

# **PERSONAL RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AS A RESOURCE FOR THEOLOGY BY THE PEOPLE**

**An Application of the Approach of  
the Alister Hardy Research Centre**

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Talk of God, by “the people”, must be open to God at every step, for God is infinite, and so beyond all human knowing, unless he chooses to reveal Himself. For infinite power to reveal Himself to the people, without dominating them, or destroying them, is an act of infinite love. Therefore, theology is open to the people, so that they may respond in freedom. God expresses Himself in infinite love by creating and caring for the people, in creating them with the capacity to respond to Him in love, and in giving them His Holy Spirit of love to unite them to Himself in love. When the people fail to respond to His love, God Himself takes the first step to save and renew their fallen humanity, by coming down to their level to raise them to His own. So, God entered human history in the person his Son, Jesus Christ, and renewed His own purpose in creation of involving the people in the relationship of love between the Trinity. So, seen “from above”, theology is, at every stage, the free activity of God’s grace. Yet, because it is an activity of God’s gracious love, it always makes possible the free response of the people. No doctrinal statement can be used as the “last word” to close the conversation between God and the people, but every contribution opens the way for a further contribution. No human culture or group can claim to have produced an absolute statement of Christian truth, which closes the way for another culture to have its say. God expresses His love to the people of every culture by creating and caring for them, by giving them the capacity to respond in their own way, and by sending the Holy Spirit to arouse them to respond. By word and sacrament, the Son offers His presence, in a way that can be embodied in every culture.

In Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God makes Himself known to the people, within a personal relationship. People know each other

personally, not as meaningless collections of sensations, nor as propositions, with a fixed meaning, but as mutual participants in a continuing conversation. Conversation or “communication” between persons does not just take place at the conceptual level of talk, but involves the whole person, as one person or people reaches out with body, feelings, thoughts, and intentions to the senses, heart, mind, and will of the other, and invites response. Such a “transcendental method” of knowing requires that we be attentive, intelligent, rational, and responsible, as Bernard Lonergan would say.<sup>1</sup> We are reminded of the command to love God “with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength (Mark 12:30). When we attend with the senses, we receive a preconception impression of another person. Inasmuch as we are motivated by genuine interest and concern to “know” someone for their own sake, and not just for what we can get out of them, and, in as much as we are not passive victims of data pressed upon us, our knowing will be an act of love. Even at the level of the senses, information is not just received as scraps of “data”. The other levels of our knowing already join here, within a sense of holistic reality of that of which we are aware. A body is never just a body, it is always the outward form of a person, and stands as a symbol of the whole person. So, at the level of attentiveness, we already have a grasp of overall form, given in “body language”, through gesture, sign, “looks”, behaviour, glance, cry, or vision. At the level of intelligence, or understanding, these signals are interpreted as thoughts or feelings, intuitions, hunches, moods, myths, or dreams. Yet, such isolated insights need to be sifted and set within a system or theory, if they are to be explained according to “reason”. Further, the more we respond to an experience, or a person, the more we truly “know” it or them. It is by re-enacting, writing about, or picturing someone, or something, that we make it symbolically available to our conscious mind. So, all the levels of consciousness work together, within the context of two-way exchange relationships, to produce what we call “knowledge”. In this way, knowledge is not abstract, but concrete, and to deny its bodily, sensate base is to empty it. This is important in a theology of the people, for it affirms that value of all the experience of the people at its most everyday “gut level”,<sup>2</sup> and challenges a merely “academic” theology imposed from above. Although we may be said to evolve or “emerge” from lower to higher levels of consciousness, we need to bring with us all we have learnt at previous levels, to allow it to be “sublated”, or integrated, within a more-fully-organised way of knowing.

