

TITLE:

In and Out of This World

Abstract

Throughout the ages people have felt that the material world is not all there is. Mystical visions, answers to prayer or an awareness of a power or comforting presence beyond the self have given intimations of a greater reality beyond the everyday.

Might this awareness also suggest some kind of survival of death as End of Life Experiences, Near Death Experiences and Post Death Communication seem to indicate?

Marianne Rankin looks at a range of spiritual experiences and considers the effects on people's lives and what they might indicate about the nature of consciousness and Ultimate Reality.

Many experiences cited are taken from the archive of the Religious Experience Research Centre, now at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in Lampeter, the collection initiated by Sir Alister Hardy in Oxford when he retired as Linacre Professor of Zoology in 1969. Much has happened since.

"A spirit is manifest in the laws of the Universe – a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble." Albert Einsteinⁱ

Spiritual experiences of an immanent and transcendent Ultimate Reality can turn a time of crisis into a moment of revelation. Such experiences, often spontaneous and frequently beyond words have led to the founding of religious traditions, inspired saints and mystics, monks and nuns but they have also transformed the lives of countless ordinary people. Such experiences may or may not be triggered by religious or spiritual practice. While some people are led to explore religion, others simply accept such an experience as a gift and look no further. It is often in times of deepest crisis that help comes unexpectedly. Many people have felt a presence or power, which has comforted them in their hour of need or given them a new perspective on life.

"Alone in my room, feeling extremely desperate about the seeming foolishness of life, I asked, out loud, that 'If there was a God, could He help?' I was immediately overwhelmed by the feeling of a Presence/Light/Love, all around; it seemed everywhere, I really can't explain. It appeared to last for a minute or two, although I can't be sure. I lost all sense of time. I was left with an indescribable feeling of peace and joy.

This moment completely changed my life. Everything suddenly seemed to make sense.

Now, in middle age, I still look back to those few moments as the most real and important in my life. I am firmly convinced in the reality of God (called by whatever name) and the power of prayer. I have an inner certainty that life, even under the most tragic circumstances, is good. Even more so now than in childhood, I feel a great love for the world and everyone in it." [04092]

"It seemed to me that, in some way, I was extending into my surroundings and was becoming one with them. At the same time I felt a sense of lightness, exhilaration and power as if I was beginning to understand the true meaning of the whole Universe." [00712]

These numbered, anonymous accounts are typical of around 6000 held in the archive of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in Lampeter. Since Sir Alister Hardy set up the Religious Experience Research Unit in Manchester College, Oxford in 1969, members of the public have been sending in their true stories. In the early days, many were sharing their experience for the first time, having told no-one else for fear of ridicule. Yet these same people treasured those experiences and had often been changed by them. The early letters to Sir Alister frequently expressed relief to find that a respected academic was taking such matters seriously.

Alister Hardy's definition of a religious experience was,
"A deep awareness of a benevolent non-physical power which appears to be partly or wholly beyond,
and far greater than, the individual self."

In the archive there are examples of visions, voices, meaningful dreams, incidents of synchronicity, examples of spiritual healing, answers to prayers and also experiences around death – End of Life, Near Death, and Post Death Communication. Some are sudden and dramatic, while others recount a constant sense of a comforting presence throughout life.

Some of the most dramatic of all experiences are Near-Death Experiences (NDEs). A typical NDE begins with an out-of-the-body experience (OBE), viewing one's own body from above, seeing and hearing what is going on, but being unable to communicate. Realisation that one has died is followed by entry into a dark tunnel with a bright, welcoming light at the end. People seem to be met by a being of light and love, and often deceased relatives as well. As the person does not in fact die, it is often at this point that it is made clear that the time is not yet ripe, and a return to the body takes place, often against their will, and occasionally into pain. Some people however, go on to experience a life-review, where they themselves feel the suffering they have caused others, judging themselves and their behaviour. On their return to life on earth these people frequently live completely transformed lives. The experience leads them to greater compassion for their fellows, to a more spiritual, less materialistic attitude, and many change to more caring professions.

