to the heart.' The following year Ebenezer Richards preached again and "about halfway through the communion some indescribable influences descended from heaven without warning, until the people began to glorify God with shouting and leaping...". In 1824 the Rev. David Evans, Aberaeron, was preaching in Llangeitho...and a gracious influence descended upon the congregation' which was the start of a powerful revival.

In 1859 Wales was one country among many experiencing a revival tsunami. In America the revival was described as 'Great' because in 'just over two years, one million people had become "born again" and another one million church members were set ablaze.'¹⁴ The waves of revivals spread through Canada, Sweden, India, Japan, Brazil, Jamaica, the Cape Colony of South Africa, Shanghai, China, Scotland, Ireland, and England. The worldwide Methodist Church grew by around 70% between 1857 and 1864.¹⁵

It was from America that Humphrey Jones brought his preaching experience into Aberystwyth and north Cardiganshire. From there, it spread southwards, mainly through Dafydd Morgan's ministry, into Tregaron, Llangeitho and Mynydd Bach. On 17th October 1858 Dafydd Morgan preached at Penuwch Chapel and his text was Philippians 3:10 *'That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death.'*¹⁶

¹⁴ Backholer, Matthew, **Revival Fires and Awakenings** (ByFaith Media, 2017) p.6

¹⁵ Ibid, and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_revival

¹⁶ Evans, Eifion, **Revival Comes to Wales** (Evangelical

Morgan held a series of meetings in Tregaron with Humphrey Jones beginning on 22nd November 1858, and this prepared the ground for a turning point in the school room outside Tregaron on the 17th February 1859. The converts in Tregaron were said to number 400. In April 1859 Dafydd Morgan visited Penuwch again.¹⁷

From Llangeitho a correspondent wrote to a magazine in August 1859: "We have had experience at Llangeitho of four revivals within a period of fifty years, but this is the most powerful. Dozens of old folks who had stubbornly resisted all these revivals have been forced to bend now. We have received three hundred new members within the first five months of this year."¹⁸ One outside prayer meeting attracted around 20,000 people. Llangeitho in 1859 was once again the beating heart of revivals that it was in the sixty years from 1735-1825. And, as in the eighteenth century, revivals spread northwards. An association meeting at Bangor from 12th-14th September 1859 attracted 30,000 people to 'a festival of preaching, praising and praying, singing and dancing'.¹⁹ According to Eifion Evans the total number of converts in Wales during and because of the 1859 revival was 110,000.²⁰

For Cardiganshire and Mynydd Bach (10 miles north of Lampeter) Dafydd Morgan had an impact that was certainly comparable with Daniel Rowland of the previous century. Both men had a gift for oratory which ensured that their passionate beliefs would be communicated powerfully. Performance oratory was crucial to religious revivals, taking listeners and witnesses

Library of Wales Reprint 1982), p.56

¹⁷ Ibid, pp.79, 87, 85

¹⁸

http://www.sermonindex.net/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?topic_id=1105&forum=40

¹⁹ Evans, Eifion, **Two Welsh Revivalists: Humphrey Jones, Dafydd Morgan and the 1859 Revival in Wales** (Evangelical Library of Wales, 1985) p.49

²⁰ Evans, Eifion, **Revival Comes to Wales** (Evangelical Library of Wales Reprint 1982) p.97

to a cliff-edge confrontation with their own mortality and offering re-birth as a salvation: This birth of belief was not always enduring, but for many, became a new foundation for living. One high church landowner in Cardiganshire, Miss Mary Morrice, challenged her tenants in the starkest of terms:

'I feel myself morally bound to set before you two alternatives, and you are at liberty to choose for yourself, namely to attend our Church service with your family and thus to support its principles, or otherwise (if your conscience will not allow you to comply with my request) you must quit the farm which you now hold of me.'

In 1861 fourteen farmers and thirteen cottagers with their families left their tenancies on Miss Mary Morrice's estate.²¹

Blood Mysticism

The strongest external influence upon the religious renaissance gathering in Lampeter's hinterland was from Moravian spirituality which originated in Bohemia before being exiled through persecution into Saxony. Behind this there was a pedigree of passion- mysticism sourced in Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), through to the young Martin Luther (1483-1546) and then championed by Nicolaus Zinzendorf (1700-1760) who became a Bishop of the Moravian Church.²² Zinzendorf's concept of faith was based on a direct and literal seeing of the crucified Christ and an embrace with his wounds and his blood:

'Central to Moravian devotion was the idea that Christ became a human being, who Christians could see, touch, and interact with...His blood became a healing medium to release a believer from sin and death, and Moravians longed to be nurtured and

²¹ Morgan, Gerald, **Ceredigion: A Wealth of History** (Gomer Press, 2005) pp.231-232

²² This account is indebted to Pugh, B.A. **Power in the Blood: The Significance of the Blood of Jesus to the Spirituality of Early British Pentecostalism and its Precursors** (unpublished thesis, University of Bangor, 2009)

*cleansed by it. Being over streamed or bathed in the blood of Christ became an expression of surrendering to the desire of an eternal life with Christ, only made possible through the spilling of his blood.*²³

Moravian influence in Wales was assisted by John Gambold (1711-1771), who was a friend of the Wesleys, and became the Bishop of the English Moravians. Gambold was born in Pembrokeshire and his family originated in Cardigan.²⁴ Howell Harris met Gambold and Count Zinzendorf in London between April and May in 1739, and Harris was particularly drawn to Moravian spirituality and remained so for much of his life.²⁵

*'So we are continually under an absolute necessity of having Christ's Blood to wash and cleanse us from sins, and His Spirit to renew our souls. O the infinite wonder and efficacy of Christ's most precious Blood! How it fills the whole creation and has infinity in it, because it is the Blood of God, by which he redeemed His Church, and cleanses His People from all their sins.'*²⁶

Gwilym Marles, writing about Williams Pantycelyn in 1863 'sharply remarked' 'that there was never so much talk about blood in any

²³ Wilkening, Ann-Catherine, 'I didn't know that I was starving until I tasted you': 18th Century Moravian Women's Ecstatic Experience of Bridal Mysticism in Communion and Marital Sexuality' **Lumen et Vita** 8:2 (2018), Yale Divinity School (New Haven, CT) pp.43-44

²⁴ Rees, D. Ben, **The Saga of a Revival: Early Welsh Pentecostal Methodism** (Liverpool, 2010) pp.2-3 and see also <https://biography.wales/article/s-GAMBOLD-1650>

²⁵ Jones, David Ceri and White, Eryn Mant, **The Elect Methodists: Calvinistic Methodism in England and Wales, 1735-1811** (University of Wales, 2012) pp.22-25

²⁶ **Harris, Howell: His Own Story** (original work published in 1791, 1984 edition Bridge Publishing UK) p.68; See also, pp. 44, 56, 61, 64, 65, 67, 70, 76, 87-89

book written since the beginning of the world.²⁷ In Williams's 1759 collection of fifty-one hymns there are twenty-six direct references to the power of blood, of which these are typical: '*All this endears our thoughts/To the redeeming Blood, /Pour'd from the pierced Side.*' (XXXVII)

The parallels between the Moravian and Welsh stories are stark. The Moravians, as the largest and longest established protestant community in Europe, grew in response to Catholic persecution and the imposition of the German language. For many decades they were forced underground. There was a famous Moravian meeting on 13th August 1727 which was the culmination of weeks of conflict and prayer and produced a powerful revival which is now celebrated annually by the Moravian Church:

*'...and verily the thirteenth of August 1727 was a day of outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We saw the hand of God and his wonders ... The Holy Ghost came upon us and in those days great signs and wonders took place in our midst... Self-love and self-will as well as all disobedience disappeared and an overwhelming flood of grace swept us all out into the great ocean of Divine Love.'*²⁸

In all descriptions, this prefigures the revivalist events in Wales which began in 1735. The Moravians survived through an active network of hundreds of small renewal groups much like the Welsh 'seiats', and the singing of hymns was fundamental to their theology and practice.

William Williams Pantycelyn (1717-1791)

This religious and spiritual renaissance would not have happened in Wales without the poetry of Williams Pantycelyn. Most of his writing is in his native language and so has remained as Wales's secret weapon, preceding and challenging the pioneering role of Wordsworth

²⁷ Williams, Gwyn, **Writers of Wales: An Introduction to Welsh Literature** (University of Wales Press, 1978) p.75

²⁸ The Great Moravian Revival of 1727-- Power From On High (<https://www.gospeltruth.net/moravian.htm>)

in the genesis of British and European romanticism.²⁹ Anthony Conran spelt it out in 1967:

*William Williams of Pantycelyn... was a lyric poet of quite remarkable intensity and range. He is certainly the greatest lyric poet in Welsh; some people would say, notwithstanding Dafydd ap Gwilym, the greatest poet of any kind... No other Welsh poet is remotely like him – even his fellow hymn-writers lack his totality of response to the feelings of the moment. He is alone in a desert land, led only by the divine spark in his soul. He uses the imagery of the Bible and of Bunyan to suggest the romantic aloneness of the individual... He used the long poem, as did the later Romantics, as a kind of spiritual biography of his own conversion, a testament to the grace within.*³⁰

This status is acknowledged and explored further by Gwyn Williams in 1978. and, recently, there has been a study and celebration, in English, of Williams Pantycelyn by H. A. Hodges and E. Wyn James with new translations alongside Welsh originals.³¹

Gwyn Williams highlights writing which is ‘...almost erotic’ with ‘references to God as the Darling (*Anwyllyd*), sometimes as a lovely Rose of Sharon, sometimes a white lily...’³² This has a kinship with the current of Moravian piety at the time:

‘Earlier theologians had interpreted the biblical book, the Song of Songs, as a description of the relationship of Christ as the

²⁹ Saunders Lewis proclaimed this in **Williams Pantycelyn** (Foyles Welsh Depot, 1927) p.17

³⁰ Conran, Anthony, translations in association with J.E. Caerwyn Williams, **The Penguin Book of Welsh Verse** (Penguin Books, 1967) pp.68-69

³¹ **The Flame in the Mountains: Williams Pantycelyn, Ann Griffiths and the Welsh Hymn** (Y Lolfa, 2017)

³² Williams, Gwyn, **Writers of Wales: An Introduction to Welsh Literature** (University of Wales Press, 1978) p.74

*groom and the church as the bride. Bernard of Clairvaux, however, explained the Song of Songs as the love song between Christ and the soul of the individual believer; the soul reaches the highest stage when it becomes one with God. The unificatio Dei was compared to the relationship between a man and a woman and described in terms of a courtship. Inspired by Bernard, who used the metaphor of sexual intercourse for the mystical union, later mystics used erotic language.*³³

Examples of this abound in Pantycelyn’s 1772 hymns collection, ‘Gloria in Excelsis...’: ‘...To thee my fainting Soul aspires/Thou art the Whole of my Desires...’(XV); ‘...Such as found Thee found such Sweetness, /Deep. Mysterious, and unknown...’(XIX) and

‘...But my Desires, in Channels free
Shall gently flow, and flow to thee,
And thou shalt be my All.’ (XXII)
‘...write my name in bright letters between
your breasts
write it again on your hand
seal me on your arm with an indelible mark
that I am married to you forever...’³⁴

These events in Lampeter’s hinterland and Wales were a powerful echo of those who lived during the eight decades or so after Jesus Christ’s death and were mesmerised through a direct recollection of his life. The other practical replication was of the spread of this foundation-Christianity from family households to close relatives and friends, to small groups, and linking and moving outwards into territories beyond their own.³⁵ As in Palestine, this ad-hoc creation powered growth and resilience in Wales.

³³ Peucker, Paul, ‘The Songs of Sifting, Understanding the Role of Bridal Mysticism in Moravian Piety during the late 1740’s’, **Journal of Moravian History**, No3 (Fall, 2007) p.62

³⁴ Williams, William, **All the Hymns and Composer of the Author of Various Texts...** (Camarthen1811) p.71, translated by Elen Howells

³⁵ Paraphrased from Hill, Jonathan, **The Crucible of Christianity** (Lion Hudson, 2007) p.37

What if?