We usually identify revelation with the concepts that are the end product of the human organising of knowledge. Yet, in the Bible, we see all the stages of the delivery and reception of knowledge in use. Gestures, moods, visions, events, signs, symbols, are all used to convey knowledge of the relationship between God and man. As all these levels of consciousness are present in the delivery or “externalisation” and “objectification” of revelation, so they can be present in its “internalisation”, or reception.<sup>3</sup>

To any new knowledge, we bring a “pre-understanding”, which is the result of the two-way interaction between our social inheritance and our personal capacity. As a result of that pre-understanding, the same event would be experienced very differently by a person from one culture to the way it was experienced by a person from another culture. Yet, in as much as a person committed himself to all the levels of consciousness involved in truly “knowing” a person, or experiencing them, the person or experience would make a distinctive impression upon him that was true to the person or experience, and not just the prejudices of the experiencing person. The “pre-understanding” will serve to develop the consciousness of the person, so that they have the skills and categories to cope with the new experience. The new experience will have power, more or less completely, to transform the understanding of the experiencing person. In this way, it is possible to say that all previous experience, especially religious experience, can serve to provide a “pre-understanding” of, a preparation for, the reception of, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. At the same time, that revelation will have the power to transform and renew the pre-understanding of the person, and to raise their consciousness on to the new higher level required to cope with contact with a new “higher” reality. The new level of consciousness will be the level of the “Spirit”, the level of the free, gracious operation of God’s love, which calls for a free and loving response. This level of the “Spirit” will not exist in abstraction from all that has gone before, because it is given in the incarnation, the bodily life of Jesus Christ, and so it integrates all levels of human consciousness. It has been anticipated, and human consciousness has been prepared to receive it, by the prophetic work of the Holy Spirit in all creation, giving hints and glimpses of the powerful love of God.

At the level of responsibility, the human response to the revelation of God’s love in action is “love in action”. At the level of reason, the revelation of God is interpreted as meaningful history, or conceptual system, based on the expression of God’s love in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. On the level of

understanding, revelation is experienced as moments of awe and wonder at the holiness of God's powerful love shown on the cross. At the level of the senses, revelation is experienced as the pain and joy associated with the trembling fear, and fascinated love, excited by the cross and resurrection. Thus, central to the knowledge of the revelation of God, is the response, the concept, the feeling, and direct contact with the "Holy".<sup>4</sup> All other experience of wonder at the "holy" prepare for, and is fulfilled, in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

The people are, therefore, invited to bring all their experience, especially their experience of the "holy", as the pre-understanding for constructing a theology, based on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. They should not reject their own consciousness in favour of a supposedly more "evolved" consciousness provided by those, whose lives have already been transformed by the revelation. In other words, Melanesians do not have to become Europeans before they become Christians. They already have, within their own culture, skills and categories that are capable of being raised to a higher level and transformed to receive the gospel. That does not prevent them, of course, coming to know for themselves, through their own ways of knowing, experiences and persons from European culture. Thus, there will be dialogue between European and Melanesian cultures, but it can be on equal terms as partners. The way of "evolution", for Melanesian culture, will not be into a pre-set European culture, but into an authentic development of their own culture, cleansed and raised by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and enabled and stimulated by European witness.

Human beings are moved to awesome fear and wondering love by what goes beyond their previous experience, especially when the new experience points beyond itself, in a way that seems totally open, without limits. Great light, great dark, great quiet, great noise, great dangers, great security, are all moments of holiness, evoking moods of reverence. The moments will be rich in their power to generate a whole cluster of thoughts, feelings, and associations with other events. Such clusters of implicit meaning will need to be made explicit, interpreted as story and concept. The person will feel either swamped or accepted by what is greater by himself; diminished or exalted, he will feel his own skills enhanced, or belittled; he will feel fed by the richness of what exceeds himself, or drained by a vast emptiness. The presence of the holy will be a summons to conversion, to turn totally towards the holy, and away from lesser experience. In as much as he responds, he will perceive the

goodness of the holy, and be aroused to love, faith, and hope. In as much as he clings to lesser experiences, he will not properly see the holy, and will only sense darkness and threat. In this way, knowledge of the holy both results from, and leads to, a moral and spiritual response. It will lead to the maturing, the “self-actualisation”, of the whole person, to the capacity to accept and convey peace, and to accept both oneself and all other persons. In this way, it is the “holy” that is the fundamental force for justice, development, and peace, and it is conversion to Christ that is the summing up of all human experiences of holiness. Christ, the light of the world, shines in the total darkness of the cross, His voice of calm speaks in the unrestrained raging of natural storm, or human madness. Moments of holiness have been described by the psychologist, Abraham Maslow, as “peak experiences”, and he claims that it is through them that human beings find their deepest needs for acceptance and significance met, and that they emerge on to ever-higher levels of consciousness, and so achieve full maturity of character. We may see the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of all “peak experiences”, and the word and sacraments, which express that experience, as the means whereby the deepest human needs are met.<sup>5</sup>