At the heart of almost all religions is the view of our earthly life as part of a larger scenario, as a finite period in the context of eternity. Death is not regarded as the final closing of consciousness. On the contrary, spiritual consciousness is an awareness of a greater reality, of which we are part. Some religions have a pattern of reincarnation, some of an eternal hell or paradise awaiting the deceased. Most envisage some kind of post-death judgement, which affects the way religious persons live. An awareness of a moral order inherent in the universe, such as the laws of *karma*, or emanating from God puts our lives into a moral context and so leads the religious believer to live a more moral life. This seems to be reflected in the NDE pattern.

People nowadays are quite familiar with NDEs particularly since the publication of Raymond Moody's bestseller *Life After Life* in 1975. Moody, a physician and philosopher studied 150 cases of NDEs for the book, which first brought them to public attention and gave them their by now familiar name. However, NDEs have been reported since ancient times. An account is found in Plato's tale of Er in *The Republic*, where a soldier presumed dead revived and recounted his experiences. Ancient books such as the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* and the European *Ars Moriendi* all addressed the process of dying well, linked to living a spiritual life.

In the fifteenth century Hieronymus Bosch painted *The Ascent into the Empyrean* showing the soul approaching union with the divine which is very reminiscent of the tunnel many experience in an NDE.



Carl Jung experienced an NDE during a heart attack he suffered in 1944 and wrote, *“What happens after death is so unspeakably glorious that our imagination and our feelings do not suffice to form even an approximate conception of it ...”*

These days there is an increasing amount of reporting, recording and analysis of NDEs and they are no longer something one does not mention. They are discussed openly and are frequently the subject of articles in the popular media. They give people hope of life after death and are often the cause of a change in attitudes and way of life. A recent publication by Dr Penny Sartori, *The Wisdom of the Near-Death Experience How understanding NDEs can help us live more fully* sold out before publication – such was the interest of the readers of the *Daily Mail* in which it was serialized.

Not all people experience the same sequence of events but a general pattern has been established in many records of accounts of NDEs from a range of different cultures. Certain events seem to take place immediately, the OBE for example, and fewer people reach the judgement stage before turning back, as can be seen from the following research figures.

Soon after Moody's work, Kenneth Ring, a psychologist in Connecticut began his own scientific research into NDEs. In his first book, *Life at Death* (1980), Ring developed the Weighted Core Experience Index to measure the most frequently recurring or core elements in 102 cases, and found that the core NDE tends to fall into five stages: (Ring, 1980).

1.	Peace	sense of peace, calm, and joy	60%
2.	Body separation	body separation, a floating sensation, sometimes including out-of-body travel and seeing one's own body below	37%
3.	Entering the darkness	entering a darkness, floating in a dimensionless realm, or moving through a tunnel-like space	23%
4.	Seeing the Light	seeing the Light, feeling drawn to its comforting, beautiful brightness, perhaps being surrounded by the Light	16%
5.	entering the Light	entering the Light, seeing its incredibly beautiful realm of heavenly scenes, meeting deceased family, hearing music, and sensing the presence of psychic beings such as angels	10%

Various studies have been undertaken since then on NDEs, notably by Dr Pim van Lommel in Holland. As a practising cardiologist, he led a groundbreaking 13 year prospective study of 344 cardiac arrest patients in 10 hospitals, of whom 41 reported NDEs. The study also had an 8 year follow-up and the results were published in the prestigious medical journal *The Lancet* in 2001.

Stages of the NDE experienced by patients:

1.Awareness of being dead:	50%
2.Positive emotions:	56%
3.Out of the Body Experience	24%
4.Moving through a tunnel	31%
5.Communication with the light	23%
6.Observation of colours	23%
7.Observation of celestial landscape	29%
8.Meeting with deceased persons	32%
9.Life review	13%
10.Presence of border	8%

Pim van Lommel has now resigned his post to devote himself full time to further research into NDEs and consciousness.