Jonathan Robinson

I guess all of us have early childhood memories. One of the things I remember from when I was very young was that I thought of myself as two distinct parts, or persons. There was “Gigger”, which I thought of as ‘me’ - somebody with the world around me, and “Giggee”, which was more difficult to describe because it was, I suppose, the subjective form of my being. It was ‘I’ and it somehow seemed the more real! “Baby talk” you may think. Nevertheless, it is a seed thought which philosophers can endlessly discuss and will probably never resolve.

It seems that there are many things in life which we, consciously or unconsciously, assume to be ‘true’. There is so much we say or think or do which we take for granted, things which we think are correct and which we don’t question.

So here are a few conundrums on which I have been reflecting which may tease and challenge. I am sure you are familiar with some of these questions. I have put them into ‘What if’ form. Maybe you can think of others.

What if: We are not the separate and self-contained individuals we have assumed ourselves to be? The sense of a separately contained ‘self’ is a belief that is being reinforced all the time by our need for self-interest, self-preservation, self-worth, personal status and through peer pressure and community beliefs. We are all subject to the social and commercial pressures around us that make us believe that we are separate individuals who can do what we like. What if we are all linked with and influenced by everything around us, and we are actually part of some larger whole?

What if: There is no actual ‘self’ as we commonly think of as ‘ourselves’, as the Buddhist religion claims and other religion implicitly or explicitly teach?

What if: The human mind is not contained within the confines of the human brain?

What if: Consciousness is not a product of a physical and mechanical process?

What if: The human brain acts as a kind of filter to allow only what is necessary for our conscious physical survival and effectiveness in this world, a filter from the larger sea of consciousness that is all around us? What if all living and sentient creatures are similar and conscious within the scope and limitations of their physiology?

What if: There is not, and never will be, a convincing answer for understanding the nature of consciousness. Physical explanations can surely only observe and cope with analysing physical and objective realities which are outside ‘ourselves’, outside our subjective experience.

What if: We recognise that all the matter which we perceive as made up of physical and discreet entities in reality does not exist in space and time as we know it. What if matter is rather a form of ‘condensed energy’ in a particular form? If we are honest, we don’t even really know what ‘energy’ actually is. We simply know its effects!

What if: The objective universe which we think of as outside us is infinite and eternal, infinite in space (as some scientists of astronomy are now suggesting) and eternal in time? There is surely no logical answer to the conundrum of ‘what lies beyond’ and ‘what came before’. (What we can say is that the universe as we know it is of necessity always subject to change.)

What if: There are higher laws and principles that we cannot rationally understand and that we cannot directly access.

What if: We ourselves do not have what we call ‘freewill’ in the sense in which we normally imagine? What if the feeling of freewill which we have is but an echo or reflection of the greater consciousness that is within us and around us, which we sometimes think of as the Universal Mind or God? We are no less than and no more than human creatures, subject to the effects of what we call natural law. Things can go wrong. Earthquakes can happen. The human mind can be corrupted. We can find contentment and peace of mind through being in

harmony with life or we can 'mess it up'.

What if: We are all expressions, or manifestations, of the Whole, the 'One', the Universal Mind, the 'Mind of God', who lives through us? (All names or descriptions are inadequate because all represent dualistic thinking.) What if there is a deeper and more ultimate meaning and purpose to our lives?

What if: The trees, the flowers, the animals, the insects and all the living world are also manifestations of the Divine, who lives through them?

What if God is not a person, but the process of life itself, that shares our joy and pain, a process whose fundamental nature is harmony and love?

What if: Angels, ministering spirits or 'Higher Powers' are descriptive of a benevolent, loving reality, able to offer guidance, support and comfort? (We may have no human language that does justice to this.)

What if: There really are no beginnings and endings, and never the spirit was born and never there was time it was not. Never the spirit, or the essence of our consciousness, can cease to be, for beginnings and endings are dreams? (from the Bhagavad Gita)

What if: Birth and death are the horizons of our seeing?

What if: The Life Force or Vital Energy, which is Prana in the Hindu tradition and Qi in the Chinese tradition, the mystery that makes us alive and energises us, actually exists in, and is expressed through, the multiplicity of living forms?

What if: The Universe is the expression, or manifestation, of the Universal Mind, the Mind of God?

What if: There is only one true reality, which is God? (or whatever name you wish to use.) What if everything, every item, every objective existence, is derivative from the whole, and has no separate and independent existence of its own, because all, at the deepest level, is interconnected? (Hence the teaching that God is in all things - Pan-en-theism).

What if: You, in your deepest being, are indeed God incarnate? But you could never know this as an information fact, because if you think of this as an information fact about your individual self you are misguided. Your world will lean towards the darkness of ignorance. It will fracture and in due course disintegrate. Every act of love, however, is surely an incarnation of the Divine.

What if: We are like the leaves of a tree, fed by the life of the tree, fresh and green in the Springtime of our youth? But when Autumn comes the leaves will fall towards the ground, to enrich the earth. However, the tree remains, and the cycle of life continues. The world we are able to know is indeed "charged with the grandeur of God".

What if: We have to accept that we cannot see the totality of this grandeur? It is a vision so grand, so glorious, that we cannot contain it. We need to accept that in this life we can only have 'hints and guesses' which will always be inadequate, because they can never do justice to the whole. But we can have spiritual and mystical experiences!

What if: We draw a little closer to the source? Surely then we would become a little less dualistic in our thinking. We would evolve into a more loving and caring society, become a little less confused, be a little kinder, more tolerant and find a greater flowering of what we have in ourselves to be. We would be a little less greedy, less inclined towards power, control and violence over others and the world would shine more brightly with the Light of the Spirit.

Finally, what if: We could become more like who we really are? Surely it is time, as we agonise over the state of the world around us, to stop deluding ourselves. It is time to allow ourselves to be more open to the deeper mysteries of life. It is time for an openness that allows us to take risks for the glory of the greater whole and for the benefit of us all.

Jonathan Robinson

Exploring the Inner = Consciousness Education

Keith Beasley

When I read that the theme for this issue of *De Numine* was ‘The Inner Light’, I smiled. The ‘inner’ is a topic dear to my heart and very much part of what I am involved in at present.

It started about 18 months ago, after I had run a First-Degree Reiki training course for my colleagues at the University of Bristol (UoB). That course had come out of several well-being workshops I've been running as part of my health, safety and well-being activities as a School Safety Officer. Staff and students alike within the UK Higher Education sector are often stressed out and I was getting very positive feedback on the range of sessions I was running to help people reconnect to their still small voice of calm within them, and to give their rational thinking self a break.

At about the same time, one of the university's research institutes (the Elizabeth Blackwell Institute) was asking for contributions to the next meeting of its Mental Health in Young People (MHYP) Network. And so I found myself describing to this group ‘The Inner Aspect of Mental Health’; how the first hand lived experience is so important and how reconnecting to our inner self can often bring much respite and enable a deeper, longer-lasting healing. My brief presentation was well received and enabled a wide ranging and fascinating discussion, not least linking this inner dimension of mental health to the equally important university theme of equity diversity and inclusion (EDI). Holistic approaches to well-being, complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) and traditional medicines (Ayurvedic and Traditional Chinese Medicine -TCM, for example) are typically focused on an inner sense of well-being: how we feel within.

Exploring the Inner

I came up with a proposal to enable further exploration of these topics and to give my Reiki students and colleagues ongoing opportunities to engage with their inner selves. With support from the EBI and the HR department, I

founded a staff Club: Exploring the Inner. We meet most Tuesday lunchtimes and share perhaps a meditation, perhaps some Reiki, an occasional sound bath, drawing, writing for well-being, yoga, equinox celebrations and even some authentic cacao-tasting ceremonies! Numbers attending the physical meetings may only be a handful, but the depth of experience obtained is often profound. The perceived value of being able to talk about the inner, within an academic setting, is particularly appreciated.

In addition, recognising that there are many staff members (and PhD students) who are unable to get to the meetings, we have an online Viva Engage group which currently stands at 174 members!

I chose to focus the club on ‘the Inner’ because I felt that word would be more acceptable within an academic context. Outside of the few disciplines that study spirituality or religion, those words tend not to resonate within a university; mysticism perhaps even more so. In describing the group I spoke about ‘a sense of connection to something beyond ourselves’, reflecting Alister Hardy's words.

Strategic Priorities

If the well-being of staff and students and EDI are key strategic objectives of UoB, so too is sustainability. It was, after all, the first British university to declare a climate emergency. Although the university has a number of initiatives on each of these priority areas, they always seemed to be treated as totally separate themes. To me, however, all three might be seen as indicators of the same underlying issue facing humanity. That is, we have become disconnected: we have become disconnected from the planet, seeing the natural world as a series of commodities rather than as part of one living entity. We have become disconnected from each other, forgetting that we are, underneath cultural labels, similar thinking, feeling human beings.

And we have become disconnected from ourselves, from our inner self: our true nature.

I realised that by focusing on the inner, by tuning in to what we really know, rather than, perhaps, what we have been taught or led to believe, then we might better reconnect to ourselves and thus improve our mental health, reconnect to what it means to be human (and thus improve EDI) and reconnect to the living, conscious, planet. By becoming more inwardly aware, so we can respond to all three strategic objectives at the same time. I called this the Strategic Inner, as illustrated in the figure below. At any opportunity, within UoB and beyond, I share this notion (and slide), to encourage a less siloed view of today's big issues. Please feel free to use and share it too (by reference to this article).

At the same time as the Exploring the Inner Staff Club was getting settled I attended an online gathering organised by the Galileo Commission (1) under the title Consciousness Education. As a result, I became an active member of their inquiry project (2). A number of participants from around the world share various initiatives by which we encourage and enable individuals to reconnect to consciousness beyond the rational: transcendent, flowing. My contribution to this project is my Exploring the Inner Staff Club and related conversations and initiatives to encourage more engagement with the inner at the University of Bristol.

Emerging from the Consciousness Education Collaborative Inquiry were these Principles of Consciousness Education:

1. Grounded in non-materialist perspectives on consciousness that are supported by scientific inquiry.
2. Grounded in an understanding that consciousness is holistic and dynamic, within which all living systems are interconnected.
3. Starts with experience, exploring the interconnection between inner and outer aspects of being and participatory entangled, relationships.

4. Sees life as a process of learning in a relational context, where we nurture an environment that allows consciousness to teach through us.
5. Cultivates transformative shifts in perceptions of reality and promotes integration; connects different ways of knowing with different ways of being, teaching, and learning.
6. Involves breaking from cultural norms.

AHT members may resonate with many of these, not least No.3: "Starts with Experience." Every time we encourage and enable others to share their transcendent experience, each chance we take to help those who have had such experience to identify the fruits of these experiences, are we not an active, conscious, part of raising awareness of an inner world?

And if the inner light is not another name for cosmic consciousness, by studying and promoting related experiences are we not, in fact, directly engaged in consciousness education?

The emphasis of the Consciousness Education Project is on heart-centred and embodied teaching and learning, the bringing together of the sort of profound experience we share in De Numine with a deeper understanding of the nature of consciousness and the value or fruits of that. By enabling such an underlying shift in how we think, individually and collectively so, the project is realising, we are also making an invaluable contribution in responding to Climate Change, the Mental Health Crises and the inequalities of today's society.

An Invitation

I invite members of the Alister Hardy Trust and others working on transcendent, religious, spiritual or other such experiences to consider whether they too might be consciousness educators. Just to acknowledge this, I have found, is to immerse myself ever deeper into the Inner Light and to shine some much-needed meaning into my work and life and, through that, out into the world.

