UNDERSTANDING THE SPIRITUALITY OF PEOPLE WHO DON'T GO TO CHURCH

A report on the findings of the Adults' Spirituality Project at the University of Nottingham

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Foreword

I have been engaged in empirical research on the nature of religious or spiritual experience for rather more than twentyfive years. The results of my work have strengthened my belief that spiritual awareness is a necessary part of our human make-up, biologically built into us, whatever our religious beliefs or lack of them. I also happen to be a Christian believer, and over the last few years I have found myself thinking increasingly about the implications of my findings for the mission of the Church.

If spiritual awareness is indeed a human universal, and if God the Holy Spirit communicates with all of Creation, then we ought to able to learn something about the nature of God by listening to people talking about their spiritual experience. At a time when the mainstream churches in this country are going through a period of severe decline, it must be valuable from the perspective of mission to try to understand how God is speaking to those who seldom or never go to church; that is to say, the great majority of the people in Britain. This is what we have been attempting to do over the past two years.

It is a pleasure to record my thanks to those organizations and individuals who decided that my idea was worth supporting financially: the Bible Society, the Church of England, the Methodist Church, the English Province of the Jesuits, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of Nottingham, Professor Andrew M. Greeley of the University of Chicago, and a charitable trust which wishes to remain anonymous. The project has also benefitted from its advisers who, whilst they may not always have shared my personal perspective, willingly offered their professional expertise: Gordon Heald, Professor Robert Dingwall, and Professor Margaret Donaldson.

A major part of fieldwork was carried out by Kate Hunt, my research assistant throughout the period of the project. I am very grateful to her for her commitment and the creativity she has brought to our work together. Finally of course, Kate and I owe our greatest debt of gratitude to the thirtyone people who permitted us to spend so much of their time in conversation about the life of the spirit. Their story forms the main body of this report.

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Disclaimer

This report reflects the views of its authors and not necessarily those of the funding bodies that supported the work, or the advisers to the project.

Chapter One: **BACKGROUND**

1.1   On the basis of current statistical trends the future of the churches in Britain does not look good. During the Decade of Evangelism that has recently ended, far from responding to missionary outreach, the people of Britain continued to vote with their feet and withdrew from adherence to the mainstream Christian institutions in increasing numbers. In this respect, Britain resembles many other Western European countries; it demonstrates a

severe lapse in formal adherence to the Christian faith.

1.2   That is the picture on the surface, but at the point when the research summarized in this report was beginning, we already knew that there was a rather different picture underneath (data summarized in, Hay, 1994). National surveys had told us that about half the adult population of Britain would claim to have a spirituality that is grounded on their personal experience. In-depth work where there was time to build up trust repeatedly showed that approximately two thirds of those interviewed were prepared to acknowledge and talk about their spirituality. These figures are comparable to and in some cases higher than rates reported for the United States, which in terms of formal religious practice is a much more religious country than Britain.

1.3   Those people we have spoken with in the past about such moments of spiritual or religious insight, have usually taken them to be intimations of the plausibility of the religious interpretation of life, though not necessarily of Christianity. Contrary to certain commonly held stereotypes, they are more likely than other people to be psychologically well balanced and to be happy. They typically speak of one of the outcomes of their experience as an increasing desire to care for those close to them as well as a sense of responsibility for the larger community and the physical environment.

1.4   These findings raise two important and related questions:

   i.   From the perspective of mission, if there is to be a reversal of the accelerating decline in adherence to the Christian institutions, there is a need to understand the nature of the gap between the way people outside the churches interpret their spiritual experience and the way people inside the churches understand it.

   ii. There is also an important ethical issue that in one sense goes beyond the immediate concerns of the religious institutions. Social agencies at all levels in Britain are currently grappling with apparently intractable problems of social coherence caused by a declining sense of communal responsibility and high levels of crime. Political responses have largely been in terms of the introduction of increasingly sophisticated methods of public surveillance. The problem associated with an approach that suppresses symptoms (sometimes in ways that threaten civil liberties) is that it does not deal with the underlying causes of social disruption. No doubt these causes need to be tackled at the political level. But if spiritual insight is powerfully associated with ethical awareness, then this has political importance for the creation of a non-coercive ethical community. As bearers of the cultural and ethical tradition of Europe, the churches are in theory the national institutions best equipped to give a lead in the reconstruction of the moral commonwealth (Selznick, 1992). There is however a problem. Although spirituality is much more widespread than we once thought, its isolation from a communally agreed means of public expression dissipates its potential to influence political and social policy. How can this hidden spirituality be reintegrated into the community to provide the energy for its renewal? This is a major challenge to the churches. It is also a reminder of their potentially crucial role in society.

1.5   The theoretical background to the project is provided by the work of the zoologist Alister Hardy who offered a naturalistic account of religious experience (Hardy, 1966). He suggested that religious awareness is a biological phenomenon that has evolved in the human species through the process of natural selection because it has survival value. It is important to note that in proposing a naturalistic basis for religion he had no intention to be reductionist. In his book *Theology and Social Theory*, John Milbank (1993) mounts a strong attack on the submissiveness of theologians to what he calls 'secular reason' in the study of religion. 'The pathos of modern theology', says Milbank,

> ….is its false humility. For theology this must be a fatal disease, because once theology surrenders its claim to be a metadiscourse, it cannot any longer articulate the word of the creator God, but is bound to turn into the oracular voice of some finite idol, such as historical scholarship, humanist psychology, or transcendental philosophy [or he might have added, 'evolutionary biology'] (Milbank, p. 1)

From our perspective, Milbank is right in so far as scholarship is used in an arrogant way to dismiss religion. But we are not dismissive critics. In fact the perspective Hardy adopted can be seen as protecting religion since if he is right it is not possible to discard spirituality as 'nothing but' cultural construction. It has its roots in what we are as biological organisms. Research so far shows that Hardy's hypothesis is highly resilient when tested against other reductionist naturalistic accounts such as those of Marx, Freud and Durkheim (Hay, 1994). It is important to add that the hypothesis amounts to a claim that what Hardy called religious experience is 'hard-wired' into the human organism. Hence, it cannot be limited to members of any particular religion or indeed religious people in general. Everybody, including people who hold no religious beliefs whatsoever, must be at least potentially in possession of such awareness. There is such a thing as secular spirituality. To underline this point, for the remainder of this report we will replace the term 'religious experience' with 'spiritual awareness' to cover all these cases, whilst recognizing that from a religious perspective it is this natural awareness that makes religious experience possible in the first place.

1.6   The project was set up from this perspective, to offer answers to the following questions about people who don't go to church:

How do they understand the term 'spirituality'?

What is the substantive content of their spiritual experience?

How does their spirituality relate to religion?

What relationship is there between their spiritual life and the Gospel as they perceive its presentation by the churches?

What are the moments when, in the light of their spirituality, the voice of the churches is heard as relevant and positive and when is it heard negatively?

Chapter Two: METHODOLOGY

Piloting

2.1   To pilot the methodology we arranged to hold research conversations about spirituality with a total of seven people known to us personally. The criterion for selecting these people was that they had no contact with any religious institution. We knew from previous work (Hay, 1982; Hay & Morisy, 1985) that spirituality is an extremely sensitive area. Even people with a formal religious commitment tend to be shy of discussing their spiritual lives. Would people who had no such connection be happy to speak frankly about their spirituality in this context? Consequently the aim of these meetings was to gauge how realistic a relatively open-ended conversation was to this kind of research, given that the interviewees knew it would be tape-recorded and transcribed and perhaps quoted from in research publications. In practice all the conversations, without exception, contained a surprising richness of data. This gave us confidence in our approach and helped us to frame the themes that would be introduced in the main research project.