Very recently, Dr Sam Parnia completed a four year study at the University of Southampton, examining over 2000 cardiac arrest patients in 15 hospitals in the UK, US and Austria. They found that nearly 40% of patients reported some kind of awareness during the time when they were clinically dead.

In their investigation of NDEs for the first ever TV programme in UK on the subject, followed by their book *The Truth in the Light* published in 1996, Dr Peter Fenwick and Elizabeth Fenwick considered over 300 accounts of NDEs. After their programme, the Fenwicks received about 2,000 letters, the majority of which said something like,

“Thank you so much for the programme, because I have never been able to talk about near-death experiences before, and now I can, for the first time, actually discuss my experience with people.”

They found that people were transformed in many ways after their NDE, primarily in their attitudes to death. 82% reported that they no longer feared death, for example,

“I suppose this experience moulded something in my life. I was only a child when it happened, only ten, but now, my entire life through, I am thoroughly convinced that there is life after death, without a shadow of a doubt, and I am not afraid to die. I am not. Some people I have known are so afraid, so scared. I always smile

to myself when I hear people doubt that there is an afterlife, or say, 'When you're dead, you're gone.' I think to myself, 'They really don't know.'"ⁱⁱⁱ

They also received the following account, which is now in the RERC archive, along with all the other accounts sent to the Fenwicks at that time. It is notable that the experience long predates the programme, but that the programme liberated the experient to write about it.

Dear Dr. Fenwick, I watched the Q.E.D television programme Glimpses of Death, B.B.C.1 on Wednesday evening, 27th January, 1988 and the subsequent Open Air programme, 11 a.m. this morning, Friday, 29th January. I had a near death experience myself one evening shortly after New Year's Day, 1951. Although this took place over thirty-seven years ago it is still as vivid and real as it was at the time, and it is difficult to find words to describe the wonderful experience. I was within a fortnight of my 35th birthday, and was at home looking after my mother who, for as far back as I can remember, was very severely disabled by Parkinson's Disease. ... There was at home also my war-disabled brother, 3 years younger than myself. ... I was feeling ill, and had not been able to get my mother up that morning. ... I crept upstairs to bed on hands and knees. By midnight I was in unbearable pain upon breathing and asked for a doctor to be sent for. ... I sat up in bed the remainder of the night, I could not bear my rib cage, right hand side, to touch the bed. By next afternoon, Sunday, New Year's day, I was so ill that I had to ask for the doctor to come ...

[some days later] I do not know exactly which evening it was, but I was alone in bedroom, in bed, of course, when I knew "something was going to happen". I was not afraid, and felt a great confidence. I rose out of my body, went towards front corner of the bedroom, (easterly direction) must have passed through bedroom wall. I do not recall any tunnel or light, I was just in a wonderful peace and well-ness, in a beautiful landscape setting of grass lawns and trees, and brilliant light, diffused, not coming from any central source, with a feeling of being surrounded by wonderful love, joy and peace, no illness or pain. I was in a little bower corner, on my own. Between me and this place there was a low, green trellis fence, which stopped, leaving a gap at the end. I could so easily have gone through. But I knew, without anyone telling me, that I could not stay there. I could see people walking around purposefully, I particularly remember seeing two nuns walking along together. I did not see anyone I knew; I would have wished to go some-one in particular had I seen him. The next thing I remember was floating along, passing through swathes of wonderful, beautiful, translucent colours, more beautiful than any I had ever seen on earth. I have no idea of time throughout this experience. I remember being horizontal, above my body in bed, back in my bedroom, then I slowly "clicked" back into my body, and eventually tried moving an arm, a leg.

I did not tell anyone about this experience. Years later I told it to a meeting of the Churches Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies. My mother lived eight years after this. I had to come back to finish my mission of looking after her. My brother, too, died four and a half years later. I had accomplished my mission, and later branched out as a mature student into a career I would never have dreamt to be in.