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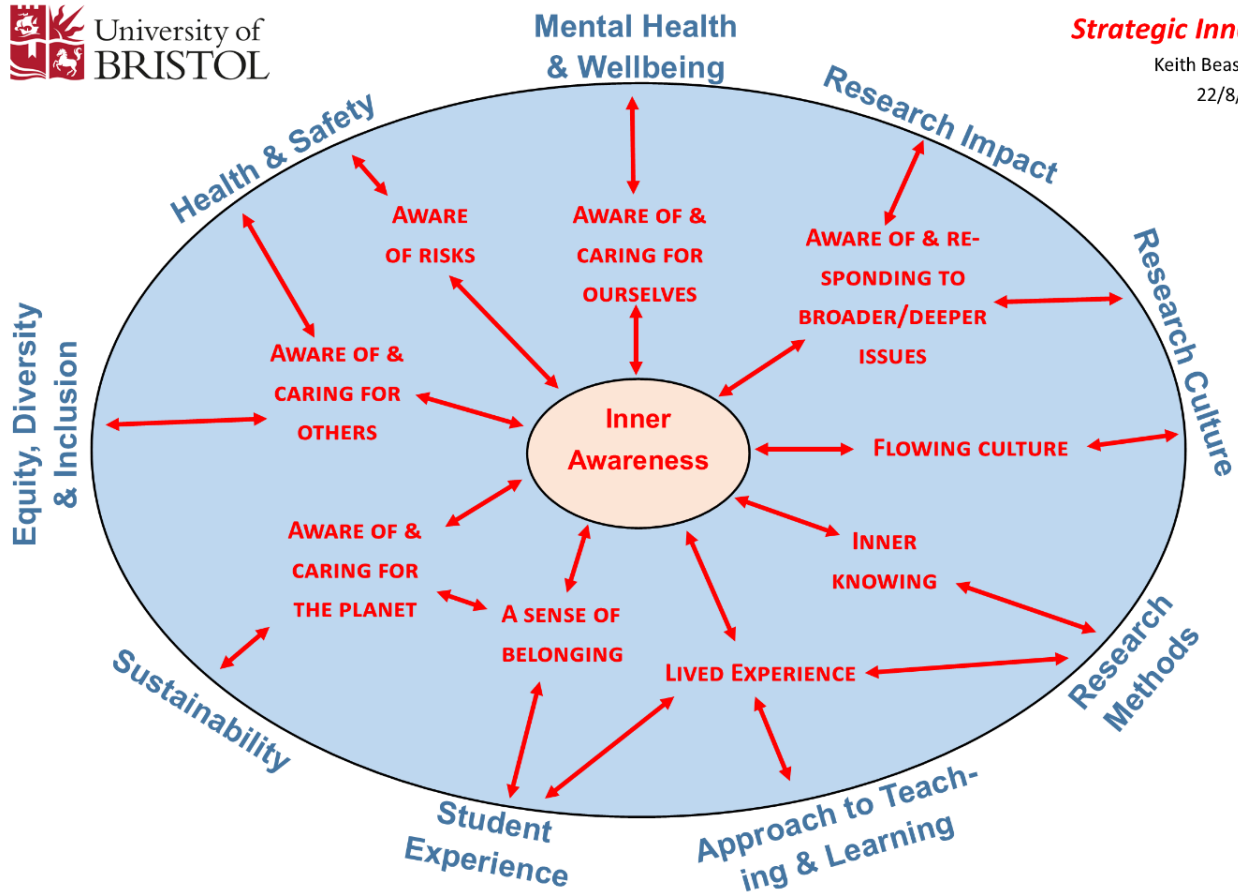
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Strategic Inner

Keith Beasley
22/8/24



Artificial Intelligence through the Lens of Stillness

Paul Trafford

Do we really need Artificial intelligence (AI)? Is it deepening our understanding of what it means to be human, helping us to fathom the nature of religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs)? As developments in AI proceed apace, there is a tendency to frame such questions by direct comparison of ‘machine intelligence’ with human intelligence. This is typically based on external observation, with reference to the physiology of the brain and the digital processes that mimic its behaviour. However, our experiences are subjective, and how we come to know and what we know varies considerably in nature and depth. This becomes evident when stopping and resting in stillness, the central point of this article’s comparative analysis.

First, let’s start with (computing) machines. For a machine to ‘understand’ generally involves processing of data, an activity which needs power and consumes energy. The more challenging the problem, the more energy consumed. Any suspension or pausing of a machine’s operation makes no contribution to the outcome. No wisdom is gained on behalf of the machine by inactivity and every answer a machine provides is produced from something and tangible, not spontaneous and intangible. This is true irrespective of the methods used, but the amount of effort involved varies enormously. Generative AI systems such as ChatGPT laboriously construct a linguistic model (*a large language model*) and then carry out further processing to deliver a response. These operations generally require large computing arrays, consuming vast amounts of energy, with obvious environmental impacts. No free and instant insight ‘out of the blue’.

But are such machines creative? This question was posed long ago for the Analytical Engine, the first general-purpose computing device, conceived in the 19th century by Charles Babbage. He illustrated its usefulness through a variety of mathematical problems, for each of which he devised sequences of instructions to determine their solution – what we now

refer to as an *algorithm*. As Babbage was busy with especially the engineering challenges, commentary on the Analytical Engine was provided by Babbage’s collaborator, Ada the Countess of Lovelace, who wrote extensive notes on its workings (Menabrea, 1843). In particular, she speculated on what machines could and could not do, seeing the potential of the Engine to compute symbols, not just numbers, to yield applications in the arts (Menabrea, 1843, Note A):

Supposing, for instance, that the fundamental relations of pitched sounds in the science of harmony and of musical composition were susceptible of such expression and adaptations, the engine might compose elaborate and scientific pieces of music of any degree of complexity or extent.

Today we might re-express this capability as computer software for composing music, using algorithms based on the encoding of the physics of sound and standard rules for what constitutes musical form. This type of AI is based on logical relations, usually evaluated as true or false. It is distinct from the machine learning characteristic of generative AI, which would involve the engine being trained on existing musical works, without necessarily providing any guidance on what constitutes *music*.

Whatever the method, the potential is wonderful. However, Lovelace didn’t get carried away as she later gives an answer to our question (Menabrea, 1843, Note G):

It is desirable to guard against the possibility of exaggerated ideas that might arise as to the power of the Analytical Engine... The Analytical Engine has no pretensions whatever to originate anything. It can do whatever we know how to order it to perform. It can follow analysis; but it has no power of anticipating any analytical relations or truths. Its province is to assist

us to making available what we are already acquainted with.

Lovelace does not explicitly define 'originate', but implies through negation that one who has originality has the ability to reach truthful conclusions in advance of normal mechanical workings. Originality is not the same as imitation or mimicry, even if these lead to new and unpredictable kinds of outputs, as she explains in a journal entry (Lovelace, 1841):

Imagination is the Discovering Faculty, pre-eminently ... It is that which feels & discovers what is, the REAL which we see not, which exists not for our senses ... Mathematical science shows what is. It is the language of unseen relations between things ... Imagination too shows what is ... Hence she is or should be especially cultivated by the truly Scientific, those who wish to enter into the worlds around us.

Lovelace's emphasis on the importance of imagination (personified) in the process of origination, particularly in scientific endeavours, displays spiritual sensitivity that is consonant with that in Alister Hardy's work (Hardy, 1979).

Creative exploration underpins discovery and is a key aspect of human agency, which points to dimensions beyond what computer systems can do and how they go about doing it. However, as AI increasingly invades our computer screens and reconstitutes the imaginings of others, we need reminders of the important distinctions. This is where RSEs can help. To provide an entry point, I accessed the online database of RERC accounts of religious experience and typed in 'stillness'. Here are extracts from some of the passages that came up, starting with another musical connection.

But I do experience in mild form all the time ... an awareness that the potential for becoming, for fuller consciousness, and for transcendental experience lies within me; and at times of stillness, or with beautiful music (Mahler is one composer I would mention, Beethoven another), I feel that

awareness more strongly.
[account number 000716].

In this first example, stillness plays a key role in fostering a quality of experience that enhances awareness and enriches consciousness. It is implicit in the appreciation of classical music, whether at home or in a concert hall.

It is also a medium for communication, like a portal into another dimension:

When I was in my teens, I had to question myself 'Does God exist?' until one day alone in the Yorks Moors I saw miles of moor & a valley between not a single soul in sight & was filled with 'Awe'. The stillness was speaking & I felt an 'Unseen Presence {sic}' on that winter's day' [000965].

Here the 'presence' is conveyed as a response to the enquiry and stillness is needed in order to receive it properly. This is stated emphatically in another example:

a presence which kept me standing still in the middle of the field, and later I described it to myself as 'the whole world seemed to stand still'. [000019].

These experiences are not mere ephemera as they often bear profound and enduring effects. The account goes on to relate, "I feel a complete certainty in my faith and in God's immanence in my soul."

There is also the feeling of being satiated, which can be retained in memory. For example,

As quite a small child, I found myself alone in a wood; it was still and peaceful, and God was there and that was enough. [000064].

The correspondent later observes how in the course of our lives we lose an innate capacity of knowing,

There is scarcely any reference to intuition, which is usually fairly strong in childhood, before it has been swamped by schooling and the mental attitudes of people round about.

These sentiments about intuition align closely with those of Edward Robinson, in his study of RSEs among children (Robinson, 1977) whereas the schooling and mental attitudes are closely aligned with machine learning.

Common to many practices and traditions, stopping and stillness is a repeated staging post in a journey of spiritual growth. This is borne out in the following account,

Then that phase ended, & at the same time every day I felt compelled to sit still & listen, & I heard an inner voice, clear & distinct, teaching me about the meaning of life. That continued each day for several weeks. [001033].

The accounts often refer to visions and this can happen once, twice, many times. These are indications that pausing or stopping iteratively is quintessential to humans gaining deeper knowing and insight, and hence greater intelligence. The nearest equivalent in computing might be 'garbage collection,' a form of periodic decluttering of its memory banks, but it is just routine maintenance and doesn't mark a step change.

Stillness is also valuable in and of itself, as a fruit:

I remember the sun and the light. ... since then, in silence, I can nearly always feel my way into the immensity of the world, & have this certainty that I do know what other people call God & doing this gives me a tremendous feeling of stillness and timelessness. [001162].

The sense of timelessness transcends the mechanical universe of timepieces; every computer has a built-in clock. But here, there is no need for them.

Stillness is an important vehicle in gaining a sense of purpose and in realizing what's important to know. It offers a means of accessing another level of awareness; pausing the mind has a 'vertical' quality, going deeper. Physiologically, this may change the regions of activation in the brain or might not even be

registered there (as with near-death experiences) – and when sustained on retreat, it is common for appetites to abate. It is in such stillness that more profound realisations may emerge. There are many words evocative of such states in the accounts (number of occurrences according to subject as of March 2025): 'floating' (205), 'clarity' (39), 'brightness' (26), 'illumination' (35), 'connection' (12), and 'union' (228).

The receptivity gained in stillness, both spontaneous and cultivated, leads to many kinds of knowledge and effects that do not have an equivalent in machine learning. It might also be interesting to explore how stillness impacts the creative arts; the artist's study, the writer's retreat, the scientist relaxing under a tree – all have moments of stillness that can lead to insight.

AI cannot be uninvented, so I would encourage anyone with religious and spiritual sensitivity to get involved in discussions, at least on what it means to be human. My own investigations have been on how to accommodate AI within a human-centred framework and determine what might be appropriate usage of AI to study religious experience (Trafford 2025).

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Mick Garratt / Spring, Ingleby Moor. Creative Commons Licence 2.0

A Sense of Wonder

Jeff Leonardi

In 2020 a book was published which Professor Bettina Schmidt, the Director of the Religious Experience Research Centre at Lampeter, had kindly invited me to co-edit, entitled *Spirituality and Wellbeing: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Study of Religious Experience and Health* (Equinox). That collection was noteworthy for many reasons and perhaps one of the most important was that it established, from a variety of viewpoints, that wellbeing is so much more than a matter of temporary and transient satisfaction or happiness for the individual, that it needs to be understood in terms of relationships between individuals in community, and with the wider world, including a sense of spiritual connection. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition this might be understood in terms of Shalom, a sense of peace which indeed surpasses understanding because it incorporates and connects with the whole created order at a fundamental level of harmony and justice. When Christians pray that God's will be done 'on Earth as it is in Heaven', it is this kind of wholeness in creation that is invoked.

After its publication I continued to reflect on these themes and came to the view that a further development of them could be of value, placing a greater emphasis upon the environment and human relationships with it, especially in terms of the spiritual dimension of this relationship. Because my specialism is counselling psychology, I also wanted to draw upon the wisdom to be found in that discipline for the study of the human psyche and relationships. We are undoubtedly caught up in a major existential crisis consequent upon our mishandling of our power to manipulate the environment for short-term gain, so it is vital and urgent that we find some understanding of the ways in which we have gone astray and hope for means of redressing the harm which is being done.