Focus Groups

2.2   To whom should we speak in the main part of the project? The primary purpose was to talk with people who had no contact with the religious institution, and yet considered themselves to be either spiritual or religious. Recent surveys (cf. Brierley, 2000) have confirmed that the number of people involved with the religious institutions is now very small, and so it was not anticipated that we would have difficulty in finding people who fitted the first of our criteria. We did not wish to research those who had chosen alternative religious organisations or spiritual disciplines, but those who had no formal religious affiliation of any kind. To be on the safe side, we nevertheless felt it necessary to require that the individuals felt that they were 'religious' or 'spiritual'.

2.3   In consultation with Gordon Heald, director of the Opinion Research Business (ORB) in London, a questionnaire was written which covered areas such as religious identity, church attendance, belief in God, self-identity (as either religious, spiritual, agnostic, atheist etc), spiritual experiences, and attitudes towards the meaning of life. This questionnaire was then used by ORB to recruit participants in a suburb of Nottingham. People were stopped randomly in a shopping centre and asked if they would respond to the questionnaire. Those who fitted the two criteria of having no religious affiliation and yet describing themselves as either spiritual or religious were invited to attend a Focus Group the same week.

TABLE 1: STRUCTURE OF THE FOCUS GROUPS

	Gender	Self-Identification	Age Range	Church Background
Focus Group 1	4 women 3 men	5 Spiritual 2 Religious	25 – 35	2C of E 1 RC 1 Methodist 1 Pentecostal 2 None
Focus Group 2	5 women 3 men	4Spiritual 4 Religious	40 – 55	2C of E 2RC 1 Nonconf. 3 None
Focus Group 3	8 women	3 Spiritual 5 Religious	27 – 60	3 C of E 2RC

				2Baptist 1 None
Focus Group 4	8 men	5 Spiritual 3 Religious	24 – 45	2C of E 1 Methodist 1 Evangelical 4 None

2.4   Although we were aware of a large number of possible variables for the make-up of the Focus Groups, financial constraints limited our choices. We decided to concentrate on differences in age and gender. As can be seen from the table above, the first focus group consisted of men and women within the age range of 20 to 39, whilst the second group was also mixed gender, within the age range of 40 and upwards. These two groups were set up on the intuition that the decade of the 1960s was a pivotal period of cultural change. People born before then are more likely to have had some sort of formal contact with the Church than those born afterwards. The third focus group was made up of women and the final group was all male. We divided these latter groups along gender lines to test the common assumption that women are more willing to talk about religious issues than men. The Focus Groups were led by Gordon Heald, David Hay and Kate Hunt. With the permission of the participants, each group was both audio and video recorded. It was felt that the benefits of being able to review the body language of the participants at a later stage outweighed the possibly inhibiting presence of the video camera. A list of the themes covered in the group discussions can be found in Appendix A (p. 41).

Individual Conversations

2.5   At the conclusion of the Focus Groups, each of the participants was asked if they would be willing to be interviewed on their own by one of the researchers. Twentynine out of the thirtyone people agreed and arrangements were made to meet with them over the following weeks in their own homes. David Hay conducted seven conversations, and Kate Hunt undertook twentytwo.

2.6   We deliberately called these sessions 'research conversations' rather than in-depth interviews, because we were interested primarily in understanding what people had to say rather than testing a hypothesis. On the basis of our pilot work and what had emerged in the focus groups we were aware of certain areas that we wanted to discuss (see Appendix B, p. 42). Nevertheless we felt it was important to be very permissive in mode, so that individuals felt they were given the space and time to speak about their own understanding of spirituality, rather than being forced into predetermined categories by tightly structured questions. This style of investigation helps to overcome some of the issues of power that are almost always present in research. We were aware that questions of authority would be present, as we were professional researchers from 'the University'. There were also issues of gender; one of us is a young woman and the other is a man in his sixties. It was important to monitor how this impacted on the dynamic of the research conversations. In general we found that people were to varying degrees defensive at the beginning of the conversations, and then gradually relaxed as they realized that we did not have a hidden agenda either to criticise or to convert them, and that we were genuinely interested in their own views. We were well aware that we were not detached outsiders, but fellow human beings who have their own life stories and spirituality that will inevitably affect the mood of the conversation. Therefore towards the end of the conversations, we offered an opportunity for the person with whom we were speaking to comment or ask any questions they like. Again, the rationale for this was that it went some way towards equalising the power imbalance.

2.7   Our aim was to discover people's personal understanding of their individual spiritualities. Because of this, we did not define the terms 'spiritual' or 'spirituality' at any point in the research process. This follows from our theoretical stance that spirituality is present in some form in everybody's life and is not always directly connected to religious beliefs and practices. We were therefore interested in people's world-views and life experiences, and not just in their cognitive beliefs. As a contemporary thinker on spirituality writes:

> The spiritual story itself is much more powerful and coherent than any text-book definition or description of spirituality. (O'Murchu, 1997 p. 61)

We found that the conversations themselves often took on recognizably spiritual dimensions as people wrestled to articulate their own sense of the transcendent. Often they had not had such an opportunity before and found that the experience forced them to look at their own lives in a different way, many discovering what they actually believed as a result. This made us even more aware of the power of our own role as researchers, and the need for respect both at the time of the conversation and also subsequently in the way we handled the research data.

Content analysis

2.8   All the recordings of group discussions and individual conversations were transcribed and initially analysed using the NUD.IST computer software programme (QSR NUD.IST, 1996). This process enabled a detailed, line by line coding of each text and from this, general themes began to emerge. At the same time both researchers embarked on individual and collective in-depth readings of the transcripts. They entered into what could be called a triologue with each other and the transcription, immersing themselves in the person's story. These processes were repeated throughout the research period, with extensive memos being written on the transcripts each time. The research method can be seen as a spiral, with the texts being revisited on numerous occasions and themes emerging and developing as the process continued.

National Survey

2.9   Following the analysis of the qualitative data, and in the light of the findings, a set of questions on spiritual experience was prepared for inclusion in the BBC *Soul of Britain* national survey, conducted in May of this year. The purpose of our questions was to see to what extent the themes emerging from conversations with the members of our qualitative sample would be found on a wider scale. At the time of preparation of this report the analysis of the data has yet to be completed. A full account of the findings will appear in the book of the project which will be published in due course by HarperCollins. However, some analysis of the data is available and will be referred to in Chapter 3. The National Survey questions to which reference will be made in this report are contained in Appendix C (p. 43).

Chapter Three: **SOME NATIONAL STATISTICS**

3.1   Philip Richter and Leslie Francis have shown in their book *Gone but not Forgotten* (Richter & Francis, 1998), that it is not quite accurate to say of most people in Britain that they are entirely 'unchurched'. However, it cannot be denied that an increasing number, especially in the under forty age group, are very remote indeed from the Christian institutions. Others are detaching themselves from the mainstream churches at an alarming rate. The UK Christian Handbook *Religious Trends 1999/2000* (Brierley, 2000) notes that regular Church attendance in Britain fell from 4.74 million in 1989 to 3.71 million in 1998; a drop of more than 20% in ten years. Rather less than 8% of the population are likely to be in church on an average Sunday. On the basis of these statistics some commentators have predicted the virtual disappearance of the churches during the course of this century.