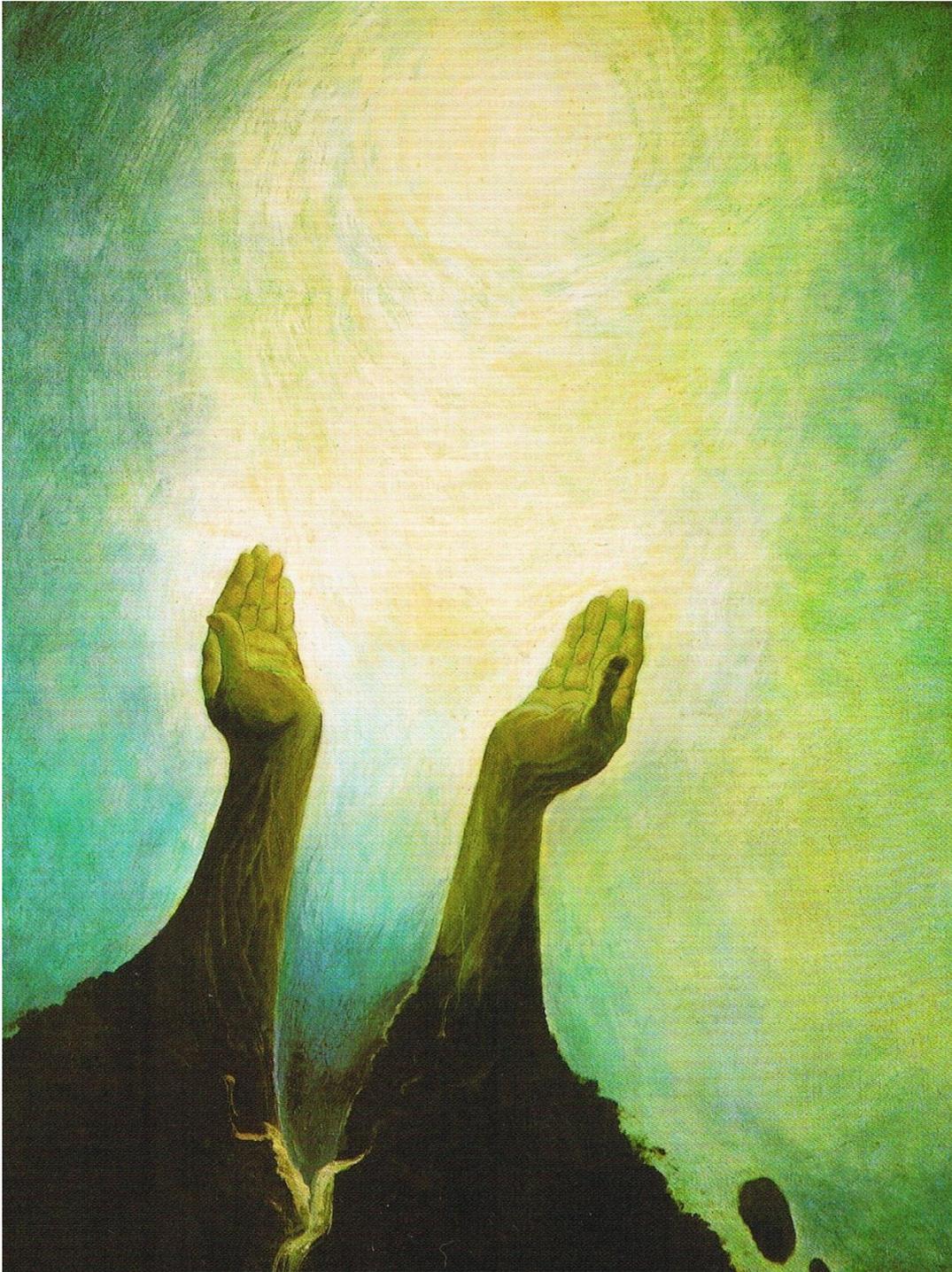
The experience has had a lasting effect upon my life: if that was "near death" I have no fear when my time for dying comes. I look forward to it, with expectation of that wonderful joy and peace. [300270]

