



Journal for the Study of Religious Experience



Meeting in the Cave of the Heart: The importance of religious experience to theology and interspirituality

Rev Dr Marcus Braybrooke
Joint President World Congress of Faiths
marcus.braybrooke@worldfaiths.org

I am very honoured and pleased to have been invited to give this Sir Alister Hardy lecture. I can picture him clearly with his glasses and moustache and tweed jacket when, soon after I had become an Honorary Secretary of the World Congress of Faiths, he gave a lecture to the Congress, of which he had been a member for many years. It was just at the time in 1970 that his article appeared in the *Observer*. I also have happy memories of George Appleton, Edward Robinson, and many other friends.

It has been said that all theology is really autobiography. It's an exaggeration, but some autobiography may help explain why Alister Hardy's work has had a large influence on my thinking. I don't think I have ever not believed in God – partly because of growing up in the country and feeling, as Wordsworth put it in *Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey*, 'a presence that disturbs with the joy of elevated thoughts' and partly because I was brought up in a Christian home, which, despite tensions between my parents, was a home shaped by the values of the Gospels.

The Rector was very liberal. It was a village joke that he had two sermons: one on the 'Fatherhood of God' and the other on the 'Brotherhood of Man.' – forgive the masculines. I have always found it easier to relate to the Jesus of Nazareth, 'the man for others' than to the Christ of the Creeds – partly because of time spent in the Holy Land. My longing, in the words of the Prayer of Humble Access, is that I evermore 'dwell in Christ and He in me.'

Studying theology, I really appreciated the Biblical and historical studies, but the more philosophical discussions were arid. Linguistic Philosophy was in the ascendant, and there were endless debates about whether it is possible to speak about God, if there is a God to speak about.

This is why my year studying Indian religions was so liberating. Spiritual Knowledge (*jnana*) is recognised as genuine – indeed as that which is truly liberating.

You may know the passage in the *Upanishads* when Svetaketu returned home. When Svetaketu was twelve years old, his father Uddalaka said to him, 'Svetaketu,

you must now go to school and study. None of our family, my child, is ignorant of Brahman.' Thereupon Svetaketu went to a teacher and studied for twelve years. After committing to memory all the Vedas, he returned home full of pride in his learning. His father, noticing the young man's conceit, said to him: 'Svetaketu, have you asked for that knowledge by which we hear the unheardable, by which we perceive the unperceivable, by which we know the unknowable?' 'What is that knowledge, sir?' asked Svetaketu.' (Chandogya Upanishad. 6:1:1)

It is, of course, spiritual knowledge, *moksa*, release or liberation – based on direct experience.

Alister Hardy's lecture was so important to me because amidst the secularism of the sixties, when 'God was dead,' Hardy was affirming the reality and importance of spiritual experience and knowledge.

What I want to try and share is how this starting point has shaped my thinking in relation to my approach to scripture and the creeds; to how the Christian faith relates to other religions; and awareness that the Ultimate Mystery transcends all words. Finally, I would like to suggest how the unitive experience and inter-spirituality inspire commitment to the search for a world with a heart.

I remember years ago a New Testament scholar saying that the question one should always have in mind when reading scripture was, 'What was it that people who thought like that had experienced and were trying to convey by what they wrote.' The preacher's task was to convey that experience in contemporary language to people who thought very differently. I have never been afraid of Biblical criticism and would usually in a sermon instead of saying 'Jesus said' I would say 'John or one of the other evangelists in his Gospel tells us that Jesus said or did this.' I try to avoid giving the impression that Jesus actually said every word ascribed to him – although I would put more trust in the evangelists than in the accuracy of some newspapers. In any case, the evangelists were not writing a biography of Jesus – but seeking to convey their new-found faith in Jesus. This approach takes for granted that the Bible and indeed the creeds are human constructions. The paradox that Wilfred Cantwell Smith made clear in his *What is Scripture?* (Cantwell Smith, 2000) is that it is the same community that regards a book as 'The Word of God' which is also the community that gives it that authority. Archbishop Michael Ramsey tried to square the circle by saying the Bible is 'self-authenticating.' (Ramsey, 1962).

But this approach to scripture was certainly a minority view for much of the last century – perhaps it still is. Theology for much of the twentieth century was dominated by Karl Barth's insistence on the authority of the Word of God and so-called 'kerygmatic theology.' Barth insisted that there is no way from human beings to God – all we know of God is what is revealed in the Word.