3.2   The figures just quoted are well known. They contrast remarkably with the dramatic changes in report of religious or spiritual experience in Britain during approximately the same period. In 1987 one of us (D.H.) along with Gordon Heald, at that time director of Gallup Poll in this country, published the results of a survey of reports of such experience (Hay & Heald, 1987). The figures showed that 48% of the national sample felt they were personally aware of this kind of experience in their lives. We wondered what had happened over the subsequent decade? We were curious to see whether the decline in church attendance was echoed by a fall in positive response to questions about such experience. In the recently completed *Soul of Britain* survey we decided as far as possible to repeat our 1987 enquiries, though in fact omitting two of the questions used in the first survey. It is therefore striking that over the past thirteen years there has been almost a 60% increase in the positive response rate. The figures suggest that slightly more than 76% of the national population are now likely to admit to having had a spiritual or religious experience. The great majority of these people are of course not regular churchgoers.

TABLE 2: FREQUENCY OF REPORT OF RELIGIOUS OR SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE IN BRITAIN FOR THE YEARS 1987 AND 2000			
		1987	**2000**
A patterning of events		29%	55%
Awareness of the presence of God		27%	38%
Awareness of prayer being answered	25%	37%	
Awareness of a sacred presence in nature	16%	29%	
Awareness of the presence of the dead	18%	25%	
Awareness of an evil presence	12%	25%	
CUMULATIVE TOTAL		(48%)*	76%
*This includes totals for respondents to two additional questions asked in 1987 about 'a presence not called God' (22%) and 'awareness that all things are One' (5%), i.e. the total of 76% for the year 2000 is quite likely to be relatively speaking an underestimate.			

3.3   The commonest kind of experience reported in Britain is the recognition of a transcendent providence: a patterning of events in a person's life that convinces them that in some strange way those events were meant to happen. In our recent survey 55% of the national sample recognised this in their own lives. That is a 90% rise compared to the response when the question was asked in 1987. Many people feel they have been aware of the presence of God. We know from our research that this can often be when they are deeply distressed. They tell us that the experience of God's presence helps them to bear their suffering. At the other end of the scale, people talk of being aware of God when they are very happy. In the latest poll, 38% of the sample said they had personal awareness of such a divine presence – a 41% rise on thirteen years ago. In great unhappiness or fear many people, including those who are uncertain about God's existence, turn to prayer for help. A total of 37% of those recently questioned feel they have received such help – a 40% increase on 1987. Another commonly reported experience is an awareness of a sacred presence in nature, rather like William Wordsworth's description of a presence that "rolls through all things" in his lines written above Tintern Abbey. A total of 29% of the sample felt that they had had this kind of experience – an 81% rise since 1987. A surprisingly large number of people, 25% of the national sample, feel they have been in touch with someone who has died – this is a 38% rise since 1987. More ominously, a quarter of all the people interviewed feel they have been aware of an evil presence – a rise of over 100%.

3.4   The dramatic increase in positive response rates to all these questions since 1987 took us by surprise. The figures are startling if only because our lengthy research experience tells us that people are very shy about admitting to spiritual experience. This makes it even more remarkable that the responses were obtained in the relatively uncongenial circumstances of a national telephone poll. Our guess is that in reality there has been no great change over the past few years in the frequency with which people encounter the spiritual dimension of their lives. What is probably changing is people's sense of the degree of social permission for such experience. Somehow or other (perhaps through the influence of postmodernism) there is a growing feeling that it is acceptable to admit to such awareness, though it is still something most people feel quite deeply embarrassed about.

Chapter Four: **THREE CASE STUDIES**

4.1   During the course of the research project we listened to what thirtyone different people had to say and analysed it at length. These individuals had certain characteristics in common, most obviously that they lived in the same area of the country, they were not involved with institutional religion and they considered themselves to be either religious or spiritual. However, they also had numerous differences; in age, gender, family background, education, personality and life history. Our research connected with their lives at three specific moments: at the time of the initial recruitment questionnaire as they were going about their daily lives in a Nottingham shopping centre; when they were brought together with a group of strangers for the focus group, and in the security of their own homes for the research conversation. Any explanation or description of their spirituality is therefore of necessity going to be provisional. We do not know the full extent of their lives, but we do believe we have had a glimpse of what is important to them. What is clear is the individuality, or what Rebecca Nye has called the 'personal signature' (Hay & Nye, 1998) of each of those with whom we talked. To demonstrate this individuality, we now offer three brief 'case studies', presented in order of their increasing remoteness from the religious institution.

4.2.1   *'Nicola',* is a non-practising Roman Catholic with a strong religious upbringing. She is fifty years old, married, and works full-time in the public sector. Nicola's mother is Italian, a daily Mass attender, and this cultural identity plays an important role in family life. The focus group gave Nicola a rare opportunity to spend some time reflecting on her own beliefs. She was quite happy to admit to being a Catholic, but apart from that, religious observance did not play any part in her adult life. However, much to her own amazement, in the focus group Nicola found herself taking on the role of 'defender of the faith'. She was part of the all women group, where the discussion quickly turned into a strong critique of the institutional Church. Nicola spent the evening repeatedly attempting to deflect the conversation from what she saw as unhelpful and unfair allegations against the Church and the Christian faith.

4.2.2   At the beginning of the private research conversation, Nicola comments on how surprised she had been by her behaviour and also by the strength of her convictions. She says:

> … you don't sort of think about religion, and how you feel, as such. You don't sort of sit there and think, 'Oh I believe in this, and I believe….' Until somebody is talking to you, or questions you about it, or it comes up in conversation, and it comes out, 'Oh crikey', you know, [laughter] 'it's still there!'

4.2.3   During the conversation Nicola discovers her beliefs through reflecting on her life, but this only happens because an environment had been specifically created for her to do this. The research conversations show that this is indeed a rare event in life today. People have to create the time or the space in which to have these conversations or to reflect on their lives, but there is little help or incentive from the rest of society. We are back with the taboo on speaking about spirituality. Nicola admits later on in the conversation that usually she tries not to think too much about life:

> I think you just have to make the most of what you've got at the time, and not think too deeply about it. Because I think if you go into it too deeply, and think about it too deeply, I dunno, you can sort of, 'Why am I here? What am I doing here?', and it could be sort of a bit negative feeling, if you aren't coming up with the right answers.

4.2.4   So Nicola acknowledges the importance of her Catholic heritage, but prefers to keep busy rather than give herself permission to face the big questions of existence. Although she has no formal links with the institutional Church, she still feels she belongs; it is part of her unconscious identity. She has tangible proof of her status as a member of the Church in the form of various religious objects that she keeps in a box in her attic. This 'reliquary' contains her First Communion dress, a Missal inlaid with mother of pearl and a children's Bible. These items are not taken out of the box, but they have power just by being there; they prove that she still belongs.

4.2.5   Later on in the conversation Nicola talks about her belief in God and her identity as a Catholic as being like money in the bank, ready to be used in emergency. Her 'reliquary' perhaps holds the same function, tying her to her roots in the Church community.