Just as NDEs seem to take us out of this world, so do many other spiritual experiences. The transformation of perspective leads to an understanding of our connection with all living beings and with the whole universe. In personal terms, inner realization leads to outer effects. The following accounts are taken from *The Spiritual Nature of Man* by Sir Alister Hardy, which he published in 1979, describing the first eight years' research based on about 4000 accounts.

"I have a growing sense of reality, and personal identity, which comes from being united to something more powerful than myself, something that is helping me to be what I want to be." [00843]

"I find it difficult to describe my experience, only to say that it seems to be outside of me and enormous and yet at the same time I am part of it, everything is. It is purely personal and helps me to live and love others. It is difficult to describe, but in some way because of this feeling I feel united to all people, to all living things. Of recent years the feeling has become so strong that I am now training to become a social worker because I find that I must help people: in some way I feel their unhappiness as my own." [00663]

Painters, poets, artists of all kinds are inspired by a deeper vision of the world around them. This is Kenneth Butler Evans' painting of his experience of a breakthrough into the light which suddenly happened to him during a church service in Kenya.



Do these experiences lead to a belief in God? In some cases people are changed, as was the case for Colin Hannaford. He recounted his powerful experience in full and moving detail in his book *Educating Messiahs*. Here a short extract can only give an indication of the impact of what happened to him.

Colin was an army officer (“a confirmed atheist since aged about eleven”).

He finds himself tricked into incarceration in a psychiatric institution, because he had spoken out during the conflict in Northern Ireland.

He is alone in his room.

"The room is small, clean, brightly lit, about ten by fifteen feet. On the left was a plain barrack-room metal frame bed. Ahead, in the right hand corner, is a washbasin on wall; above it a mirror; above that a strip light. The main light is coming from a very bright bulb in a plastic shade hanging from the ceiling. ... I have already realized that this building is a wing of the much larger building. That is where they would keep any soldiers who have become psychotic. So far as I know I am the only officer here."

He is caught and incarcerated.

"If I had been accused of something criminal, then I could be locked up; but I would also have the right to a lawyer, someone to add his arguments to mine. Once there is a medical opinion, the only other opinions that matter are those of other doctors."

He is afraid.

"Psychiatric medicine has moved on from pushing a spatula in over the eyeballs to scrape out the frontal lobes to 'rectify', actually destroying, the personality, but only just. Used often enough, electro-convulsive 'therapy' can be just as destructive. And then there are the drugs."

He is at a loss.

"... I can think of no way out of this problem, and this is what is annoying me most. I am used to thinking my way out of difficulties. The first thing I need to know right now is not how to think, but how to act."

He reflects on what he has said, whom he has annoyed, who was now in charge of his situation.

"I was still coldly furious; ... I became suddenly aware ... that I was impelled by something else to take the risks I had. ..."

What I suddenly knew I could do was not rational, yet I was perfectly certain it would work. I had only to do it. ...

I turned from the mirror, knelt beside the bed, clasped my hands, bent my head, and I said, actually quite angrily: "I need some help."

The effect of this was utterly astounding. There was an immediate cessation of all the perceptions of kneeling in the room. There was a tremendous sensation of forcible displacement, of acceleration to a velocity. Before there was time to realize more I knew that I was passing out of the region of solar space. ...

And then I stopped. It was dark. I knew that behind me also there was nothing. ... But then I knew I was not alone ... there was a consciousness of having entered the dominion of a presence ... with it came a blaze, a force of love, of pride, delight, of comradeship - with such a shock that I might have laughed aloud with the joy of it. ...