Barth was very critical of Friedrich Schleiermacher, whom, you may have guessed I admire. Schleiermacher was an influential German theologian who lived from (1768-1834). His emphasis was on spiritual awareness. Schleiermacher passionately wanted to communicate to those whom he called 'Cultured despisers' of religion. He asked them to think about those moments when they had 'a sense or taste for the Infinite' or in a phrase, he often used, 'a feeling of absolute dependence.' Religion, he

said, 'is the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things in and through the infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the eternal.' He scorned the petty divisions in the churches over belief and ritual (Braybrooke, 2016). You can see why Barth was highly critical of Schleiermacher, because Schleiermacher started from human experience not from revelation.

One of Barth's disciples, Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965) applied the dictum that 'there is no way from human beings to God' to religions and dismissed them as futile human attempts to reach God that were bound to fail. 'Revelation is God's sovereign dealing with man or it is not revelation' Religion is 'unbelief' and 'criminal arrogance against God' (Kraemer, 1956, p. 320).

This was certainly the dominant view in the churches when I went to India and of many of the staff of Madras Christian College,' Some were very hostile to my wish to visit a Hindu temple.

Several factors made me increasingly unhappy with such a narrow approach. One was that before I was theologically educated to read Barth and Kraemer, I had always assumed – to quote St John's Gospel that the Light manifest in Jesus was 'the light that lighteneth every person who comes into the world.' (John, 1:9)

Secondly, one day in the dusty library at Madras Christian College, I picked up a translation of devotional poems of Manikka-Vacagar. He was one of the Tamil devotional poets of the 10th century and one of the few Prime Ministers to have been a saint. He repeatedly tells of God's deliverance:

Thou entr'ing in stood'st by me, fast bound in sin
As one who says, 'I'm sins's destroyer, come!'
(Manikka-Vacagar, 1900. Hymn V, XXII, 52).

You could say he was the Tamil's Charles Wesley. There is a Tamil saying that 'anyone whose heart is not melted by Manikka-Vacagar's poems must have a heart of stone.'

The discovery opened up for me the riches of Tamil devotional literature and the *bhakti tradition*. And like Rudolf Otto, who was also amazed by the devotional poems of the Tamil, it made me question the exclusive claim that only Christianity speaks of divine grace. Indeed, Tamil devotees debated whether God was like a mother cat who carries her kittens, who have to do nothing, or like a mother monkey to whom the kittens have to cling – echoes of the argument between Pelagius and St Augustine about salvation: whether it is a pure gift or has to be earned (Otto, 1930).

I was grateful for the chance to study under a leading Saiva-Siddhanta scholar and was becoming convinced that it was not only Christians who might have an experience of God's overwhelming love and mercy. I was later to learn about Pure Land Buddhism.

I was also influenced by the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, to whom my professor introduced me - which are familiar to many of you. Vivekananda was a student at the Scottish Presbyterian College in Calcutta. He asked a number of religious teachers, 'Sir, have you seen God?' He got the evasive

sort of answers I guess you would get if you asked many of staff at a theological college. But the principal suggested to Vivekananda that he should seek out Sri Ramakrishna, who gave him a direct answer, 'Yes, my son, I have seen God, just as I see you before me, only much more intensely.' Sri Ramakrishna, after intense longing, had had a vision of Mother Kali. Later on he followed other spiritual paths including Christianity. 'One day he saw coming towards him a person with beautiful large eyes, serene countenance, and fair skin. As the two faced each other, a voice sang out in the depth of his soul, 'Behold the Christ who shed his heart's blood for the redemption of the world... It is he, he Master Yogi, who is in eternal union with God. It is Jesus, Love Incarnate.' Sri Ramakrishna's claim, based on his own experience, was that different spiritual paths lead to 'realisation.' The differences are a matter of culture and language (Ramakrishna, 1942, p.34).

At this time, a few Roman Catholic scholars, with similar experiences, were suggesting that holy people of other faiths might be regarded as 'anonymous Christians' – that is to say they were saved by Christ in whom they would have believed if they had had a chance to do so. If that sounds complicated - it is. It is a way of saying that holy people of other faiths are saved, without compromising the then teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that 'there is no salvation outside the Church.' For example Fr Bede Griffiths, with whom I was in touch, wrote in his *Christian Ashram* in 1966, 'What we can say with certainty is that at all times and in all places God (and that means Christ) is soliciting the hearts and minds of every person' (Griffiths, 1966, p.196).

The difficulty is with that phrase: 'and that means Christ.' Bede's views of course in later writings move beyond this. I was becoming convinced that other religions were themselves Divine Revelations and channels of God's grace, although like Christianity always an inadequate human response to that grace. Some of you will know of Fr Murray Rogers, who spent his last years in Oxford, whom I visited at his ashram at Jyotirketan. He told me of a group who recognised that the true meeting for people of faith was in 'The Cave of the Heart.' It is where, as has been said, 'You tell me your beautiful names for God and I tell you mine.'