> I know it sounds stupid, but it's like having some money in the bank, at the back of you, if you ever need it. Not sort of the money that you can go into every day, but just some security there at the back of you, in times of crisis, or if something goes wrong, you've got something there. And I think I feel like that about being a Catholic, you've got something there, you've got your belief, there's not nothing there. I know it sounds….

Nicola describes how her husband had a heart attack a few years previously and how that was a moment when her faith did indeed help her to cope. She gained an inner strength which she believes came from God.

4.2.6   So in Nicola's mind, she still belongs to the institutional Church; she is an insider, even though she does not attend. This is a recurrent theme in the research conversations with those people who have had some affiliation to the Church as children. They talk of 'the seed having being sown' and of a sense that they cannot escape either God or religious belief; it is part of their inheritance. Nicola ponders whether she believes simply because she has been indoctrinated, but seems to decide that it is more than that. Her experience shows that her belief is genuine. This is where the difference appears between those people who have had a childhood connection with institutional Christianity and those who have not. Matthew and Tom, who are discussed below, either do not have or find implausible a traditional religious language or symbolic framework with which to express their spiritual beliefs and experiences. Others, such as Nicola, are able to make use of the resources of the Christian culture.

4.3.1   *'Matthew'* is a professional man aged forty. He is divorced and is only able to see his children at weekends. He has had much less connection with the institutional Church than Nicola: a year of Sunday School when he was nine, the obligatory school assembly, and the remnant of Christianity that still exists in our culture. Matthew's conversation is helpful because it illustrates very clearly the attitude that many of the people we spoke with have towards institutional religion. It also shows a man who is struggling with issues of belief and transcendence without the assistance of a religious meta-narrative.

4.3.2   Matthew begins the conversation with a declaration that there is no point in trying to search for meaning and purpose in this life. He says:

> I don't think, you know, the sort of 'why' question is really relevant…. I don't feel the need to keep, you know, this, you know, 'why are we here?'. We are, it's marvellous, but we are, and it's a fantastic gift, but I don't think we should be wasting, or concentrating too much time, struggling and grappling with it.

However, he then goes on to spend the rest of the conversation attempting to articulate his own search for meaning and belief. There is a contradiction here that underlies Matthew's own spirituality. The desire for belief and yet the inability to believe.

4.3.3   There are three distinct influences in Matthew's life, two of which tell him that life is random chaos, and one which leaves open the possibility of meaning. The first influence is his own life experience. Two critical incidents have impacted on him profoundly; the death of a school friend from leukaemia when he was eighteen, and his marriage break-up a few years previously. These events made him realize that, as he says,

> … this isn't adding up to going any place, it's just, again it's such arbitrary, chaotic tragedy and nonsense. Yeh, I think that's when the whole, you know, meaninglessness of things um really started taking some sort of definite shape.

Matthew looked to the Christian tradition for some explanation of these tragedies, but found no solace. For him, the God portrayed by the Church is still the old man in the sky, an idea that to him is 'self-indulgent', 'awfully sentimental', and 'just wildly wrong'. God does not intervene in his life, or anyone-else's; he is at best an 'absentee landlord'. This is not the kind of God that Matthew can believe in.

4.3.4   The second influence on Matthew's life is the world of science. If Christianity, or any formal religion, cannot offer him an explanation for life, then perhaps science can come to the rescue. He finds some comfort in the idea of evolution, of human progress. But even that does not ultimately help him, as he knows only too well that so-called 'progress' can be used for evil purposes as well as good. Science can tell Matthew that we are simply part of the universe, but this does not answer his deepest questions of meaning.

4.3.5   The third influence on Matthew's life is the 'nagging instinct' that tells him that there must be more to life than mere existence. He says:

> It's just, you know, um it's probably just a nagging instinct, that um whilst all the material evidence is telling me, this is ludicrous, you know, this is all complete chaos, nonsense, it's arbitrary, you know, we're a rock in a vacuum just spinning through nothingness and, you know, um the consequence of impersonal cosmic forces, nothing beyond it. Um, whilst my sort of intellectual faculty can tell me that, there is this other, and I'm not going to use the word 'soul', but there's this other bit of me which is just sort of going, 'hang on', you know, 'what if pal?', you know.

It is the 'what if' that keeps Matthew on his spiritual search.

4.3.6   Matthew's view of the Church is not based only on a dislike of the popular image of God. He also feels very strongly that religious people in general are arrogant in their assumption that they are the bearers of the truth. He says:

> … it seems so very often that you, people that are believers, they've got it, they know, you know? The fact that you don't know means that you, yes, you don't know, you're stupid. You know, it's the arrogance, um it's a very well dressed up humble looking arrogance, but it's arrogance nonetheless however, you know. That's what annoys me. Um, you know, you're not with us, therefore you're against us. No I'm with you, but I'm not sure, I'm not against you, and I just want to know, you know. If you know, how do you know? Do you really know, all the time?

For Matthew, and many other people we spoke with, belonging to the institutional Church means that you have to believe with certainty, there is no room for doubt. But this is just not possible for him as he reflects on his own life and the world around him. Matthew's spirituality is dynamic, it changes with his life; there is no room for a once-and-for-all revelation. Yet he gives the impression of longing to be able to belong to a faith community; a place where he can explore his beliefs and develop his spirituality. He wishes the Church was less dogmatic, but also more serious about its role instead of being bogged down in empty ritualism and fine words.

> But again it's, you know, being an iconoclast, smashing that nonsense down, you know, get real, you know, let's get underneath all that….

4.3.7 Matthew can see the attraction of belonging to a Church and even says somewhat wistfully,

> I think they get a lot out [of attending Church], again, this is probably envy in me, you know, it's, you know, why don't they invent one that I can go to?

The research conversation with Matthew vividly illustrates the struggle that many people have to believe and to nurture their own spirituality without either the language or the legitimating framework of an institutional religion. In doctrinal terms, his beliefs may seem thin, but the desire to believe is strong. Sadly, the institutional Church is out of bounds for the likes of Matthew, and so he is left to search in other places.

> And that's probably why um, I do tend to explore the subjects and the religions. I will talk to people, find out what they believe. Um, because maybe one day I'll find it, you know. Um but again, I think there is a need in all of us, I think. However much we resist it.

4.4.1 *'Tom'* is in his thirties, is married and works in a small local firm. Compared with Nicola and Matthew he has had virtually no contact with institutional religion, only attending church for his own wedding. His conversation illustrates the way that spirituality is often expressed by people who are completely outside the Christian tradition. Tom's spiritual life is highly materialistic. His talk is peppered with references to tangible phenomena such as ghosts, apparitions, premonitions, 'atmospheres' and the like. For Tom, the spirit world is all around us if we care to look. He and his wife Sarah seem to have the role of 'shamans' in their social circle. Sarah is the seer, as Tom says in a matter-of-fact way:

> Right, as far as premonition's concerned, I mean that's, that's definitely Sarah's field and whenever she has one, I listen.

4.4.2 Tom enjoys leading ghost hunts in the local woods and is adept at sensing atmospheres in people's houses. His friends regularly ask him to go to their new homes to judge whether or not the place is friendly. So the spirit world is part of Tom's everyday life. However, he is aware of the cultural critique of such beliefs. When referring to his friends asking him to go to their new homes, he says:

> And they, they wouldn't come out directly and say um, 'I want you to tell me if you sense anything in the house.' They'll say, er, 'just come and have a quick look at my house for me.' So they, they're not so much sit on the fence. They'd rather hide it and not say anything in public, 'cos they might be criticized for what they say.