It was a caress, and its strength was its tenderness. What could have destroyed, smashed back into oblivion, stretched out, touched, steadied, and held. Here was a strength to do anything, perhaps which did everything. But here it was in check. Its very power was balance. It included everything - and yet it was outside everything. All the principles, all the polarities lose their meaning. Human affairs are nothing. Good and evil are human affairs. An absolute is the absolute, which is everything.

The enquiry was then simple. I was asked what did I want. I could not have drawn three breaths. My presence was my question. I wanted to know what to do. I heard the answer: as clearly and distinctly as a strong voice speaking into my ear. It seemed to me that a voice did speak to me; as if a man stood close beside me at my shoulder, to the right. "BE HONEST."

And then I was back in the room, and opened my eyes. Nothing had changed. But I had changed. For me a world had changed. ... I said, aloud again, "That was God". It sounds foolish. It was pronounced, in delight and with astonishment, but for a purpose. In these few moments ten years' of unbelief, and increasing certainty, had been swept away."

Colin was eventually deemed perfectly sane by the doctors and now understands that "God must communicate with us through our imagination, for only our imagination can accept the inexplicable as real."

He quotes J.B.S. Haldane as saying: *'My own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose.'* Alternatively one might accept that we cannot see what is, but only what our minds allow us to see."

This account shows just how shattering such an experience can be, how a desperate plea can be answered in a totally unexpected way and how a life can be transformed in an instant.

Some experiences are a result of worship, prayer or meditation as in this example recounted by a Christian philosopher of religion, Revd Professor John Hick,

"I have been practising meditation, in a faltering sort of way, for some years, using the mindfulness method that I learned from the Sri Lankan Buddhist monk Nyanaponika Mahathera ... The one moment of breakthrough that I have experienced so far was only a few months ago. In normal consciousness I am here and the world is there, apart from me, surrounding me and so to speak hemming me in, and arousing all sorts of hopes and fears. But as I opened my eyes after perhaps ten minutes of meditating I was suddenly vividly aware of being an integral part of the world, not separate from it, and that that of which I am a part is a friendly universe, so that there could not possibly be anything to fear or worry about. It was the same world, and yet totally transformed, and for a short time – only one or two minutes – I was completely free and completely happy. I was by myself at the time; but if this new consciousness had continued into daily life I believe that my attitude to others would have been a liberation from self-concern making possible love and compassion for everyone I had to deal with."ⁱⁱⁱ

Alister Hardy was born in 1896, at a time when science and religion were at war after the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Hardy was a Darwinian biologist, who studied under Julian Huxley at Oxford and went on to become professor at Hull, Aberdeen and eventually Linacre Professor of Zoology at Oxford, where, interestingly, he taught Richard Dawkins. In 1957 he was knighted for his services to the fishing industry through his zoological research.

Hardy was a convinced Darwinian but did not agree that belief in evolutionary theory entailed a materialist interpretation. Hardy's own youthful experiences of nature mysticism had convinced him of the reality of the spiritual and religion remained a lifelong passion. After his first term as a student in Oxford, he had to leave and join up for WWI. He made a vow to what he called God, that if he should survive the war, he would devote his life to attempting to bring about such a reconciliation of evolution theory and the spiritual nature of human beings that would satisfy the intellectual world.

His interest in religion was maintained throughout his illustrious scientific career and on his retirement he was invited to give the Gifford Lectures in 1963-4 on natural theology, later published as *The Living Stream: A Restatement of Evolution Theory and its Relation to the Spirit of Man* and *The Divine Flame, An Essay towards a Natural History of Religion*. At the very end of his life, in 1985, he was awarded the Templeton Prize for his work on religious experience. Surely he fulfilled his vow.

Hardy thought of humans as spiritual animals, and of religious experience as a natural phenomenon of evolutionary value. He felt that in exploring their environment, humans had become aware of something beyond it, a transcendent presence which met them in a different way from their everyday experience. In other words, he believed that spirituality was a natural part of consciousness.