This recognition of the spiritual riches at the heart of different religions has influenced my approach to the study of other religions. I want to learn from them and not just learn about them.

The first international conference that I attended was in Patiala in the Punjab held to mark the 500th anniversary of Guru Nanak's birth. (It's where I first met Ursula King). Many of the papers emphasised Hindu influences whereas others stressed the influence of Islam – rather as if Nanak was writing a thesis drawing on both the writings of Muslim and Hindus but did not include any footnotes – the sort of Orientalism that Edward Said criticised. Traditional sources, however, suggest that during the three days he was missing, he was taken into the presence of God, who told him to call others to experience the bliss of God's love. That is to say his teaching flows from an over-powering sense of God's presence – and in my paper I compared this to Sir Francis Younghusband's transformative experience in the mountains near Lhasa.

It is the failure to recognise that Islam flows from the Prophet's spiritual experience in the cave on Mount Hira that led Christians in the Middle Ages to brand him as a heretic and extremists today to pervert Islam into an ideology.

If however you recognise other world religions as channels of God's self-revelation, then rather than just learning about them you seek to learn from them. Now, if I read the *Qur'an* or the *Guru Granth Sahib*, I read it with the same hope that I will hear God speaking to me as I have when I read the *Bible*. Raimundo Panikkar's *The Vedic Experience... for modern man*' is a brilliant example of this approach (Panikkar, 1977).

Not all spiritual experiences are as life transforming as those of Guru Nanak or the Prophet or one could add the conversion of St Paul or perhaps the Baptism or Transfiguration of Jesus Christ. But many of the accounts collected by the Religious Experience Research Centre that I have read and nearly all the people about whom I wrote in my book *Beacons of Light – One hundred people who have shaped the spiritual history of humankind* (Braybrooke, 2009) had a life-changing experience and I believe, we are enriched by each person's story.

With this emphasis on the spiritual core of each of the world religions, I responded too to those, like Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, a Spalding Professor here in Oxford and later to be President of India, who spoke of an emerging world faith as members of different spiritual paths shared their experiences and responded to the modern world to which they all had to relate. I notice that Sir Alister ends his *The Biology of God* with the same hope. He wrote,

Just as science is science in any country of the world, so in the future there may be a faith to bind all people together in a universal recognition that what they in their different ways have called God, Nirvana, Kwoth (an African name for the God of Creation) and other names, is in truth a demonstrable part of the very nature of man – man the religious animal.' (Hardy. 1975, p. 323)

The same hope inspired Sir Francis Younghusband to found the World Congress of Faiths. My own picture 'of the spiritual history of humankind is of a great river with various springs, sources and tributaries, always changing, sometimes dividing, with backwaters, but moving forward and enriching the present by what is carried forward from the past and opening up new vistas for the future' (Braybrooke, 2009, p.4).

This is not a view that is fashionable in interfaith circles at present. The emphasis is more on the distinctiveness of each religion - the mantra is 'Respect for Difference.'

But the coming together of which I am speaking is not an artificial mixture – partly it is true that people of different faiths live in the same world and so there are common problems to which to respond. But for the writers I have mentioned the unity they speak of springs from the mystic's recognition that God transcends all that we can say of the Divine Reality - even if mystics write at considerable length.

The fourth century Cappadocian Father Gregory Nazianzen wrote,
 'By what name shall I call you, Who are beyond all name?
 All names are given to you yet none can comprehend you.
 How shall I call upon you,
 O you beyond all names?

Or Kabir wrote

The moon shines in my body, but my blind eyes cannot see it,
 The moon is within me, and so is the sun
 The unstruck drum of Eternity is sounded within me;
 but my deaf ears cannot hear it. (Braybrooke, 2003, p.50)

Or the Syrian liturgy ,
 O God you are the unsearchable abyss of peace,
 The ineffable sea of love. (Ibid.)

And, of course, Moses was warned by God, 'No one may see me and live' (Genesis, 33:20).

If the Ultimate Mystery to which the great religions point is indeed a mystery, it means that all are human creeds and dogmas and they have only a relative truth. They are, as a Buddhist saying puts it, 'fingers pointing to moon'.

It is this mystical experience that transcends words that inspired many of the pioneers of the interfaith movement. This is not suggesting that all religions are really the same – indeed it is in sharing their particularity that we are all enriched. In a trusting relationship, frank and critical comment, helps to deepen our understanding of the Divine mystery. I gladly acknowledge how much I have learned from Hinduism; and that immersion in Holocaust studies and reflecting with Jewish friends has changed my picture of God.