4.4.3   Unlike his friends, Tom seems happy to talk about his psychic experiences, perhaps because he was brought up in a household where such events were considered the norm. Tom's grandmother 'used to delve into all this sort of stuff as well, bless her,' with her copy of *Everybody's Fate and Fortune*. He also describes how his sister fixed watches by staring at them. So, as Tom himself acknowledges, it is not something he has ever been far away from. His family provides a legitimating framework for his beliefs.

4.4.4   However, towards the end of the research conversation, Tom begins to talk about a very different kind of experience that he had had eight years previously. His father became seriously ill and Tom had to take him to hospital in the middle of the night. Tom was sat in the hospital corridor waiting for news of his father's condition, when he experienced a sudden rush of warmth and a sense that someone was telling him not to worry, that everything was going to be all right. This episode has the hallmarks of very many of the accounts of religious experience collected by Alister Hardy in Oxford.

4.4.5   It is significant that Tom kept the experience to himself. He told his mother and subsequently his wife, but no one else. Before describing it to the researcher here, he says that he definitely did not say anything about it at the previous Focus Group, 'cos I don't really admit it.' Why is that? What is the difference between giving accounts of ghost hunts and spontaneous human combustion, as Tom does freely, and talking about a religious experience? It seems to be an example of a taboo that has recurred many times in our research conversations. Tom is happy to talk about certain beliefs and experiences because in his mind he is able to provide proof that they 'really happened', and he is well aware that we live in a scientific age where rationality and physical proof are highly prized. He tries to keep these two parts of his experience together; his keen spiritual awareness and love of mystery, and his belief in the importance of rationality and logic. He can keep these two in tension with his highly materialistic understanding of spirituality, but it is not so easy with his experience of sitting in an empty hospital corridor; he can provide no proof for what happened.

4.4.6   The desire for tangible proof is a theme running throughout Tom's conversation. He states that he only believes scientists if they have facts and proof, and that he would even believe in a religion such as Christianity if they could show him some proof.

> I don't mind the idea of believing in something, if, if it's there in my face and I know it's there. But I, I haven't been given any other, any, any factual evidence and I, I do go a lot on sort of facts.

No wonder he described his experience in the hospital as 'so bizarre' and 'really, really weird.'

4.4.7   Unlike Matthew, Tom does not focus on his view of the institutional Church or Christian doctrine. It is as if these are so far removed from his life that they do not figure in his reflections on spirituality at all. But there is a contradiction here once again, as he does admit to being interested in church buildings. He even says that since the focus group he has wanted to go into churches as he walks past them. He goes on to say,

> Which, which is sort of quite strange for me. I, I do get a little impulse now and then but I just shrug it off….

What is this impulse? It seems to be linked with Tom's interest in atmospheres and his desire for tangible evidence of the spiritual world. He tries to explain his reasons for wanting to go into a church in this way:

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> Maybe, maybe I want to believe. Maybe there's a sense of I want to believe in something definite and concrete and maybe I've got the idea that if I go in at that moment, I might see something.

So churches are not dead, empty shells for Tom, they have the potential to reveal spiritual truths. His experience is that the walls carry a reverberation of the beliefs and prayers of people throughout history, and he finds this appealing.

> Rock, brick – it's like a tape recorder. It echoes things from the past.

But there is never any sense that Tom wishes to belong to the present day community of faith. This is simply not an option for him. Religion is forever linked with Songs of Praise, and the rush to see which member of the household can switch the television off first. It has nothing to do with Tom's personal belief system.

4.4.8 Tom illustrates a tension which exists in nearly all the conversations; how to maintain one's integrity as a member of a highly rational, logical, scientific culture and yet at the same time allow one's spiritual awareness to flourish. His conversation may be confused and self-contradictory at times, but this is precisely because he is attempting to hold these two contrasting worldviews together. Tom is aware of the cultural taboo surrounding admitting one's own spirituality, but seems to value the opportunity to share his thoughts in the research conversation. After being asked why he is interested in spirituality, Tom replies:

> It's just a sense of, er, I don't know. It's a sense of wonder, isn't it? If, if everything's as black and white as everybody wants it to be painted, the world would be a dull and boring place. And, and it's the not knowing. It's not, it's like is there life on other planets? It's the not knowing. [It's the mystery?] Yeah. I, I think if something came down and presented itself to you then the mystery would be gone…. See, I'm not really weird [followed by laughter].

Chapter Five: ASPECTS OF THE SPIRITUAL SEARCH

5.1   We now turn to an attempt to make some generalizations about people's attitudes to spirituality. Although there is great individuality in the way people talk about the spiritual life, it is nevertheless possible to identify a number of dimensions in which there is a high degree of common ground.

5.2   ***Timidity.*** There were exceptions, but in general the people we spoke with were very timid when it came to talking about religion or spirituality. In fact we feel that we were ourselves were misled by the widespread embarrassment about speaking about religion in public into doubting whether it mattered to many people. We now feel that we were much too conservative in insisting that those we selected ought at least to claim to be either spiritual or religious. Almost anybody would have done. All those with whom we conversed, without exception, had an easily recognizable concern with spirituality, though it was characteristic of most research conversations that this only became clear towards the end, when it was felt safe to do so. Quite often, as the person sensed that the conversation was coming to a close, they would ask us about our own beliefs and experience. By this point it had become sufficiently obvious that we were not intending either to criticise or to convert them. A simple and honest response in terms of our personal religious life often led to a further and vivid account of experience on the part of those with whom we were in conversation. But the necessary precursor for this was absolute clarity that we were researchers, not evangelists.

5.3   ***The meaning of 'spiritual'.*** The word 'spiritual' is clearly not in ordinary currency, or well understood. One of the commonest confusions was the assumption that 'spirituality' refers to 'spiritualism'. The connection of spiritualism with the weird or uncanny aspect of life meant that these people often felt uncomfortable about identifying themselves as spiritual. Where the general connotation was clearer, some people considered themselves as spiritual by elimination. That is to say they felt they were not religious, therefore they must be spiritual. For others, spirituality did have considerable importance, but contrasted with their critical feelings towards the religious institution. For example, one person compared the egalitarian nature of spirituality with the unattractiveness of the hierarchy within the Church. Similarly a number of people spoke about the openness and freedom of spirituality as opposed to the closed rigidity of religious dogma. However a few people, particularly in the older age group, were not offended by the word 'religious'. Sometimes this was because of a retained image of religion as to do with virtue, as in the case of a woman who wished to be thought of as religious because she saw herself as a 'nice person'.

5.4   ***The Quest Mode.*** The way many conversations developed suggested that most people's spirituality is in what Daniel Batson (1993) calls the 'Quest Mode'. People sometimes said explicitly that they were on a journey following a route that was not clear or, as one person put it, 'It is like a foggy day.' Sometimes, as in the case of Matthew discussed above, the dynamism of their search was painfully obvious. This dynamism very often extended into the research conversation itself. Even as the encounter developed it was apparent that a rethinking was going on. It is important to add that of course this was a two way process. We ourselves were constantly changing our understanding as we listened to what people were saying to us. There is no other way for open-minded research to proceed.