Traditional culture in Papua New Guinea contains many opportunities for experiencing and expressing wonder at moments of holiness in life. Dreams and visions not only recall great persons and experiences of the past, opening the way to the world of the ancestors, but also anticipate the future, alerting to the threat of attack, or promise of blessing. Rituals and dances are performed in a mood of dignity and reverence, exaltation, and joy. Feasts excite expectations of unlimited plenty, calling for unstinted giving, but hinting at even greater return. Sacred times, sacred places, sacred social roles, all provide occasions for contact with what is unknown, and “other”. Many such experiences remain pre-conceptual, implicit rather than explicit. They are made known by gesture and hint, rather than articulated act, and coherent speech. Nevertheless, their intrinsic holiness is great, and they can provide rich resources for reflection and response, as those who have experienced them emerge on to higher levels of consciousness. Thus, the cultures of Papua New Guinea have, within them, a store of skills, and ways of knowing, which can prepare the people to know for themselves the revelation of Jesus Christ. In turn, the revelation of Christ will “convert” those cultures, not distorting or diminishing them, but affirming them at every existing level of consciousness, from the most basic gut-level, upwards. It will not belittle, or make captive,

the culture, but will bring free growth to that which has been stunted by being directed to an inadequate object of attention. By attending to the union of God and man in Christ, it will find unlimited scope for all its capacity for growth.

If the Melanesian capacity for wonder at the holiness of life is to be made available as a preparation for the gospel, and as a means to spiritual growth, then it needs to be described as fully, and as truly, as possible. A possible way in which this could be done is through the methods of the Alister Hardy Research Centre, Oxford, which conducts research into religious experience. The statistical methods used by the centre, and their use of “wordy” written questionnaires, addressed to individual people, may be more appropriate to an individualistic, literate, and materialistic European culture, than to communal, oral, and holistic cultures, like those of Papua New Guinea. Similarly, some of the questions may be too specific to a European culture to be appropriate to Papua New Guinea, or they may seem to be prying into areas that are too private. Nevertheless, the questionnaire may provide a framework for people to answer, in their own way, the basic question: “Have you ever been aware of, or influenced by, a presence, or a power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?” If sufficient answers are obtained, they can be used for reflection in the construction of a theology of the people in Melanesia. They may also be analysed and sent to the Alister Hardy Research Centre for comparison with the results obtained in the culture of Britain.

Sir Alister Hardy was a distinguished biologist, who contributed theories about evolution, which are accepted by most biologists today. Yet, Alister Hardy did not think that the “living stream” that carried human evolution forward was caused just by an inner hunger to satisfy material needs. He pointed out that the prolonged dependence of human children on their parents resulted in a capacity to be open to the consciousness of a superior, and to learn from them. This capacity to be open to what is above evolved into a readiness to worship, to respond to “the divine flame.”<sup>6</sup> Since evolution “worked” in this way, worship of God must be an intrinsic part of the evolutionary process, and could only be there if God had put it there. So, on the basis of biological researches, Alister Hardy argued for the “spiritual nature of man”, and for communication between God and men. In this way, he not only found a place in “natural theology” for religious experiences, but also showed how a readiness to learn led to receptivity to revelation, to be sensitive to communication with what is other than man. Alister Hardy’s work may be