When I consider the attitudes underlying our reckless disregard for our collective impact on

our world and its life forms, it seems to me that we have lost a crucial sense of participation in life. We have come to believe that we are the only ones that matter, and that we can disregard the rights and needs of all other life forms and the global environment, treating it all as if it exists only to be exploited for our (short term) gain. I believe this to be a violation of our essential natures. Earlier peoples, and the surviving descendants of indigenous peoples, can be seen to exemplify a deeper sense of respect for the world and its creatures. We can fall into calling such peoples 'primitive' and yet they often see how lost and soul-less we have become in modern 'civilised' societies.

As a counsellor I have learned the enormous value of a capacity for empathy, the sense of being alongside another person and feeling with and for them, accurately. Once acquired and developed, empathy enriches not just human relationships but can engender a sense of relatedness with other living beings. What I want to convey is a concern that modern human beings have lost something vital and important by way of participation and relatedness in the wider realm of our existence. Owen Barfield was one of the Oxford academics known as the 'Inklings', together with J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. He articulated a theory of human development or evolution, beginning from Original Participation up until the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, succeeded by Rationalism and Detachment, which describes our present state. He postulates a further state or stage of Final Participation, in which human beings reintegrate the fruits of intellectual endeavour with a renewed sense of relationship with or participation in the wider world. (1)

Sir Alister Hardy described experiences in his youth when he would be so profoundly imbued with a sense of the wonder of the natural world that he could go down on his knees in response.(2) Many of us know such times. The archive of accounts in the Religious Experience Research Centre contains many records of individual experiences of one-ness with the

natural world. Unitive consciousness is the term given to states of awareness where the individual transcends the boundaries of personal separateness and experiences a condition of unified participation with their surroundings, which can extend to a sense of being part of all that is. This is one of the outcomes of transcendent mystical experience.

The newly published book which I edited and contributed to, *Environmental Spirituality and Wellbeing*, represents an attempt to bring together spiritual, psychological and environmental perspectives on the human condition, and suggest ways in which we might begin to heal the 'Wound of Knowledge' inherent in a rationalism that diminishes the full range human consciousness and responsiveness, and the prevalence of a ruthless disregard for the impact of selfish greed on ourselves and our world and its inhabitants.(3) In both cases empathy can be seen as a crucially helpful ingredient for healing.

The book contains ten chapters written by a rich and diverse group of authors, all connecting with the theme of spirituality and the environment. Some of them are counsellors and psychotherapists, others are researchers; three of them are clergy, one is a Buddhist, and three of them draw from their study of these themes in a South American context, especially Brazil. When I invited them to contribute to the book I might have hoped, but could not guarantee, that their chapters, although written separately, would cohere around shared perspectives. I was delighted and impressed by how far this turned out to be the case. If there is a single unifying sentiment running through all the individual chapters it is the perspective that human beings in the modern world have become alienated from their place as children of the Earth and fellows with all life forms.

There was one event during the compilation of the book which was a cause for great sadness. Rev Dr John Reader had been known to me since my training for ordination in the late 1980's, and we had become close friends and colleagues, sharing many perspectives on spiritual and philosophical issues (and cricket!). John was a much-published theological writer. When I

outlined the proposal for the book, he kindly offered to co-edit it with me and I readily accepted. He was the first to complete and submit a draft chapter, which was typical of his enthusiasm and commitment. We had further discussions, and he seemed in fine form, if a little subdued at times, but only a few weeks later he developed a serious brain haemorrhage and died within days. The shock to his family and friends was enormous, and deeply sorrowful. The book is dedicated in his memory.

I cannot give an adequate summary of each chapter of the book, but I should like to convey to you something about the insights each contributor has given, to whet your appetites.

John's is the second chapter: 'Reconnecting with Nature and Spiritual Experience'. In it he explores contemporary approaches to engagement with the natural world, at the practical level drawing upon his life-long engagement with Anglican parish ministry and at the theoretical drawing from his equally extensive embrace of contemporary philosophy and theology. At the latter end he quotes from Stengers, Keller and Latour and weaves it all together to argue that we are sick through our alienation from nature but that this sickness can and should be addressed.

Dr Marianne Rankin, again well known to this community, has completed her doctorate on the outcomes of spiritual experience, and in her chapter 'Spiritual Experiences of Inter-connectedness' focuses especially on those which involve a sense of connection to the natural world which can contribute to 'wellbeing, a sense of being at home in the natural world and among our fellow creatures.' She articulates very well the need to integrate a scientific understanding of evolution with a spiritual world view, as did Sir Alister Hardy. She is the first of our writers to declare how important it is that those who have spiritual experiences should be received sympathetically and respectfully by others, not least the medical and scientific communities, and indeed the churches!

Rev Robert Fruehwirth is an American Episcopal priest with a deep commitment to the English

mediaeval mystic Julian of Norwich, indeed Robert at one time occupied the role of Warden of the Julian Centre in Norwich. He is also deeply convinced of the virtues of the person-centred approach to counselling. In his chapter 'Julian of Norwich and Spiritual Depth' he offers a profound and convincing remedy for the 'sickness' of our times to which we have referred in terms of the healing power of the God who Julian reveals to be unconditionally loving and understanding. He shows how Julian herself needed to be converted through the Revelations, and their outworking in her, from a self-critical unworthiness to a greater sense of her and our belovedness to God at the core of our being. This for Robert is the goal of both religion and therapy.

The next chapter offers a fascinating comparison to Robert's. Having shared in a mystical Christian perspective we move to Becky Seale's 'Beloved on the earth: a Buddhist and person-centred approach to the ecological crisis.' For Becky the environmental crisis has raised serious questions about human nature: how can we deliberately continue on a road to disaster? She knows that the Christian narrative can include a major statement about the 'fallen-ness' of the human condition. As a Buddhist she knows that her faith teaches about the 'Buddha nature' in every sentient creature, and as a person-centred practitioner she knows that Carl Rogers, the founder of the person-centred approach, posited a constructive formative and actualising tendency at work in all things. How to reconcile these beliefs with the evidence of fallen-ness posed by the environmental disaster? Her chapter is her response to this question.

In our introduction to Marianne Rankin's chapter we noted the way she draws attention to the importance of how those who have spiritual experiences are received and understood. Professor William West has devoted much of his academic and therapeutic life to encouraging awareness of this delicate and profound process. His chapter 'Spiritual experience and counselling' draws from his own experience of working with clients exploring such themes, and also from his own personal spiritual experience. He points out that at times the counselling relationship itself can become a

spiritual experience of relatedness at the spiritual level, a view which corresponds with my own research into therapists' spiritual experience as 'relational spirituality'.

In our first reference to spirituality in a South American, specifically Brazilian, context, Professor Marta Helena de Freitas starts by suggesting, in her chapter 'How it is going the marriage of Heaven and Earth?', that the spirituality and mythology of some of Brazil's indigenous peoples offer a vital understanding of the need to de-centralise the human race on the world stage, and to recognise the mutuality and reciprocity of life forms, at both the physical and also spiritual levels, a relationship encapsulated by the metaphor of the marriage of Heaven and Earth. She contrasts the indigenous beliefs in intentionality of all the elements of the environment with the objectivity of the scientific-medical model in which 'the world becomes "disheartened" and devoid of subjectivity'.

Again invoking the richness of the indigenous spirituality of South America, Hannah Armbrust brings a Jungian perspective to the consideration of our relationship with the earth (and universe) in her chapter 'La Pachamama's Soul'. She argues that our nature is interbeing or intersubjectivity, and introduces the concept of archetypal intersubjectivity 'as an epistemology concerned with Ecospirituality that alerts us to the urgent need for a new ethical centrality to take care of our common house, Earth.' She writes of Jung for whom "psyche is Nature itself" and following Jung she invites us to ask by what myth we are living? For Armbrust the work of psychologists and therapists in this way is linked closely with the individuation process: 'to answer to the summons of the soul, recovering the emotional energy we once had through our profound and intersubjective relationship with the environment.'

We have already referenced Professor Bettina Schmidt. In her chapter, 'Wellbeing is the feeling of being "one with the world and my surroundings"', she takes her previous research into wellbeing and spirituality in the Brazilian context and develops the focus in terms of the relationship with nature and the environment,

which is perceived there as a living entity with which (whom) to develop relationships. She quotes from Rodríguez to argue that wellbeing, far from being purely about achieving individual happiness, requires also 'living well together' as human beings but also with nature, and with spirits, deities, or ancestors. She invokes the concept of 'ecospirituality' beyond simply 'connection to nature', to be 'not just about the spiritual sense of interconnectedness but also about the need to integrate ecological harmony and social responsibility'.

In the final chapter, 'Creative Biosynergy and the Person-Centered Psychology of Global Spiritual Well-Becoming' Dr Anthony Rose writes with great expressiveness of his conviction, from both personal experience and the rich historical and cultural resources of human history, that the fundamental dynamic of the world is 'Biosynergy', a creative and harmonious working together for the evolution and development of all life. In terms of personal experience his chapter is underpinned throughout by reference to the profound experiences of interspecies 'epiphanies' which set him on his journey and continued to lead him further. He also coins the term 'well-becoming' to advance beyond the present-moment connotation of wellbeing and extend its scope to embrace an evolutionary view from the past through the present and into the future. His approach is profoundly reverent and Person-centred, and like Marta de Freitas' chapter, he seeks to de-centralise the human phenomenon and convey instead a profound sense of our participation in something greater and wider than ourselves.

Finally, my own chapter, 'Knowing and Un-knowing: Extending the Spectrum of Meaning to Include what Really Matters', engages with and echoes many of the themes articulated here. I am passionate about the profound importance and significance of spiritual experience, and that science and the intellectual sphere in general is impoverished and inadequate in failing to accord such experience due regard and consideration. I argue that this tendency needs to be addressed, not just in a 'new Enlightenment' with regard to spiritual experience as such, but also with regard to the wider context of many other kinds of subjective experience, without which the human

enterprise is reduced to a soul-less and mechanical exercise. I suggest that the reduction of human consciousness to its purely intellectual dimension, and the relegation of subjectivity to a less valued status, underlies much of the modern malaise and indeed the failure of our care for the environment. By contrast, I suggest that all approaches which increase our capacity for empathy and reverence towards other species and our world are what is needed to 'turn us around' and enable healing.

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3. Jeff Leonardi & John Reader (eds.) *Environmental Spirituality and Wellbeing: integrating social and therapeutic practice*. Equinox: Sheffield. Published October 2025.

Prof Jeff Leonardi is a retired Anglican priest, a qualified Person-centred counsellor, and Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Wales Trinity St David.

Environmental Spirituality and Wellbeing: Integrating Social and Therapeutic Theory and Practice is published by Equinox in hardback and paperback, ISBN 978-1800505834.

EXPERIENCES

Approaching the beyond

Mahalla Mason

Lying in 'RESUS' on a hospital bed linked up to a drip infusion and wired up to a monitor, I felt completely blown up with fluid. My pulse was racing and fluttering and I recognised atrial fibrillation. It was six years ago but I need to record what happened while I am still reasonably able.

In an instant I was out of it! The heavy waterlogged legs, the fluid laden cough and the fingers blown up with water all disappeared. I was out of the heart failure!

I felt FREE as the air, light, young, in my prime. Even a thought could move my joyous body.

I looked around. I was in the countryside. It was extremely quiet. The grass was stretching ahead short, bright, new spring growth and on my left were tall trees just coming into leaf. Ahead was a road across my path. It was not marked with lines and there were no cars. It had a beige coloured, fine surface and I could look across the road to more grassland beyond.



Mahalla Mason in her garden

Then I saw my lovely mother, in her prime, across the road. She looked serious and in her

hand was carrying what looked like a drying up cloth. Had I interrupted something?

Suddenly there was a 'hullabaloo' — that was the word which came to me, as if I had interrupted a happy family party. Over to my right Aunt Sylvia appeared surrounded by all the large close family and a very high level of noise! Sylvy looked surprised to see me even though we had a pact that she would be with me when I died (I had done this for her).

Do they have parties in the spirit planes, in the beyond? It looks as if they might!