5.5   ***The Christian God and the Generic God.*** Having emphasised the quest, we also need to say that the parameters within which people expressed their spirituality were, at least at an unconscious level, those of the Christian meta-narrative with varying proportions of ideas drawn from other sources (e.g. Eastern religions, Spiritualism, paganism, science fiction etc.). Some people, particularly those in the older age group, spoke in a

consciously Christian manner about their spirituality. Their statements of belief were doctrinally no different from those of practising believers and, in some cases, more sophisticated than those of the average churchgoer. For this small group the only recognizable feature that differentiated them was their choice to be absent from the pews on a Sunday. Behind this refusal there was often a history of painful mistreatment by one or other of the religious institutions.

On the other hand when most people said they believed in God, this seemed to be a 'generic' God rather than the Trinitarian God of Christianity. References to Jesus tended to come only from people who had had a childhood background in Christianity, but even they were unsure of their doctrine as the following quotation from 'Emma' illustrates:

> [talking about believing in Jesus] "Yes, yeh, um, I think that's quite a difficult really, yes, he does, yeh, I mean because I believe in the um, you know, in Jesus as such, he came down and, I don't necessarily understand it, but I, you know, believe it to have happened as such. I wouldn't be able to pinpoint a role for him at the moment you know, I don't quite know what he's doing now, what he's got on his c.v. as such, but yes I do.

The confusion and evident embarrassment, covered over by humour, is very characteristic and suggests the strength of the taboo on talking about religion in contemporary Britain.

5.6.1   ***'Something There'.*** Another much larger group offered the commonest response of all, in that they were uneasy about saying anything positive about their spiritual experience, beyond the conviction that there is 'something there'; sometimes adding that it matters very much that it is there. This term 'something there' was so commonly used that we are thinking of drawing on it as the title of the book we are writing about the research. At one level this refusal to make positive statements suggests a widespread suspicion about the adequacy of traditional theological language to describe our experience of God. Perhaps this is not surprising after 300 years of sustained critique of religion within European culture.

5.6.2   Sophisticated religious people might be inclined to dismiss such vague talk, but another way of looking at it is to see it as falling into the apophatic tradition, seeking to approach God through refusing to make positive statements about the divine. This inarticulacy would seem to have many biblical precedents e.g. the nameless and imageless God, YHWH, and St Paul's metaphor of seeing through a glass darkly. There is a good deal of evidence amongst those we spoke with, that behind this approach lies not only a suspicion or resentment of religious doctrine in general, but annoyance about cut-and-dried answers that seem to deny the mysteriousness of life. This came out particularly in 'James' who spoke of that which he encounters as 'deeper than God' and of his communion with this as 'more profound than prayer'. James had gone up to university to study theology but given up in disgust at what he saw as the hypocrisy of his fellow students (and perhaps the staff). He is not the first person to do this. He reminded us of William James' father, Henry James the elder, who quit his studies at Princeton Theological Seminary during the mid Nineteenth Century, because it wasn't religious enough.

5.7   ***Self constructed theologies.*** Another kind of response comes particularly from people in the under forty age group who have grown up isolated from direct contact with the religious institution. They construct a theology of their own, quite often using fragments of the Christian meta-narrative that are available to them. To some degree Tom had done this. 'Stephanie' is another example. She had discovered New Age teachings during her search for meaning and she spoke with strong conviction of the importance of meditation

and of being in connection with the 'Universal Consciousness'. Her beliefs and practices had remarkable similarities to those of traditional Christianity but they were expressed in different language. For example Stephanie's concept of Universal Consciousness seemed to be similar to the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit; a presence that connected everyone and everything in the universe:

> I have experienced vast chasms of empty loneliness ….. and getting in touch with the universal consciousness is like being in touch with everyone else who's out there. Um and it's like filling yourself up with that, um, to take that feeling away.

Later on in the conversation, Stephanie spoke about the importance of forgiveness in her own life:

> And I think one of the hardest things was learning to send my love and forgiveness to people who had done things that had caused me pain. ……. What you put out you'll get back tenfold. The universe will look after me. The universe will look after them. If they've done something bad to me, the universe will take care of them, not me, it's not my place. I mean your God as you call him, like vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord, well it's that theory, but in my words, is the universe will take care of it, I don't.

5.8.1   ***Theodicy.*** Traditionally, God is seen as almighty, omnipotent, omniscient. God is also seen as male and, especially amongst the men we spoke to, punitive. He is the transcendent God who saves and redeems his people, but also condemns. This idea of God poses grave difficulties for people on the periphery or outside of the Christian faith. It is an issue of theodicy. One of the questions in our recent national survey (see Appendix C, p. 43) was put in the following way: 'Some people don't think there is a God. Why do you think this is?' The largest single group by quite a long way, 41% of the national sample, agreed with the alternative which stated 'There is too much suffering, poverty and injustice in the world for God to exist'. It is often thought that the advent of the scientific attitude is the major stumbling block to religious faith. But the number of people concerned about theodicy was almost double the size of the group who felt that loss of belief was because 'science has explained the mysteries of life'.

5.8.2   The figures for the national sample are fully supported by the content of our research conversations. Traditional monotheism is still the natural religious assumption for the ordinary person in the street, but as a practical belief the idea has been watered down to mean not much more than that God will intervene if my relatives or I get into difficulty. People speak of God helping their families at the same time as having difficulty in believing in God because of all the disasters in the world. Here is 'Steven' (whose wife is a practising Catholic) talking about homeless people:

> ….. this is, this is somewhere where um, God could do more if he could. If there was somebody um, he'd look after everybody in the world. But, um, if he's that good, then why is there so much suffering? [Does that make it hard for you to believe in God?] Yeah, I think it does. Um, I suppose I believe in him in a, in a small sort of way whereas um, like he's looking after my children and the children's schools and sort of, um, all the Catholic friends what, you know, um that we have, that we know. But then again, like I say, there's that much suffering and pain in the world that, maybe, you know, there isn't, there isn't a God.

So God has shrunk down to become a 'household god', looking after an individual's family, but not able to intervene in a wider context. In some cases there seems to be a

suggestion that there is more than one god, and this loving household god is different from the remote and frightening creator God.

Chapter Six: THE CHURCH AND CHURCHGOERS

6.1   Numerous trenchant comments were made about the Church and churchgoers. As we looked at the transcripts we began to see that there were a number of tensions or binary oppositions regarding attitudes to the Church. These tensions suggest to us that much of the anger directed towards the churches arises from disappointment. Some of the major aspects of this ambivalent critique are summarized below.

6.2   ***Cynicism about the religious institution.*** This is the 'default mode' in public discourse, as was made very clear in the focus groups when people were asked for their opinion of the Church. In fact the references to hypocrisy, bigotry, being out of touch and other critical clichés were boring in their repetitiousness. In private, where the social pressure to conform to stereotypical opinions was reduced, the negative critique was on the whole not so severe. Where it carried particular weight was when it came from someone who was personally devout but had ceased to attend church. Thus 'Mary', whose devotional life was thoroughly Christian (she spoke of her daily prayer, and how through prayer she had learned of the compassion of God, 'God is not a snooper') enumerated the defects of the Church as,

(a)   Obsession with control, (the church should be a servant),

(b)   Living in the past (God is a God of the living, not the dead),

(c)   Failure to be concerned with humanity as a whole – meaning universalism, and genuine political commitment to the poor (occasional collections for the poor of the world are mere tokenism!).