Even if we cannot know God in all the Divine glory, some pictures are more adequate than others. I once heard Ninian Smart say, 'God is not literally a father, but God is not even non-literally an onion.' Did God really ask Abraham to sacrifice his only son – even if divine intervention stopped Abraham at the last minute? The philosopher Immanuel Kant, said that Abraham should have known that the command was opposed to moral law and could not have been the true voice of God. The same needs to be said clearly today to all who claim to kill in the name of God. I have always thought of God in personal terms and increasingly have come to see, as the poet Dante wrote at the end of *The Divine Comedy*, that it is 'Love that moves the sun and other stars' – a love, in my picture that knows no limits - which is why I am a universalist in the sense that I trust that in the end all people will be reconciled to God.' For, as the mystic Angelus Silesius put it, 'there can be no heaven, if there is still one soul in hell.'

But should one speak of the Unknown in personal terms. It is interesting that Sankara, the greatest exponent of Advaita philosophy, wrote several hymns of great devotion to God. He recognised that many people had not advanced beyond the need for a personal God.' The great Muslim scholar al-Ghazali insisted that the ordinary person's devotion is as important as the scholar's learning. 'Trust the religion of the old women,' he said at the end of his life.

I will not pursue this now, as you are the experts about the commonalities and differences of peoples' religious experiences. You, I am sure know what the initials SBNR stand for – 'Spiritual but not religious.' I gather that on dating sites you are more likely to get a response if you say you are a spiritual person rather than that you are religious. Saying you are an atheist gets you even less offers.

Personally I am sad about the distinction. Many of the people in my *Beacons of Light* had real problems with the religious authorities – for example, Hildegard of Bingen. Worship should lead us in the presence of God. If not, it is like sitting in an aeroplane waiting for it to take off – only to be told there is no slot. It always interests me that the prophet Isaiah's Vision came as he was sitting in the Temple after the evening worship had finished. But, as Evelyn Underhill, partly because of her discussions with Baron von Hügel, came to see, religion provides a frame-work and a discipline. As she put it earlier on, 'The Church is an 'essential service' like the Post office, but there will always be some narrow, irritating and inadequate officials behind the counter and you will always be tempted to exasperation by them' (Armstrong, 1975). I would be more positive – there have been frustrations - but far more wonderful friendships, the beauty of buildings and music, and an ever increasing sense of the overwhelming generosity of God reflected in Jesus Christ. I once heard Edward Carpenter, former Dean of Westminster say, 'I am glad to have been a member of the Church of England, but equally glad to have spent much time outside it.' I believe the spiritual and religious need each other. Incidentally Alister Hardy says some people thought 'Spiritual Experience' would have been a better name for the Unit than 'Religious Experience'. What really matters, however, is not how we describe the experience of oneness but that it is life-transforming for us and contributes to the transformation of our world. That real change, I believe, will come from the visionary sense of 'oneness,' which inspired the interfaith pioneers. Today interfaith work often seems to start from the problem – how to encourage members of different religious communities to live together.

It is this vision of Oneness that offers hope for the transformation of the world. It is also a pity that today so much interfaith work starts from the problems of a multi-religious society – rather than from the vision.

Younghusband says of the vision that changed his life that,

The whole world was ablaze with the same ineffable bliss that was burning within me. I felt in touch with the flaming heart of the world. What was glowing in all creation and in every single human being was a joy far beyond mere goodness as the glory of the sun is beyond the glow of a candle. A mighty joy-giving Power was at work in the world - at work in all about me and at work in every living thing. So it was revealed. Never again could I think evil. Never again could I bear enmity. Joy had begotten love. (Younghusband, 1940, pp.3-5)

Thomas Merton, the guru of so many young Americans in the sixties spoke of the sudden experience when he was shopping in Louisville of 'an over-powering love for all the people there, whose faces were shining like the sun' (Merton, 1966, pp. 140-142). It is an awareness of our oneness with all life and with the Source of Being that will inspire us to help create what Wayne Teasdale described as 'a Civilization with a Heart' (Braybrooke, 2005, p127). This inspiration that needs to be expressed through work for peace, providing food for the hungry, homes for the refugees and sanctuary for all living creatures.

Let us share the hope voiced by the environmentalist Jane Goodall, 'We are moving toward the ultimate destiny of our species – a state of compassion and love' (Goodall, 2000).

May our own experiences, our research and our writings inspire us and those with whom we relate to share in the movement 'towards that state of compassion and love.'

As Alister Hardy said some fifty years ago, 'As we feel in touch with a power and a glory beyond ourselves, we can make the world a different place – a new kingdom.' (Hardy, 1975).

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