Then like the flick of switch I was back in my hospital bed. My Quaker Friend said that if I had crossed the road I most probably would not have come back.

This did not seem like a usual 'near-death experience' with a tunnel and light at the end, rather it was approaching the crossing. My uncle said he had a river to cross when his time came near. Maybe it is not always a tunnel, and in my case it was a road to cross.

All I know is that the joyous feeling of freedom, lightness in weight and in the surrounding radiant light and beauty was almost beyond words. We have nothing to fear. Love will draw us together where it truly exists in whatever plane of existence we dwell.

LETTERS

Dear Editor,

Re: Alister Hardy Memorial Lecture 26th October 2024 on Zoom

There is doubtless a report of the 26th October 2024 Memorial Lecture and online Conference in *De Numine* [*sadly not, but a full introduction to the book by Jeff Leonardi on page 29 - Ed*] but, as I am limited to 500 words, I shall concentrate mostly on Rev Fruehwirth's contribution.

The Conference opened with Dr Jeff Leonardi's reading from a summary of the book he had edited together with the late John Reader, published in June 2025. The book gives a very comprehensive overview of the three uniting pillars of this conference, environmental, spiritual and well-being. Spiritual experiences are too often dismissed as being subjective, an idea which Dr Leonardi totally rejects; spiritual experiences can be life transforming and often enable greater understanding to the psycho-therapist. Dr Leonardi responded to his questioners for which there was too little time. Bettina Schmidt spoke of her anthropological studies in Brazil which she combined with personal descriptions of her own nature experiences and how much we, in the Western World, have to learn from those who are closer to nature than we are.

It may be because of my age that I found Robert Fruehwirth's contribution the most interesting. Most mystics and spiritual writers have not lived into the third, never mind the fourth, age that many of us enjoy in the twenty-first century. This presents us with new opportunities. Rev Fruehwirth's study of Mother Julian of Norwich, who lived to be 74 (a good age for her time) gave us an insight into this. In today's world we continually set ourselves targets, measure our progress and feel that "we must get somewhere"; a process we can transfer to our spiritual lives. But in Mother Julian, Rev Fruehwirth saw someone, who, having measured her progress in her prime, abandoned the targets she had set herself as she grew older, let go and enjoyed

being accepted just as she was.

I recalled an earlier meeting of the Alister Hardy Society, in which a member of the Society of Friends said that we spend the first half of life developing a personality, the second half losing it. In a world where more of us are living to a greater age, is this not one of the privileges of age that we no longer have to worry about "getting somewhere" for our extended lifespan? The spiritual life of the old is a vastly unexplored field.

Zoom Conferences have their advantages; they can accommodate more people than a local meeting, members and speakers like Rev Fruehwirth can attend from different parts of the world and this one attracted over fifty people from the U.S.A, some countries in Europe and the four nations of the United Kingdom. However, it would be a tragedy if they totally replaced face-to-face meetings, geographically limited though those may be, as it is good for members to meet each other in the flesh from time to time.

Rowena Rudkin, April 2025

Dear Editor,

Thanks for another excellent issue of *De Numine* (issue 77, Autumn 2024).

I was particularly interested in the article 'Energy perception' by Billie Krstovic, page 25, paragraph 5, in which she describes the spontaneous breaking of a glass she was holding when she was in a bad mood.

I had a similar, though not so dramatic happening, a few years ago. I was stressed and angry. I picked up a small pot and plant to move it, and it shot out of my hand and smashed on the floor. The simple explanation is that I was not concentrating and dropped it.

However, I felt very strongly at the time that psychic energy associated with my stress, etc, had left me and entered the unfortunate pot and plant.

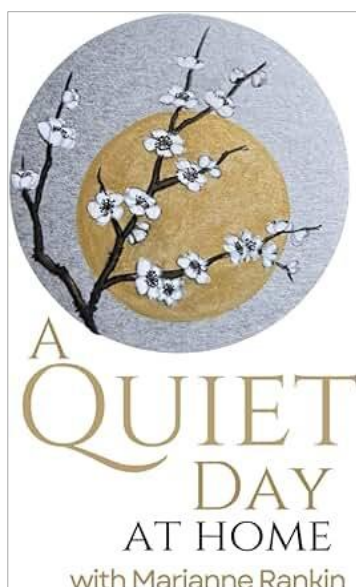
Neil Hancox

MEMBERS' NEWS

Quiet Days

When I was Director of Communications for the AHT, I found myself speaking about spiritual experience to rooms full of people, which involved overcoming my nerves, but was almost always rewarding. People responded positively to what I said and often shared their own experiences with me. Many were then written up and added to the RERC Archive.

These sessions were often in schools, for Sixth Formers studying religious experience for A-Level. The students responded well to a speaker on matters not usually covered in lessons – their own spirituality and what they thought of experiences which seemed to indicate a deeper response to life and a consideration of the possibility of survival of death. Sir Alister Hardy and his research were at the heart of these presentations. Other venues were spiritually-based organisations



such as the Scientific and Medical Network (SMN) and the Christian Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies (CFPSS) or the World Congress of Faiths (WCF). Since Covid, many of these events take place on Zoom, which is highly convenient, but nothing rivals getting together in person. Many members feel this loss since the AHT seems to have moved exclusively online.

However, my favourite events were and still are Quiet Days. These would typically take place in a lovely venue, most often locally in Stanton Guildhouse or Holland House, both in Worcestershire. Usually about a dozen of us would gather to reflect on a particular topic. The day would begin with introductions, where connections were often a surprise, as people explained what had brought them that day – friends' recommendations, the topic, the venue or possibly the speaker. This was often the most interesting part for me, as we learned about each other and our lives.

I would then give a talk (often illustrated using PowerPoint) – perhaps on Spiritual Experience and Music, Art or Literature, or Near-death Experiences. A brief discussion would ensue. Then we would all have an hour of silence – a gift of time and space - to reflect further on the topic, go for a walk, read a book or perhaps draw or colour a picture. By then it would be lunchtime, either catered or our own. The afternoon would offer the opportunity to elaborate on the morning's theme and to share our reflections. I encouraged contributions from participants - although I never wanted anyone to feel obliged to say anything. I knew from personal experience that many people just want to listen. It was many years before I felt confident enough to ask questions at lectures, let alone introduce speakers. The idea of speaking myself was far from my mind when I was first involved in the Alister Hardy Society. The small groups who come to Quiet Days make for a relaxed atmosphere for both the speaker and participants.

The book 'A Quiet Day at Home' was inspired by my thinking of people unable to take part in such days, due to age, inability to travel, being infirm or housebound. Since writing it I have also thought it could be shared – in person or on zoom. It suggests a day of reflection in your own home, a time to enjoy it without feeling the need to tidy, clean or rearrange anything. It might be good to make it as you like it and

then settle down with the book, which is based on the introductions we would share when in a group.

I begin with 'Have you ever wanted to stop the world and get off?' and offer you, the reader, the chance to do just that. This leads to a time of quiet appreciation of your surroundings and a short meditation. Then I encourage you to ask yourself the question 'Who are you?' and to look back on your life from birth, through childhood, education and adult life. The book is about YOU. If you choose, you could record your answers to my questions and explore

your thoughts further, making a loose autobiography.

The book, with my illustration on the cover, is available on Amazon at £10 for the paperback, £15 in hardback, ISBN-13: 979-8315852728.

<https://amzn.eu/d/5Z2qmej>

Dr Marianne Rankin



Boat moored on the River Thames in the morning sun. Photo by Dave Sherwood

OBITUARIES

Ann Mills 1942 - 2023



Ann Mills with children at Room to Learn, Bengal

Ann Mills died peacefully at home, with her husband Brian at her side, on 22nd December 2023. Ann and Brian attended meetings of the Oxford & Cotswold Alister Hardy group for several years and hosted a weekend on Healing at their house for members of our group in 2013.

When I first met Ann she was attending an Anglican church and we were both very ecumenical, interfaith, and had experienced psychical events. This manifested in Ann as an outstanding gift of healing. We attended the Spiritualist church occasionally and became good friends.

Ann was largely brought up by her grandmother and after leaving school she joined the RAF. Following guidance from a dream, she requested leave in Singapore, and it was there she met Brian Mills, also in the RAF, who was there just for a few days. Ann was stationed at RAF Lyneham (Wiltshire), as was Brian, but owing to the RAF staff rank protocol they had not met on the base. Shortly after their meeting in Singapore, Ann was posted to Gibraltar and Brian remained at Lyneham. Less than a year later they were married. They were blessed with two sons, Desmond and Malcolm, and now have three grandchildren: Frances, Henry and Arthur.

Ann and Brian bought a bungalow, 'Manor Lodge', in the beautiful village of Minster Lovell in Oxfordshire, which included a large garden plot. It was quite rundown, so they worked

over many years to extend the house, creating a very large productive organic garden. The home became a healing centre, and they generously shared all the produce they grew and welcomed many visitors.

Ann loved to travel world-wide whenever she had the opportunity. She went trekking in Nepal for three months. Whilst in Asia she made several friends in India.

Ann and Brian were posted to Germany twice and whilst there travelled all over Europe with the children in a VW camper van. When they returned from Germany she qualified as a nurse and worked for the NHS in the UK. Ann's gift of healing was outstanding. She combined Therapeutic Touch with aromatherapy, prayers for healing, sacred music and listening to life stories. Ann was the first Registered Nurse to practice Therapeutic Touch in the NHS.

My mother-in-law Doris Mason (Dolly), who was a gifted medium, came to Witney in 1982, and Ann joined her psychic development circle which met regularly. She encouraged Ann in her healing ministry.

When my mother was dying of liver cancer she was given peace and very deep comfort by Ann's presence and radiant gentle touch. This also happened when my younger son was trying to recover from an emergency appendix operation. Ann's presence altered the atmosphere to one of positivity, recovery and hopefulness. She just turned up without being sent for, feeling she was needed!

Ann worked on the John Warin Infectious & Tropical Diseases ward at the Churchill Hospital in Oxford at the time of the AIDS crisis, combining complementary therapies with sound medical and nursing care; her use of Therapeutic Touch was a very great comfort to many. Ann's positive awareness of the afterlife and its beauty helped many people who were faced with 'crossing over'.

On retirement Ann felt led to return to India. The extreme poverty, particularly in the countryside and amongst the Dalit caste, challenged her enormously. Following the earthquake in Nepal many families moved into India to find work. They were 'below the poverty line' (BPL) and the children suffered along with the adults.

This is when Ann felt called to set up 'Room to Learn', a UK charity operating in Kalimpong, West Bengal. It is for young children living BPL in makeshift shelters and poorly nourished. Children aged 3-4 years old were taken to a Nursery Room in Kalimpong with a playground outside. They were given a good meal, as well as learning some numbers and letters, playing together and having fun.

Small children in India who have some nursery experience are more likely to get places in the

State-run primary schools; the nursery experience at Room to Learn has helped Dalit children living in Kalimpong to get school places. Ann and Brian's son Desmond has taken over as CEO of the charity, and under his and the trustees' guidance Room to Learn continues to help these under privileged children to have a much better quality of life. At the time of writing Room to Learn is now providing 88 children with quality education.

Ann was, and always will be, a very much loved and inspiring friend. As Des has said, she had an amazing life and was guided in all that she did. Her parting words were: "You cannot keep love, you have to give it away."

Thank you so much Ann, from your friend –

Mahalla Mason



Ann and Brian Mills (centre) with children, staff and parents at the Room to Learn nursery school, Kalimpong, West Bengal

REPORTS

AHT Trustees' Report Autumn 2025

Over the past two years the running of the Alister Hardy Trust has been undertaken by a small group of trustees, acting as an executive committee: Leslie Francis (chair of trustees), John Harper (vice chair and honorary archivist) and Tom Farley (now treasurer). Such a small group enables the kind of direct interaction and collaboration that was possible when there was a director and three staff based in the Religious Experience Research Centre at Lampeter up to 2010. We work to the agreed strategy, objectives and budget set and reviewed by the whole trustee body, which generally meets twice each year, with additional advice and assistance from Bettina Schmidt, as the current director of the RERC, and Jeff Astley, who has for some years been closely involved in research and advanced study for the trust. This is our report, which focuses on two important matters.