Mary saw these defects as a betrayal of religion, enough to make her avoid church attendance altogether. She angrily pointed out that stopping going to church has nothing to do with losing faith; 'we need more religion now, not less'.

6.3.1   ***Three ways of relating to the institution.*** In the case of all who took part in the research conversations, membership of the Church has either been abandoned or not even considered. The images of God and of the hereafter that they had encountered at an earlier stage simply did not resonate with their life experiences, hence the institution has little or no bearing on the content of their spiritual lives. However, in some cases it is tolerated as a necessary inconvenience. It represents something still considered important: morality, a sense of the past, groundedness, even of belonging or identity. This does not mean that the individuals either need or want to be a regular part of the Church community themselves. It is enough to have the children christened ('given the right start') and perhaps attend a Christingle service at Christmas. Anything more tends to be viewed as excessive. In summary, the ways of relating to the institution fell approximately into three categories (illustrated by the case studies in Chapter 4):

6.3.2   *(a) Believing/not belonging*
This group of people tended to be in the over 40 age range. Usually they had quite a good knowledge of Christian belief and doctrine, but for various reasons had ceased going to church. Their spirituality was conventionally Christian.

6.3.3   *(b) Not believing/not belonging*
Here, people had generally been brought up with quite a lot of contact with the Christian institution. Their experience of it had been negative and they were generally quite hostile towards it. Nevertheless they had an easily recognizable spirituality, sometimes of considerable depth. On the whole these people belonged to the younger age group.

6.3.4   *(c) Untouched by the Church*
This group of people appeared to have had no significant contact with the religious institution, yet had a vivid spirituality. In some ways this group was the most interesting since its members had often constructed a personal theology drawn from a variety of sources.

6.4   The binary opposition that is present in much of what people say is between the notion of belonging (the Church is 'my tribe'), and the Church as alien, not allowing me to belong. The 'tribal' end of this tension was held to most strongly amongst people who had had an orthodox Roman Catholic upbringing, but, rather to our surprise, was also true to a degree, even of people who had never had any links with the institution, that is, the members of our category (c) above. However, some people's experience when they did venture into their local parish church meant that they felt strongly that they did not belong, as in the instance mentioned below (p. 33) of Sharon's embarrassing visit to a communion service.

6.5   ***The Bible.*** The orthodox faith of our group (a) above implies a knowledge of the Bible. Nevertheless, not one of the participants mentioned reading the Bible. It was definitely not an open, or opened, Book. On the whole, knowledge of Bible stories was limited to vague memories of Sunday School, catechism, or RE classes. There seemed to be no connection between most people's personal beliefs or understanding of God and the Bible. Where people did care to respond to questions about it, at best it seemed that the Bible was full of 'nice stories'. At worst it was impossible to understand. For many it was viewed in the same light as Shakespeare; part of our cultural heritage, but hardly relevant to daily life.

6.6   ***Church Buildings.*** There are still sacred spaces available for people in the secular world. They are places where contemplation can take place. They can be as varied as a back doorstep in the evening, a swimming pool on a Sunday morning, the open countryside, or even a garden centre. Nor is it true to say that traditional sacred spaces such as a church or a cathedral are closed to people who choose to stand outside the institution. We have already seen this in the case of Tom. The church building was typically seen as sacred space open to all, and not the sole property of churchgoers. Individuals spoke of going into empty churches and appreciating the atmosphere. Somehow there was a different quality to the atmosphere in a church than in other, secular buildings, as the following quotations illustrate:

> Now as I've said, I'm not particularly religious. I don't go to church. But the feeling of calmness inside there [Ripon Cathedral] and the feeling of humbleness if you like, you know, is, it was amazing…. It was a strange, strange feeling, strange feeling. To say that, um, I don't really feel particularly religious, it was, it was a calming, calming atmosphere. (Graham)

> Um and I like going into churches, from an aesthetic, you know, I think they're great places, um and they have weight and silence and um, you know, tranquillity and beauty, and you can find, you know solace. (Matthew)

Churches also provide a safe haven when life is particularly difficult. The following quotation comes from a man whose two-year-old nephew died in tragic circumstances. Feeling very upset, he went into his local parish church:

> They've got a stained glass window straight in front of the altar. And I don't know what it was, but when I walked out of there I felt a hundred percent better. Just being there. I don't know if… I don't know, I can't explain it. I

> haven't got the words to explain it, but I can definitely say I felt a hundred percent as I walked out after that about the events. (Simon)

Note the difficulty that Simon had in articulating his experience. This echoes Graham's 'strange feeling'. Being in a church is somehow different to being in other buildings, but the difference is intangible. However, churches are not always viewed so positively. One woman spoke of the austere nature of her local Catholic parish church:

> It's huge, it's enormous, it's like, I don't know why they built it so big, but you go in and it's like the ceilings are massive, it's freezing cold, and like it's so big, they don't fill it…. I think it's just too big, it just feels like cold in there in the winter, you're all wrapped up, and can't wait to get home. That shouldn't be how it should be, is it? (Sarah)

Sarah felt rejected by the Catholic Church because of certain life choices she had made, and the actual church building seems to symbolize her feelings towards the institution.

6.7   ***Christmas.*** Apart from the occasional offices, Christmas was the one occasion in the year when several of the people to whom we spoke admitted to having attended church. Christingle services were particularly popular with families, and many people mentioned enjoying singing hymns and carols. This seems in the main to be a nostalgia for a (perhaps fictitious) past when all was well with the world. People spoke of Christmas having 'lost its meaning' for society, but within the walls of the local parish church there remains some memory of the way things used to be. This links in with the view that the Church is a symbol of past certainties, and so should not attempt to become modern and 'trendy'.

6.8   ***Occasional Offices.*** Of those people who had recently come across the religious institution, most had done so through the Occasional Offices. Their experiences were strongly contrasting, either extremely positive or extremely negative and embarrassing, depending on the reception they obtained from the clergy. People became very angry when they felt that they were being kept out of the church. They also sometimes felt they were being asked to jump through hoops just to keep the clergy happy. However, if parishes were welcoming, then people spoke warmly of their experiences.

6.9   ***Inauthenticity.*** When representatives of the religious institution were directly encountered, hypocrisy was repeatedly cited as off-putting. Sometimes this meant a critique of double standards on the part of churchgoers, for example the contrast between a cloying 'niceness' (Matthew revealingly called it 'humble arrogance') in the context of the church, allied to disgraceful behaviour in personal and professional life outside the church. Sometimes it extended inside the church doors. One woman spoke of feeling unable to go to church because her husband had been mentally ill and she feared the gossip. Simon, a working class man who, although he never went to church, gave voluntary help within the parish had noticed that the more conventionally pious ignored him in the street.

> I've walked by these people and they've just walked by you because if you don't talk with a plum in your mouth, if you don't really like [have] the right clothing, you're not entertained are you?

These incidents - and many similar ones were cited - carry echoes of the publican at the back of the synagogue and suggest that there is genuine substance to the accusations of hypocrisy.

6.10   ***Embarrassment***. Remoteness from the institution combined with curiosity can lead to toe-curling embarrassment. 'Sharon' remembered one occasion when she did venture into the local parish church and felt terribly uncomfortable:

> But I think they ought to do like a church for beginners really, because if you're not used to going, because they always have communion here. [she goes on to explain how she was encouraged to go forward for Communion] It was a really awkward situation, do you know what I mean? And he was giving us the sip of the wine, and the um, and he beckoned us to bring the children up as well, and they give you, whatever it is they give you to eat. Is it rice paper?