criticised as too “biological”, and insufficiently historical in itself, to be used as a complete basis for a Christian theology, but it offers an essential element in the exchange between revelation, experience, and reason, which will make up a full theology.<sup>7</sup> Bernard Lonergan has called for just such studies as the Alister Hardy Research Centre provides: “The functional speciality, foundations, will derive its first set of categories from religious experience. That experience is something exceedingly simple, and, in time, also exceedingly simplifying, but it also is something exceedingly rich and enriching. There are needed studies of religious interiority: historical, phenomenological, psychological, and sociological. There is needed, in the theologian, the spiritual development that will enable him, both to enter in to the experience of others, and to frame the terms and relations that will express that experience.”<sup>8</sup> Also, a recent report on the Doctrine of God, commissioned by the bishops of the Church of England, quotes Alister Hardy, himself, in order to state that theology must take the data of religious experience into account: “the encounter with the holy is not to be found only in places, which can have a “religious” label put upon them. Indeed, as Alister Hardy points out, “Contrary to the premise on which most Christian evangelism is planned, the awareness of God’s presence has little to do with preaching or teaching. It is most often found in solitude, and is triggered by natural beauty, music, or literature, or by illness, depression, or despair.” Some people, who have this kind of experience, carry on in much the same way as they did before the experience, but a significant number of people feel driven to church, because, in the church, they expect to have these experiences validated and given a context within which their life can take on a new meaning and purpose. For them, the meaning of the experience is that they have been addressed by God and it is self-authenticating. . . .

“These experiences are difficult to systematise, but there are enough similarities in them to form a cluster of meaning, which is part of the data to be considered.”<sup>9</sup>

Writers from every Christian background, from the Roman Catholic to the Evangelical, and the Charismatic, or Pentecostal, have emphasised the place of personal religious experience in constructing a Christian theology.<sup>10</sup> This does not mean that all knowledge of God is reduced to one or two vivid moments, or conversion experiences, nor that the reality of God is confined within the limits of what human being are conscious. However, human experience of the holiness of God is that it is all-loving, as well as all-

powerful. Therefore, He can be trusted to be faithful, and not to reveal Himself in ways that are against human experience and reason. God makes Himself totally open to man, that man may, in Christ, be totally open to God. Grace perfects nature.<sup>11</sup> In terms of Melanesian theology, this means that Melanesian religious experience is a necessary, but not exclusive, element of Melanesian theology. European Christian tradition has handed on to Papua New Guinea the word and sacrament of the revelation of God in Christ, and has shared the rational skills developed to interpret that revelation. So what Melanesians inherit is not a completed theology, but a way of doing theology, according to the intrinsic capacities of the human mind to engage in, and reflect upon, experience, in terms of the self-authenticating truth of God Himself. Since God reveals Himself, and is experienced, as holy, Christian theology must meet the test of holiness in word and deed. God is of unlimited power, therefore, no theology should serve merely the interest of any worldly power, or local interest. God is all-loving, therefore, theology should reflect God's faithful love, by being, at once, consistent and unified, yet respecting the distinctiveness of all God's creatures. These tests do not belong within any one culture, Melanesian or European, but reflect the transcendent, and, therefore, universal holiness of God Himself.

*All readers of this article are, therefore, asked to complete, or, at least, respond to this questionnaire, and to encourage as many other people to do so as possible.*

Please send questionnaires (cut from the journal or duplicated) to:

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#### **NOTES**

1. Lonergan, Bernard, *Method in Theology*, London UK: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972, pp. 35ff.
2. Dorr, Donald, *Spirituality and Justice*, Dublin Ire: Gill & Macmillan, 1984, p. 21.
3. Berger, Peter, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Harmondsworth UK: Penguin Books, 1967.
4. Otto, Rudolf, *The Idea of the Holy*, London UK: Pelican, 1959.

5. Maslow, Abraham, *Towards a Psychology of Being*, New York NY: Oxford University Press, pp. 79ff.
6. Hardy, Alister, *The Divine Flame*, London UK: Collins, 1966, p. 27.
7. Dulles, Avery, *Models of Revelation*, Dublin Ire: Gill & Macmillan, 1983, for the need for theology to be based on historical revelation mediated through human consciousness.
8. Lonergan, Bernard, *Method in Theology*, p. 290.
9. The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, *We Believe in God*, London UK: Church House Publishing, 1987, p. 139.
10. See, for example, Edwards, Dennis, *Human Experience of God*, Dublin Ire: Gill & Macmillan, 1984; Hughes, Gerard, *God of Surprises*, London UK: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985; Tozer, A. W., *The Knowledge of the Holy*, New York NY: Harper & Row, 1961; Proudfoot, W., *Religious Experience*, Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1985.
11. Avis, Paul, *Methods of Modern Theology*, Basingstoke UK: Marshall Pickering, 1986, quotes St Thomas Aquinas, “the way up and the way down are the same”, p. 38.