Leslie Francis, John Harper, Tom Farley

Lampeter and the AHT

This has been an uncertain and unsettling year for the staff and students based at the Lampeter campus of UWTSU, and for the town and local community. After more than 200 years of higher education at Lampeter, the teaching of humanities has been transferred from Lampeter to Carmarthen from September 2025. That has required a very speedy process of physical and human change, including significant relocation, restructuring and redeployment of both academic and support staff in the seven months since the final decision to close the Lampeter campus was announced.

The good news is that a new future for the Lampeter campus is already emerging. Ceredigion County Council has plans to base a new post-16 centre for education and training in agriculture, horticulture and gastronomy at the campus. It has already, with Welsh government support, bought a farm adjacent

to the university as a first step in what will be a three-year programme of development. There are also active discussions for greater community use of the resources of the campus. All this is particularly welcome for a rural town and community in whose economy and employment the university has played a major part for so long.

The AHT has also been affected by these changes, since UWTSU generously houses its archive and books in the university's library building at Lampeter. First, the much-expanded university has started to centralise its archive of records and documents in the library building at Lampeter under the aegis of the staff of the Roderic Bowen Archive. To accommodate the new materials, the AHT has needed to vacate the spacious RERC room in the library that it has occupied for fifteen years to make room for the new Harford Archive. We now have two much smaller rooms, formerly occupied by the university's IT information service. That move took place in November 2024. Our original plan to move the whole AHT archive into the RERC room had to be abandoned. Secondly, the university library has largely become a repository rather than a working library and now has just one collections' librarian on site. The whole building was closed in July and August 2025; and from September onwards, access to the library building in Lampeter is by appointment only from Tuesday to Friday.

As a consequence of these changes of accommodation and access, the AHT has made over to UWTSU the greater part of its book collection, already shelved and catalogued within the university books and periodicals. The Trust has retained key works by RERU and RERC staff or very directly related to the specific work on religious and spiritual experience pioneered by Sir Alister Hardy; these will be incorporated within the AHT archive collection.

The Archive Conservation Project

It is now four years since the archive conservation project began. At the outset of the project, no one anticipated that so much work would need to be undertaken, or that it would take so long to gather, assess, sort, list, classify, conserve and re-order everything. The organisation established by Sir Alister Hardy, and variously known over the years as RERU, AHRC and RERC, was set up for active research investigations with clear focus. Over half a century, it has accumulated working papers and documents, which were all part of the research and running of the organisation. This material was never planned to be an archival research resource. Furthermore, the organisation has moved premises five times – three locations in Oxford, and two different buildings in Lampeter. It has also experienced research and administrative staff changes and, in 2010, radical reduction in support staff. Such changes inevitably have consequences on what is left after people have moved on.

The best of what is now the archive was systematically stored and logically indexed. This applies notably to the unique collection of accounts of religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs). It was Dr Peggy Morgan who not only ensured their safe storage and eventual relocation to Lampeter but, between 1997 and 2000, oversaw the building of the database of transcriptions from the accounts of RSEs that continue to be the principal resource the AHT offers to researchers and advanced students on an international basis.

Much of the rest of the documentation had been boxed, though not sorted or assessed; but that left a significant body of material found in filing baskets, drawers, cupboards and filing cabinets, in folders, ring binders or just as loose papers. The range of material is very considerable: some is related to research projects, some to administration, finance and governance; there are records of events and fund-raising, and a substantial collection of press cuttings that include articles and appeals that originally encouraged the submission of accounts of RSEs. We have now been through everything, sorted it and listed it. In June 2025,

six of us were in Lampeter to re-order what was somewhat randomly sorted in the old boxes, putting each item in its newly classified order. For the very first time, we know what we have and where it is to be found. In due course this will become part of a new searchable database, to complement the existing database of accounts of RSEs.

There have been some notable finds and discoveries. Of course, what has been newly found in this process would have been common knowledge at the time when materials were in active use; but that memory is lost. For instance, in the folders containing individual accounts there is often additional material: further submissions, correspondence with Sir Alister Hardy and in some instances completed questionnaires that followed the submission. All these additional contents are now listed, and that information will in due course be incorporated within a revised database.

What has also been significant has been the discovery of links between the accounts of RSEs and follow-on correspondence and questionnaires, especially those that were part of the research of Edward Robinson (who worked with Sir Alister Hardy and succeeded him as the second director) and Mike Jackson (who was a research associate while completing his doctoral research at Oxford). Edward Robinson was intent on exploring both spiritual experience in childhood and also the relationship between spirituality and the imagination. He was in contact with some who had submitted accounts of RSE, inviting them to respond to specific questions in these areas. The responses can now be linked to the account of RSEs that each had submitted. In the same way, Mike Jackson, working in the field of psychology, invited some of those who had submitted an account of RSE to respond to an extended questionnaire. The resulting correspondence and completed questionnaires offer a new body of material for investigation in exploring the context of the related accounts of RSEs.

Our original hope had been that the conservation of the archive and the improvement of

the database would attract a grant from the Templeton Foundation. When, following a change in the foundation's focus and staffing, this application failed, the trustees agreed to undertake the project with AHT funds. The work has been undertaken on a part-time basis and often at a distance. The project has been overseen on a voluntary basis by John Harper, who lives in Denbighshire, a hundred miles away from Lampeter; with sessional assistance from Rachel Dowd, who lives sixty miles away in Morriston; and there has been occasional help from family members and trustees. Though extended in time, this has enabled us to assimilate what is there, stage by stage, and then to take an overview of what is an exceptional, unique collection.

All being well, the final stage of the conservation process will be complete by the end of 2025. There is then the task of editing the contents of the very large Excel workbooks, so that the new information can be incorporated within the existing database or form part of the second, new database. There is a further challenge: in sorting through the accounts of RSEs, we have found some discrepancies between the original account and the version appearing on the database. Our intention is to make scanned copies of all the accounts of RSEs, and then to gather a small team to check the original against the transcription. The scanning itself is a major task, and we have been fortunate to find Bridget Thomas, a former BBC video engineer

and also a former library attendant at Lampeter, who lives in Lampeter. She is initially assisting with the final stages of conservation and listing; then from November she will move on to address the scanning challenge. When that is complete, the AHT will have digital copies of all the original accounts of RSEs currently in the archive.

None of this work would have been possible without the generosity of those who have made donations or bequests over the past twenty years or so. These have formed the basis of the AHT's investment portfolio, shrewdly nurtured by Sue White of Walker Crips in partnership first with David Greenwood and more recently with Tom Farley as treasurers of the AHT. Although the project has so far cost £90,000, the value of our investments has only fallen by £30,000 to around £300,000. We have about £60,000 yet to spend to complete the project and prepare the new databases. That sounds a lot of money, but the overall cost will represent only a third of the original Templeton grant application. Most important of all, the trust's principal and unique assets will be conserved and in good order for generations to come, a stable foundation for the future of research into RSEs built on the work of Sir Alister Hardy, and for future of the trust as a whole. It almost goes without saying that, as we undertake these significant projects and look to secure the future of the AHT, we continue to welcome donations and bequests, both large and small.

POETRY

The Blessing **by Alan Rainer**

For the beauty of silence heard in the highest heaven.
In the stillness of reflective prayer when the soul unites
In perfect bliss with blessings beyond compare
In wondrous praise with creation alight.

In mystic union with the fire of love in threefold unity.
The whole cosmos, the sense of the divine.
The gentle touch of spring breeze through leaves
Of lush-foliaged trees, bursting with buds - spring's sign.

How can it be whilst the whole universe expands
That kneeling, all unfolds in mystic harmony
As though the angles all sing in unity
To the glory of the eternal Trinity?

How can this majestic silence bring me so close
To thy heart, in the very depths of infinity
So warm, so intense yet so calm, yet I know
That at the centre of the fiery furnace it is Thee.

Such blessings I cannot fathom: it is beyond belief.
Beyond explanation, beyond physical and temporal sense,
Radiating a soft healing caress of breathless beauty
So full of meaning with ecstatic awareness so immense.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Lucid Dying by Sam Parnia, MD, PhD. New York: Hachette Books, 2024. 342pp. ISBN: 9780306831287

The centrepiece of this book is its presentation of the findings of the AWARE-II study, of which the author, Sam Parnia, was lead scientist and director. AWARE-II was a collaborative study made up of 33 leading scientists across 25 major medical centres in the US and UK which was designed to monitor the brains of those who were dying and being resuscitated and which used state-of-the-art technology to do so. 567 persons receiving CPR were monitored and the testimonies of an additional 126 community survivors of cardiac arrest were collected from around the world. Specifically - and amongst other things - brain oxygen levels and brain electrical systems were measured second-by-second. Much of *Lucid Dying* is taken up with the results of this study, the results of which were first published in September 2023 and in which analysis of these persons' experiences was made using grounded theory, Natural language processing and AI methods. The ambition can't be faulted and the outcomes of the AWARE-II study make for absorbing reading, particularly when combined with the findings of an earlier study, AWARE-I, in which a much smaller database was obtained and analysed.

Several of these projects' findings stand out, as does Parnia's avoidance of the term 'Near-Death Experience' (NDE) in favour of 'Recalled Experience of Death' (RED): a substitution occasioned by the fact that he sees the former as a mislabelling. Indeed, for him, REDs are actually showing us what happens in that 'grey area' where the ordinary cognitive states of life give way to a 'hyperconscious' state occasioned by brain disinhibition as that self-same brain 'dies.' Remarkably, it appears that such states of hyperconsciousness can occur some time after the brain flatlines and the author cites his own and other studies as making clear that in some cases the brain can remain robust and hence theoretically revivable for staggeringly prolonged periods after it apparently ceases to function: several minutes or even hours.

The notion of disinhibition is key to Parnia's overall thesis which includes the assertion that brain disfunction in that 'grey area' at the end of life can actually reactivate hitherto dormant parts of the brain, disclosing new 'dimensions' of reality. Several things follow from this, including dying persons' enhanced awarenesses of what reality actually consists of together with a vivid, 'cause-and-effect' review of their actions - and the actions of others toward them - from within the life just passed. The latter can often lead to greater insight and knowledge, he writes; a sort of judgement in which 'everyone seems to evaluate their life based on a universal set of ethical and moral principles.'

The reader might be feeling a creeping sense of déjà vu at this point. Haven't we read all this before? After all, the term 'Near-Death Experience', first coined by Raymond Moody in his 1975 book *Life After Life*, is 50 years old this year and that makes for half a century of detailed, ongoing, research. And there is a very real sense in which we *have* read it all before inasmuch as many of the fifty or so elements reported by persons whose REDs make up the study are indeed identical or very similar to those found in the NDE literature generally: separation from the body, increased lucidity of thought (more on this later), the 'life review', encounters with a light or lights, acquiring knowledge of the future, and so on. In fact, very few motifs from earlier NDE 'models' are missing, I noted, apart from the 'ringing' or 'buzzing' noise from Moody's original 1975 model (a motif which has, admittedly, had something of a patchy presence in the various NDE models presented both by he and other researchers over the last half a century). Parnia adds one or two others - such as the 'cord' joining the 'new' consciousness to the old 'self' - and gives fresh detail to some existing ones, but he doesn't drop any real surprises in this regard.

The best parts of the book are the things Parnia presents which *are* genuinely new in either his

own research or that of others: the fact that awareness can persist for so long in a flatlined brain, the fact that it consists, measurably, of delta waves, the fact that such activity can ‘spike’ several minutes after flatlining, and the clear and demonstrable difference between REDs on the one hand and dreams, hallucinations and imaginary creations on the other; this latter point shown convincingly via the computer-based mathematical modelling obtained via Natural language processing. The study also joins that small and growing number of books to have emerged in recent years which have sought to examine cognitive lucidity in cases where brains are damaged or deteriorated beyond the point where such should be possible. Hence it is possible to read *Lucid Dying* profitably alongside other studies which have sought to examine phenomena such as Terminal and/or Paradoxical Lucidity.

It is to Parnia’s credit that he avoids reductionistic explanations of the phenomena that he has done so much to uncover; preferring instead to view the brain as the mediator, rather than the producer, of consciousness. This puts him somewhat outside of the existing scientific consensus: a point which he returns to at various places within the book. He also seeks to locate his study within the context of philosophical and other studies dealing with the ‘hard problem’ of consciousness and the result is a refreshingly wide-ranging study which I recommend to anybody curious as to where such end-of-life research has taken us in the fifty years since Raymond Moody brought it to such broad, popular, attention.