In order to acquire data in support of his theory, Hardy began a collection of the experiences of ordinary people, which he obtained first through a press agency. He collected experiences related to the spiritual aspects of life but not to formal religion. He later placed adverts in the religious press, but met with a disappointing lack of response. So he turned to the secular newspapers, the *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Times* and *Daily Mail*. There, after a short article or example of a spiritual experience, he posed what is now known as 'The Hardy Question':

Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?

There was an overwhelming response to his appeal, as thousands of readers sent in accounts of experiences they had never dared share with anyone before, for fear of being thought abnormal. In 1969 Hardy was able to set up the Religious Experience Research Unit in Manchester College in Oxford, where he began work on classifying the many accounts of spiritual experience he had received. Hardy felt that he was following in the American footsteps of Edwin Starbuck and William James, whose *Varieties of Religious Experience*, based on his Gifford Lectures was published in 1902.

As Alister Hardy thought that spiritual experience was a natural human trait, he assumed that it would be universal. He began the research in the UK and wanted it to be extended to other cultures and other faiths. In the past few years research has been conducted through the RERC in China, India and Turkey and the hope is that eventually the archive will include experiences from all over the world.

It is interesting to note that various surveys carried out by former RERC Director David Hay, Gallup and the figures from research projects undertaken under the auspices of the RERC all indicate that between a third and half of those questioned would admit to having had what they would count as a spiritual experience. Surveys undertaken by David Hay with Gordon Heald showed that in 1987 48% of people reported some kind of spiritual experience yet by 2000, despite the numbers of those attending church having dropped by 20%, this had risen to 76%. Research for the RERC was undertaken by Professors Paul Badham and Xinzhong Yao in China. Their religion had been suppressed between 1949 and 1980, yet about half of those questioned between 2004-8 admitted to an awareness of a power beyond the everyday.

Today the archive is available online to researchers and there are two RERCs – one in Lampeter and another at the University of Glyndwr in Wrexham. The Alister Hardy Society for the Study of Spiritual Experience supports the research, publishes a bi-annual journal, runs study days and has local groups around the country. Membership is a prerequisite for access to the online database.

What so many of these experiences have in common is a state of mind which is open, the controlling ego is absent. This may be triggered by religious practice, despair, or through an overwhelming sense of natural beauty or music. It is as if another dimension of reality breaks through, illuminating our world. Although they declare that such experiences are ultimately ineffable, mystics in all religious traditions have expressed this unity in the heart of spiritual reality.

Neither Manifest nor Hidden

O HOW may I ever express that secret word?
O how can I say He is not like this, and He is like that?
If I say that He is within me, the universe is ashamed:
If I say that He is without me, it is falsehood.
He makes the inner and the outer worlds to be indivisibly one;
The conscious and the unconscious, both are His footstools.
He is neither manifest nor hidden, He is neither revealed nor unrevealed:
There are no words to tell that which He is.

Kabir

Bengali translation from Hindi by Kshiti Mohan Sen
English translation by
Rabindranath Tagore

ⁱ Quoted in Peter Russell From Science to God, A Physicist's Journey into the Mystery of Consciousness (2002, 2003) New World Library, California. p. 115.

ⁱⁱ Raymond A. Moody Life After Life (1975) Bantam Books. pp. 94-95.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sandy & Jael Bharat A Global Guide to Interfaith, Reflections from around the world (2007) O Books, Hants. p. 44.

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She is the author of *An Introduction to Religious and Spiritual Experience* (Bloomsbury 2008). She has also updated Shirley du Boulay's biography Cicely Saunders, *The Founder of the Modern Hospice Movement*; written a history of St Richard's Hospice in Worcester and illustrated Hal French's acclaimed *Zen and the Art of Anything*. Marianne is a linguist who lived in the Far East for almost twenty years, working as a teacher, translator, interpreter and freelance writer. On her return to UK she took a Master of Studies in the Study of Religion at the University of Oxford. She gives talks in schools, colleges and to a variety of groups and enjoys leading Quiet Days.