**QUESTIONNAIRE  
PERSONAL RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**

Name: .....

Address: .....

The first section asks about the general pattern of your religious experience. For some people, such experience occurs in particular moments of insight. For others, religious awareness develops more gradually, so that it may not be easy to pick out particular occasions as being of outstanding significance. "Have you ever been aware of, or influenced by, a presence or a power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?"

1. Which pattern of experience is most like yours?
  - a. One particular moment or period of insight .....
  - b. A number of different separate insights .....
  - c. A steady growth of awareness .....
  - d. A steady growth of awareness, with special moment of insight .....
  - e. Something else (PLEASE DESCRIBE BELOW) .....

2. Many people who have had such experience say that there are "triggers", or specific events, or circumstances, that set them off. Below is a list of triggers that people described. Please read through the list before putting a tick opposite those that are right for your experience(s).

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| a. Natural beauty .....                     | o. Child birth .....                                    |
| b. Sacred places .....                      | p. The prospect of death .....                          |
| c. Taking part in a religious service ..... | q. The death of others .....                            |
| d. Prayer .....                             | r. Crises in personal relations .....                   |
| e. Meditation .....                         | s. Silence, solitude .....                              |
| f. Visual art .....                         | t. At a feast .....                                     |
| g. Literature, drama, film, dance .....     | u. Chewing betelnut .....                               |
| h. Creative work .....                      | v. In a dream or vision.....                            |
| i. Physical activity .....                  | w. Sitting in the village "house" with others.....      |
| j. Relaxation .....                         | x. Because of garden or hunting, magic or sorcery ..... |
| k. Sexual love-making.....                  | y. Something else (PLEASE DESCRIBE) .....               |
| l. Happiness .....                          |   |
| m. Depression or despair .....              |   |
| n. Illness .....                            |   |

3. (1) People give many different kinds of descriptions of what their experience was like. Here is a list of some of the things they say happened. Please read the list before ticking all those descriptions that apply to your experience(s).

- a. A sense of security, protection, or peace .....
- b. A sense of joy, happiness, or well-being .....
- c. A sense of new strength in myself .....
- d. A sense of guidance, vocation, or inspiration .....
- e. A sense of awe, reverence, or wonder .....
- f. A sense of certainty, clarity, or enlightenment .....
- g. I felt exaltation, excitement, or ecstasy .....
- h. I was lost for words .....
- i. A sense of harmony, order, or unity .....
- j. A sense of timelessness .....
- k. I had a feeling of love, or affection, within me .....
- l. There was a yearning, desire, or nostalgia .....
- m. A sense that I was forgiven, restored, or renewed .....
- n. A sense of integration, wholeness, or fulfilment .....
- o. A sense of hope or optimism .....
- p. I was released from the fear of death .....
- q. I felt fear or horror .....
- r. A sense of remorse or guilt .....
- s. A sense of indifference or detachment .....
- t. A sense of purpose behind events .....
- u. A sense that my prayers were answered in events .....
- v. A sense of non-human presence .....
- w. Something else (PLEASE DESCRIBE) .....

(2) Which, if any, of the above descriptions is the most appropriate to your experience? (Just give the letter) .....

4. People quite often speak of specific sensations in connection with their experience. The list below describes several of these. Did your experience(s) have any of them? Please read through the list before putting a tick opposite the appropriate ones.

- a. I had a vision .....
- b. I had an "illumination" .....
- c. I had the sense of being bathed in light .....
- d. I had a feeling of unity with my surroundings or with other people .....
- e. I felt I was lifted out of my body .....
- f. I felt that in a strange way this had happened to me before (d  j   vu) .....