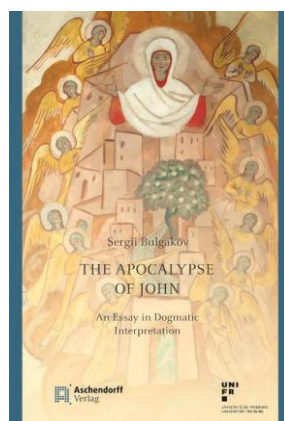
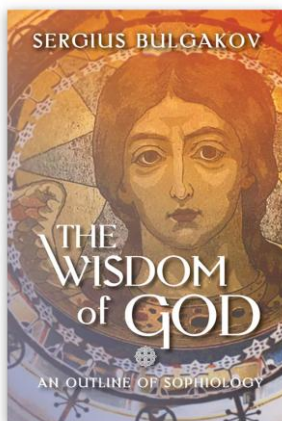
Mark Fox

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Revelation and Sophiology – ideas of history, the history of ideas and religious experience in Russian theologian Sergei Bulgakov’s writing

Janet Mackinnon

Books Reviewed: *The Wisdom of God – An Outline of Sophiology* (1937/2024 Angelico Press, pp 226, ISBN 979-8886770827) and *The Apocalypse of John, An Essay in Dogmatic Interpretation* (1944/2019 Edited by Barbara Hallensleben and Regula M. Zwahlen, in collaboration with Dario Colomb. Translated by Mike Whitton, revised by Michael Miller. Aschendorff Verlag, pp 391, ISBN: 978-3402120422)



“All great, genuine art resembles and continues the Revelation of St. John.”

Yuri Zhivago in Boris Pasternak’s novel *Dr Zhivago*, published in English 1958 (1)

Although the subjects of this essay review were originally written by Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944) shortly before and during World War II, *The Wisdom of God – An Outline of Sophiology* was republished by Angelico Press in 2024, and his commentary on *The Apocalypse of John* (The Book of Revelation) was published for the first time in English in 2019. I would like to thank the University of Freiburg/Aschendorff Verlag for providing a review copy of the latter volume. The period since 2019 has been a momentous one, encompassing increasingly apocalyptic discourses on climate change and the environment, the Covid 19 pandemic together with profoundly destructive conflicts in Europe and the Middle East. However, Bulgakov lived through an era of even greater upheaval in his

homeland of Russia and later in France where the two books discussed were written. This review considers the broader context of his works within ideas of history – notably eschatology - and the history of ideas around Sophia, the divine feminine in creation, as well as their relevance to the present time. Bulgakov also published his *Spiritual Diary* (first English translation 2022) during a period of exile in Prague in the early 1920s and personal religious experience, as much as ‘dogmatic interpretation’ of biblical texts and theology, is a vital and enduring component of his writing and exegesis; as is the wider cultural resonance of his work.(2) The latter is discussed with reference to art inspired by *The Apocalypse of John*, together with a ‘Sophiological’ reading of the famous mid-20th Russian historical novel *Dr Zhivago*.

Ideas of History and The Apocalypse

“These are apocalyptic times, my dear sir, this is the Last Judgement. This is a time for angels with flaming swords and winged beasts from the abyss.”

The revolutionary Strelnikov in *Dr Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak

In 1910 Bulgakov discussed ‘Apocalyptic and Socialism: Religious-Philosophical Parallels.’ His writing before the Russian Revolution demonstrated varying support for socialist chiliasm, reflecting a belief in earthly victory of good over evil within human history; but later evolved into eschatologism, or belief in victory of good over evil beyond history. In Bulgakov’s own introduction to his ‘dogmatic interpretation’ of *The Book of Revelation*, he describes this as a more ‘universal’ account of the Apocalypse than those which preceded – or, indeed, followed - because of its ‘inherently syncretic character,’ representing ‘the heritage of deep antiquity,’ and a timeless quality which has resonated in the interpretations of subsequent ages. However, partial conflation of chiliastic and eschatological conceptions of history (and historiography) continue to be a feature of Russian culture, particularly in contemporary relationships between the Orthodox Church and State. In 2024, the cultural theorist Mikhail Epstein published a book

entitled *The Russian Anti-world: Politics on the Verge of Apocalypse* that identifies the emergence of a new form of apocalyptic worldview in Russia following the collapse of communism.(3) This phenomenon is explored in an earlier article by ethnologist Victor Shnirelman, *Russia as Katechon** - ‘Civilizational’ and Eschatological Discourse in Putin’s Russia, written shortly after the country’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.(4)

Bulgakov would almost certainly have been horrified by the ‘Russian World’ ideology of the Putin regime: the merging of orthodox religion with nationalist imperialism and what has been described as a Stalinist legacy of ‘hybrid totalitarianism.’ (5,6) The views expressed in his work after his deportation from Russia under Lenin - following dismissal from a university position in Crimea and arrest whilst a priest at Yalta’s orthodox cathedral – gradually evolved to advocate separation of church and state.(7) In parallel, Bulgakov moved towards an internationalist Christian ecumenical position which, arguably, provides the political theology for his ‘dogmatic interpretation’ of *The Book of Revelation*. A significant fellow traveller – indeed spiritual collaborator – with Bulgakov in exile was Sister Joanna Reitlinger (1898-1988) whose representation of *The Apocalypse of John* in a series of mural paintings in the style of Russian icons appear on the cover and at the end of the 2019 English version.(8) Following Bulgakov’s death, these murals were painted in London shortly after World War II and have remained in England ever since, now residing in St Anne’s Orthodox Church, Northampton.(9) The Church’s website describes the paintings as ‘a kind of artistic parallel with the theological text. The spiritual link of sister Joanna with her mentor was not broken’.(10)

Sophiology and the History of Ideas

...an English mystic of the eighteenth century, Dr Poradage,...wrote a series of remarkable treatises on Sophia...

Sergei Bulgakov in *The Wisdom of God – An Outline of Sophiology* (1937 English version)

(T)he equating of Sophia and Rus’... resonates with the intuitive Russian truth about the fact

that Rus' is the land of the Mother of God, her country.

Alexander Dugin, political and religious philosopher, as quoted by Gordon Hahn (11)

The remarkable life and artistic talent of Sister Joanna provides a fitting introduction to Bulgakov's theological work on Sophiology for which he remains best known. Yet despite a welcome reception for his writing and her distinctive visualisations of this in the English-speaking world, Bulgakov emphasised key differences between the Western tradition of Sophia as expressed in, among many others, the 17th century work of polymath John Pordage.(12) The latter drew inspiration from the German mystic Jacob Boehme and representations of Sophia found in Gnosticism, whilst Russian Sophiology, notwithstanding arguable common syncretic origins, Bulgakov advocates 'represents a theological, or if you prefer, a dogmatic interpretation of the world (Weltanschauung) within Christianity.' Therein lies a problem because, as with both revolutionary and contemporary Russian interpretations of the Apocalypse, the earthly and cosmically redemptive figure(s) of Sophia can acquire nationalistic and geopolitical connotations, as in the writing of Vladimir Putin's reputedly favourite philosopher, Alexander Dugin (quoted above). The American Russophile and Eurasianist Gordon Hahn outlines the 'sophiological Revolution' proposed in *The Fourth Political Theory* by Dugin in a blog -which does not end well! - entitled 'Russian Tselostnost (Wholeness) and Ukraine.'(11)

In stark contrast, Sergei Bulgakov's 'sophiological Weltanschauung' (my quote marks) unfolded peacefully after his death in the work of the French philosopher, theologian and Iranologist Henry Corbin. By way of background, I reviewed Corbin's collected writing published in English as *Jung, Buddhism and the Incarnation of Sophia for De Numine* in 2020.(13) However, the review did not acknowledge the extent to which his thinking evolved after he read (and translated) Bulgakov together with other Russian philosophers. Corbin's 'Bulgakovian Turn' is described in a 2013 master's dissertation by the now Cambridge University-based scholar Hadi Fakhoury who highlights his 'Sophiological

interpretation of Carl Gustav Jung's Answer to Job.' (14). In this essay, Corbin describes Bulgakov as 'the herald of Sophia and of Sophianic thought'; while Fakhoury argues the French theologian regarded Russian Orthodoxy, notably in the form of Sophiology, as having 'an important role in mediating between East and West, Christianity and Islam.'(15) This anticipates the ecumenical project of the Swiss Inter-faith theologian Hans Kung in the later 20th century. Bulgakov would almost certainly have agreed with Kung that religions must undergo paradigm shifts through history as part of a process of spiritual renewal. (16) In *Key Theological Thinkers: From Modern to Post-Modern*, a major review of leading 20th century figures from religion, philosophy and literature, entries for Kung and Bulgakov's aptly appear next to one another. (17)

Narrative and Religious Experience

Doctor Zhivago is "a world in itself, a sophiological world."

American monk and poet Thomas Merton to Boris Pasternak in *Letters to Writers* (18)

In a 2021 article for the open access journal *Religions*, Svetlana Efimova provides a literary exegesis of Boris Pasternak's famous mid-20th century Soviet novel *Dr Zhivago* which also helpfully illuminates the preceding discussion of Sergei Bulgakov's works. (19) Efimova refers to a letter written by Pasternak in 1946 which states he had begun work on a book that "... will be an expression of my views on art, on the Gospels, on one's life in history and on much more". Her reading emphasizes 'the inter-relationship between religion and philosophy of history' in the novelist's completed version. By contrast, *Dr Zhivago* was primarily received in the West as a historical romance located within the half century before and after the Russian Revolution. However, Efimova analyses the narrative 'as a condensed representation of a religious conception of Russian history between 1901 and 1953.' In the novel, Pasternak's explores ideas of history through the fates of different characters, including the apocalyptic revolutionary Strelnikov who commits suicide. His fate is contrasted with the cyclical nature of Thomas Merton's 'creaturely Sophia' in the lives

of hero and heroine, Yuri and Lara, as well as powerful evocations of the Russian countryside. These in turn are juxtaposed with the timeless religious experience of Corbin's 'eternal Sophia' as expressed in 'The Poems of Yuri Zhivago' at the end of the book. Merton was a perceptive and enthusiastic reader of Bulgakov and Pasternak, each understood - in the words of Dr Zhivago himself - that: "All great genuine art resembles and continues the Revelation of St John."

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Keith Ward, Spirituality and Christian Belief: Life-Affirming Christianity for Inquiring People, Eugene, OR. Cascade Books, 2024, ISBN 979-8-3852-0482-3. pp. 104. £15.

This is a short but comprehensive book by Keith Ward, Fellow of the British Academy, Emeritus Regius Professor of Divinity of Oxford University and author of numerous works of philosophy and theology. He gave the Annual Alister Hardy Memorial Lecture in 2004 and is a speaker well-

known to AHT members. He is also an ordained priest of the Church of England. In this work Ward considers Christianity as a spiritual path rather than as a religion based on beliefs and addresses head on the reasons for today's dwindling congregations.

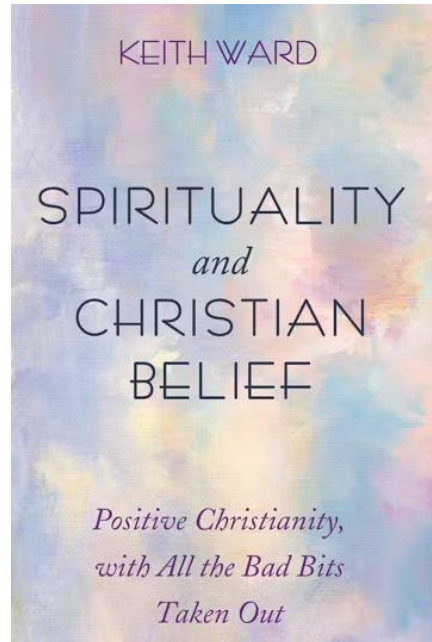
The underlying premise is clearly stated in the first sentence of the Introduction, 'Religion has become unfashionable in the Western world, but spirituality is regarded with respect'. He goes on to elaborate on the differences between the two, with religion often seen as 'exclusive and excluding, anti-scientific and illiberal, hierarchical and patriarchal.' This is contrasted with spirituality which is 'concerned with things of the spirit, with the higher faculties of humanity, with devotion to personal enlightenment and fulfilment, with cultivating a sense of unity with nature and care for the welfare of all beings.' Many readers – and AHT members in particular – will recognise these views. The book explores whether the Christian message can offer a spiritual path, rather than being dismissed as a collection of outmoded beliefs perpetrated by a rigid institution.

The book is clearly set out, despite some odd variations in font and formatting. The first section offers a concise summary of each chapter, followed by an introduction, twelve chapters and an afterword entitled *What Difference Does Belief Make?* The provocative text on the back cover indicates the challenging scope of the subject matter: that of tackling beliefs often assumed to be held by Christians, and frequently dismissed out of hand by non-Christians, putting them off further exploration:

Christianity is not the only true faith. The Bible is not inerrant. Jesus is not God walking on the earth. Hell is not eternal. What's left? Everything important. The ultimate reality is cosmic mind, which generates the physical universe. Its goal is to liberate all beings from evil and suffering and to unite all beings to itself. God sets the goal, Jesus shows and attains the goal, and the Spirit guides the way to the goal. This is a spiritual path to God, to which the Bible testifies, from a specific cultural background, the Abrahamic way.

These issues are all dealt with in the book. Ward sees spirituality as a constant feature of humankind, expressed in different ways through the great variety of global religions. That we are able to know about such a wide range of religious traditions is a recent development for humanity, making us aware of the deeply-held

and vastly different beliefs of others. He enjoins respect for spiritual paths not our own, rather than any exclusive claims to hold the one exclusive truth.



He begins by setting Christianity within the Abrahamic tradition, with Jesus understood as a Jew of his time. Ward explains the origins of the Bible and how textual analysis entails the way it should be read – metaphorically – not as a historical text, but to 'inspire spiritual insight and reflection'. He takes issue with the kind of sermons so frequently preached, which ignore the scholarship clergy have received during their ordination training. His view is that these priests are afraid of challenging their congregations and suggests that a more nuanced and scholarly approach would be appreciated. This would include rejecting the claim that the Bible records the exact words spoken by Jesus, which ignores the effects of translation from the original Aramaic, the historical context of the texts, as well as the motivations of the New Testament writers. Failure to take this approach has led to Christians opposing or ignoring the findings of evolutionary theory, cosmology and quantum science, attitudes for which they are frequently judged by outsiders. However, Ward explains that taking the Bible as a spiritual guide, rather than historical fact, can enable acceptance of all these discoveries, thus bringing Christianity into the modern world, without losing its integrity.

In later chapters, Ward gives his interpretation of the Trinity, atonement, the return of Christ, universal salvation, life after death and the spiritual realm. He suggests that these sections can be skipped without detracting from the main theme. However, as these concepts are often stumbling blocks for people exploring Christian beliefs, and indeed for Christians too, Ward's reasoning is helpful, as it enables understanding and acceptance of them in the light of contemporary scientific knowledge and consciousness studies. In fact, Ward goes further, branching out into 'cosmotheology' as he suggests that even on other planets a similar triune structure of religion may well appear: a transcendent creator mind, manifesting in a

finite form and a spiritual power acting in the lives of beings.

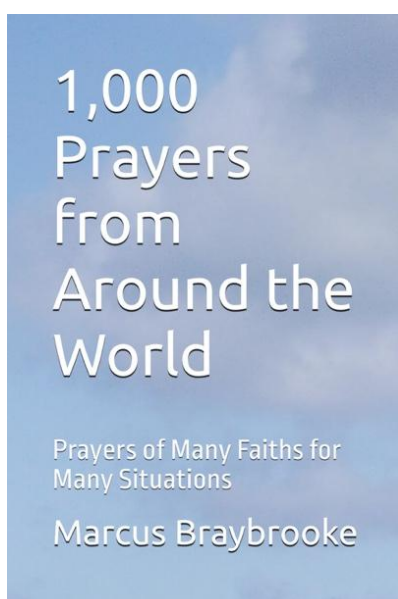
This is a hugely wide-ranging book, dealing with fundamental aspects of Christian belief but going beyond them to embrace a universal spirituality. It is a perspective which offers a deeper understanding of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. For people reflecting on the significance of Christianity, this short but important book offers spiritual sustenance, a path to follow. If this were more often preached by clergy, perhaps the churches would not be emptying.

Dr Marianne Rankin

Marcus Braybrooke, *1,000 Prayers from Around the World: Prayers of Many Faiths for Many Situations*. Amazon, 2024. pp.374. ISBN 9798343956160. Hbk £39.99; Pbk (black and white) £9.99; Pbk with colour £19.99.

A leading figure in interfaith relations worldwide, Revd Dr Marcus Braybrooke is well-known to AHT members, as a speaker and longstanding supporter. He is an Anglican priest who was for some years Co-President of the World Congress of Faiths, a Peace Councillor and Co-Founder of the Faith and Belief Forum. He is the author of over fifty books and has dedicated his life to encouraging understanding and co-operation between people of faith. Who better to draw together a wide selection of contributions from a range of diverse sources?

His latest book is a much-revised version of a similar work published in 2003. The new *One Thousand Prayers from Around the World* is a comprehensive selection of prayers and inspirational reflections from different religions and spiritual traditions across the globe and also across time – from prayers over a thousand years old to contemporary offerings, including from Marcus himself. The vast range encompasses Zoroastrian, Baha'i, African and Native American prayers and even an Eskimo (Inuit people) prayer. Small illustrations enhance the text.



The book is organised by themes: God; Times and Seasons; All the Changing Scene of Life; The World and Society; The Natural World. There are sub-sections under each theme; for example under 'God' : Prayer, Silence, God's Glory, Creator, God's Love and Care, Gratitude and Thanksgiving, God's Forgiveness, God's Care and Guidance, Surrender to God. A similar structure is then found for 'Times and Seasons' with Time, Morning, Day, Evening and Night, Seasons of the Year. This makes it easy to find whatever subject one is looking for. There are notes on the contributors and references, with numbers enabling the reader to find those quoted. The arrangement leads to interesting juxtapositions such as 1.3. 13 Jalal al-Din Rumi

and 1.3.14 Julian of Norwich. The reader can use prayers of spiritual leaders such as Lao Tsu, the Buddha, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, Guru Nanak and Paramahansa Yogananda. The Inspirational writings of Jiddu Krishnamurti, Rabindranath Tagore, Thomas Traherne and William Wordsworth can lead into meditation. The book provides a rich source for general and interfaith worship, small group meetings, and for private reflection.

There are prayers of gratitude for the glories of nature and the world around us. Other prayers are for strength in challenging times: facing fear, childlessness, illness and death – including a desperate plea from a Uruguayan survivor of a plane crash in the Andes. Prayers for magistrates, firefighters and the RNLI are also included.

In his introduction, Braybrooke reminds the reader that many people of prayer have also been active in the struggle for peace and justice and in the service of those in need. He says that ‘This is not surprising. Prayer brings us into the presence of the Divine and as we begin to see the world as God sees it, we become more aware of the injustice and suffering which afflicts so many people. The pattern of the book reminds us that a turning to God should result in a renewed turning to the world in compassion and service.’

This book is a treasure trove of spiritual wisdom. To illustrate the rich contents, I add a few examples here:

The first prayer

Prayer is the Soul of Religion

I believe that prayer is the very soul and essence of religion and, therefore, prayer is the very core of the life of a person, for no one can live without prayer.

Mahatma Gandhi

The last prayer

5.4.17 Beauty

Before me, beauty: Behind me, beauty
Below me, beauty: Above me, beauty
Around me, beauty: May I speak beauty
May I walk in beauty always
Beauty I am.
All is restored to beauty
All is restored to beauty

From the Najavo Blessing

On a lighter note...

2.3.28 Thanksgiving for a sense of humour

Lord, thank you for the gift of humour, which adds enjoyment to life, enables us to cope with difficulties, and helps us to relax and to ease tensions. Give us a sense of fun and the ability to laugh at ourselves, confident that you love us as we are.

Marcus Braybrooke

The theme of the book

4.2.16 Unity

O God, Let us be united
Let us speak in harmony ...
Common be our prayer;
Common be the end of our assembly;
Alike be our feelings;
Unified be our hearts;
Common be our intentions;
Perfect be our unity.

The Hindu Scriptures: The Rig Veda.

Dr Marianne Rankin

COURSES

Quakers and the Afterlife

29 - 31 May 2026

Charney Manor Retreat Centre, Charney Bassett, Oxfordshire, UK

<https://www.charneymanor.com/>

Booking contact: sales@charneymanor.com

Description: What happens to us when we die? Quakers have collected convincing evidence, from the 17th century through to the present, of what happens at death and before we arrive on earth. We'll explore personal testimony in the QFAS anthology, *The Life That Never Ends*, and share inspiring accounts from other times and texts, including international scientific research. All welcome.

About the facilitator: Rhonda Riachi works in professional health education. She has followed developments in near-death experience and survival research for 24 years.

NB: Participants will need a copy of the book, *The Life That Never Ends*, available from Fee Berry, Clerk of QFAS.
Email: caliandris@gmail.com
<https://quakerafterlifestudies.wordpress.com/books-and-literature/>

Reincarnation: a brief introduction

8 - 12 June 2026

Glenthorne Quaker Study Centre, Grasmere, UK

<https://glenthorne.org/>

Booking contact: info@glenthorne.org

Facilitated by Rhonda Riachi

Reincarnation has never been part of mainstream Christian teaching, but around 10% of Christians believe in reincarnation. How did this happen? We'll explore a growing body of research into reincarnation memories to shine a light on this intriguing subject.

The course will include presentations, discussion, reflection and some relevant films on the topic. Course begins 20:30 on Monday and concludes 11:00 on Friday. Afternoons are free for participants to explore Grasmere, with optional discussions or films in the evening.

All welcome – of any faith or none.

For any queries about the course programmes email rhonda.riachi@outlook.com



View of Helm Crag, Grasmere, from Glenthorne. Photo: Rhonda Riachi

PROJECTS

Contemporary Religious and Spiritual Experience: An Illustrated Guide

A project led by Marianne Rankin and Eleanor Dailey

This initiative seeks to explore the diversity and depth of religious and spiritual life in the UK today. In a climate where meaning, identity, and belonging are increasingly complex issues – particularly for young people – this work promises to offer both clarity and inspiration.

The Project aims to make a meaningful contribution to education and to public discourse, fostering empathy, reflection, and cross-cultural understanding at a time when such qualities are urgently needed.

Through a compelling combination of photographic storytelling, first-person testimony and academic research, the project will bring to light the lived experiences of individuals across a wide range of faiths and spiritual paths.

Dr Marianne Rankin studied religious and spiritual experience for many decades, working with the Alister Hardy Trust, speaking in schools and to spiritual groups. In 2008 she published *An Introduction to Religious and Spiritual Experience* (Bloomsbury/Continuum), exploring how such experiences manifest across different faith traditions and secular contexts. In 2022 she was awarded a PhD focusing on the *Fruits of Spiritual Experience* – a study of the long-term personal and societal impact of mystical and transformative encounters. Marianne's work provides the academic foundation for the project, grounding personal testimonies within a wider philosophical and theological context.
www.mariannerankin.com

Eleanor Dailey has photographed over 50 countries and has a special interest in religious architecture and human spirituality.
eleanordailey.com

The Project will result in:

- A **website** where visitors can explore stories through images and sound - featuring powerful portraits, interview audio, and interactive thematic navigation - accessible to the public and educators.
- An **online downloadable publication** featuring fine art photography and narrative.

Outreach

We are currently seeking support for this work. Initially we are hoping to contact representatives of the major religious traditions, to request permission to photograph ceremonies and festivals, which, combined with the explanatory text, will form the basis of the various strands of the project. We are also recording spiritual gatherings with a more open view of the spiritual.

Sponsorship

If you can support the project financially, you can find details and explore sponsorship options at <https://www.crse.uk/sponsorship>

Project Website: <https://www.crse.uk/>