- g. My surroundings were transformed in a remarkable way .....
- h. I heard a voice, which called me .....
- i. I was given guidance by a voice .....
- j. I "spoke in tongues" (glossolalia) .....
- k. I heard an inner music or other sounds .....
- l. I experienced physical healing .....
- m. I felt warmth, or a fire .....
- n. I felt physical comforted .....
- o. I felt I was being hit or shocked .....
- p. I felt physically guided .....
- r. I was aware of a perfume or smell at the time .....
- s. I knew what was going on somewhere else (telepathy) .....
- t. I knew what was going to happen before it happened (precognition) .....
- u. I saw in my mind something going on elsewhere (clairvoyance) .....
- v. I got in touch with someone who had died .....
- w. I saw an apparition or ghost .....
- x. Something else (PLEASE SPECIFY) .....

Many people describe specific experiences that happened at a particular time in their lives. If you have had an experience of this type, please answer questions 5-8 below. (If you have had more than one such experience, choose the one that has been most important to you.)

(If your experience has not included these special moments, go to question 9.)

- 5. If you had to choose one word, or maybe a few words, to describe your feelings immediately before you had the experience, what would you say?
- 6. Did the experience come: When you were wide awake? ..... Between waking and sleeping? ..... While you were asleep, in a dream? .....
- 7. Approximately how long did the experience itself, apart from its after-effects, last? ..... A fraction of a second ..... Between one and 10 seconds ..... Between 10 seconds and a minute ..... Between a minute and an hour ..... Between an hour and a day ..... Several days ..... Several weeks ..... Other (PLEASE SPECIFY) .....

- 8. a. How would you describe your state of mind after the experience left you? .....
- b. How long did this state of mind last? .....

**The next section is about the way your experience has affected your life, and how you interpret it to yourself.**

- 9. Has the experience affected your life in any way? Tick the appropriate statement.

Not at all ..... Slightly ..... Quite a lot .....  
A great deal ..... More than anything else .....

- 10. If your answer to question 9 was "Yes", can you describe the way in which your experience has altered your outlook on life?  
.....

- 11. a. What did you think was the cause of your experience at the time it first happened? .....
- b. What do you now think was the cause of it? The same, or different? If different, in what way?.....

- 12. Have you told anyone else about your experience (apart from the Alister Hardy Research Centre)?  
Yes ..... No .....

- 13. a. If you have told other people about your experience, what was their relationship to you? .....
- b. What was their reaction when you told them?  
.....
- c. If you have never told anyone else about your experience, why not? .....

- 14. Do you view your experience as being in some way religious?  
Yes ..... No .....

- 15. If your answer to question 14 is "Yes", can you say why you think of your experience as religious? .....

- 16. How old were you when you first had experience of this kind?

Under 5 years	.....	35-44 years	.....
05-15 years	.....	45-54 years	.....
15-24 years	.....	55-64 years	.....
25-34 years	.....	65 or over	.....

17. How recently have you had an experience like this?  
Now .....  
Within the last week .....  
Between a week and a year ago .....  
Between a year and ten years ago .....  
More than ten years ago .....
18. How often have you have an experience like this?  
Once ..... Twice ..... Several times .....  
Often ..... All of the time .....
19. If you think of "people in general", how many of them would say they'd had an experience like this?  
None ..... Very few ..... About half .....  
Most of them ..... All of them .....

**The next section is about the environment in which you grew up.**

20. How important was/is the spiritual side of life for your mother (mother substitute)?  
Of no importance ..... Slightly important ..... Fairly important .....  
Very important ..... I can't answer .....
21. How important was/is the spiritual side of life of your father (father substitute)?  
Of no importance ..... Slightly important ..... Fairly important .....  
Very important ..... I can't answer .....
22. If you belonged to a religious faith, or denomination, as a child, which one was that? (If none, say "none") .....
23. Are you involved in any religious faith or denomination now? If "yes", which one? .....
24. How often, on average, do you attend a religious service or ritual?  
More that once a week ..... Once a week ..... About once a month .....  
A few times a year ..... Only weddings, funerals, baptisms, etc. .... Never .....
25. Whether you attend religious services or not, do you have some religious belief?  
Yes ..... No .....