6.11   ***Lack of openness to the outsider***. As we have just noted there often seemed to be no place for the 'beginner' and equally as serious, no place for the honest searcher. One of the most moving occasions during our research conversations was when people, usually towards the end of the chat, spoke of their personal search, and many of them were on the search. 'Colin' was burned up with anger at the institutional church, yet later on spoke wistfully of his longing for a plausible basis for belief. Another man explained sadly that he had been unable to find a church open enough to accept him as a searcher. One woman spoke for many when she said 'I think about it (the meaning of life) all the time', yet admitted that she talked about it to nobody else. It is worth noting that she chose to speak about it to us when we offered the opportunity, but had not tried to do so with a member of the clergy.

6.12   ***Fear of evangelical rigidity.*** Perhaps her reticence was related to a generally expressed fear; opening a conversation with a member of the clergy would invite an embarrassing attempt to guide them into accepting Christian beliefs about which they were at best doubtful. People in general were put off by their perception of religious orthodoxy as requiring them to sign up to a list of beliefs. This came to a head on those occasions where contact with the church was sought, for example because of a wish to have an infant baptized. The ritual itself was acceptable, even strongly desired, but not the doctrinal accompaniment, at least when handed to them without discussion.

6.13   ***Fear of social isolation.*** Many feared being laughed at by friends and colleagues. 'Evelyn' cringed as she imagined the mockery, 'She's seen the light, haven't you Evelyn?' Amongst the men the fear was stronger still 'If my mates in the football club knew I was talking like this they'd think I was crazy.' The social construction of masculinity certainly plays an important part here. Spirituality is for women, or if it is spoken about at all by men it happens only late at night, after having had too much to drink. 'Sean' spoke proudly of being too insensitive to get in touch with his spirituality, 'probably my brain cells have rotted from too much alcohol'. Yet he accepted that there was a reality in the spiritual life, it was simply that he personally was out of touch.

Chapter Seven   **REFLECTIONS ON MISSION**

7.1   In this final section of our report we offer for consideration some themes that have emerged repeatedly as we have considered our findings in relation to the mission of the Church.

7.2.1   ***Images of God and the Church.*** It has become very clear to us that a central theme for reflection on the part of those concerned with mission must be a clear-eyed exploration of the effect of traditional images of God and the Church on non-churchgoers. All of those we spoke with were perfectly clear that anthropomorphic ideas of an old man in the sky are inadequate. Yet on the occasions when they have ventured into a church service they have heard the recitation of the Creed, with its reference to Christ's Ascension into heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father. The uneasiness this causes amongst people who are not used to traditional religious metaphor means that, in general, to avoid discomfort they avoid explicit mention of God, preferring to use a term like 'something there'. We have seen that this is perhaps not too remote from the apophatic tradition.

7.2.2   As we have seen, one doctrinal difficulty that crops up regularly with a number of people is the unacceptability of God seen as transcendent. God's immanence is much more acceptable and at times the tension between the two images leads to them being torn apart and seen as two separate gods, as in the case of James discussed above. James's ideas come out of a profound personal reflection that leads him to seek the God beyond the conventional God. But in most other cases adherence to immanence appears to be quite explicitly a matter of 'taming' God, holding to a sentimental and cosy picture that is reassuring when life becomes pressured. This is linked with an understanding of the function of the Church as above all to offer comfort. The implication is that its primary task is to minister to people who are personally inadequate, and to soothe the elderly as they face death. In fact this keys in to a major contemporary reductionist explanation of religion, the 'deprivation' theory (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997); that people are religious because they are lacking in some way (i.e. because of poverty, loneliness, ill-health, social repression etc.). Most normal people, the implication runs, don't need that kind of crutch. That in itself is destructive of any kind of image of the Church as challenging or heroic and it must be said that the notion that religion could be demanding did not appear very often in our conversations. This suggests to us that the religious institution, in so far as it has reached these people, has failed to offer a profound enough understanding of the nature of the religious search.

7.3   ***Theodicy***. The sometimes painful reality of the religious search brings us back to our earlier reference to the question of theodicy. The problem of suffering is probably the single most difficult issue for believers in a good God, yet it often seems to be avoided by the representatives of the institution, or covered up by sentimentality. The national statistics show that it figures more heavily as a dissuasive to religious belief than any other factor, including the reductionist claims of some empirical scientists. George Steiner suggested in his book *The Death of Tragedy* (1961) that in the course of European history, the classical Greek sense of life as tragic was overcome by the advent of the fundamental optimism of the Judaeo-Christian belief system. We are wondering whether, forty years on from Steiner's analysis, after Auschwitz and after the many other atrocities of the 20th Century, we see in post-Christian society the return of a tragic sense of life? Whilst most people enjoy our high standard of material affluence, they also have these disasters conveyed to them by means of electronic communication in a way that has never happened before in human history. This is part of modern awareness, and in many of the conversations that we have had there is an undertow of frightened avoidance of the realities of life. If at the deepest level there is a conviction that life at depth is pitiless and utterly meaningless, then the optimism of Christianity becomes incredible. The people

we spoke with are well aware of this, and it is an issue that church people need to face much more directly in their dialogue with secular culture.

7.4.1 *Secularity as a social construction.* Religious words, ritual and statements of faith have little force in a community in which our spiritual awareness has been overridden by secular cultural assumptions. These assumptions are often taken to be self-evident, yet they are the result of social construction. It is important to emphasise this, because whilst the postmodern movement has led to a great deal of scholarly labour in deconstructing religious belief, the same is not true in relation to the construction of secularity. Yet this is perfectly feasible. Our work in the field of religious and spiritual experience has caused us to reappraise the standard Feuerbachian inversion that underpins secular explanations of religion, i.e. God did not create us, we created God (with all the subsequent consequences for current sociological and psychological explanations of religion). We now see this inversion as a culturally constructed mistake, created during the course of the European Enlightenment. Our claim is that there is a need to make a second inversion. Enlightenment ideas, along with their many benefits, have also generated a secular world-view that has obscured the natural spirituality of the human species (this is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2 of *The Spirit of the Child* [Hay with Nye, 1998]). Seen in that light, the postmodern movement is actually of considerable help to Christian mission, because it suggests that it is possible to deconstruct secularism in exactly the same way that secular theorists have tried to deconstruct religion.

7.4.2 We are developing the idea of culture as a 'valve'. The notion is that language and behaviour considered acceptable within a particular society both close off and open up human potential. In the case of spirituality, traditional religious language has had the function of opening the valve, that is, of opening up our inbuilt spiritual awareness. But such language is either unavailable or implausible to many of the people with whom we have conversed. The languages and behaviour patterns that *are* socially permissible act like a stop-valve that closes off spiritual awareness. Nevertheless, the constant use of the phrase 'something there' to describe the transcendent, seems to have the function of keeping the valve open, sometimes powerfully so. At least one person spoke of the spirit as 'seductive'. We sometimes felt that in a different age, one or two of these people would probably have been recognized, and recognized themselves, as mystics. Their innate propensity towards the spiritual rose to the surface in spite of strong cultural voices that sought to denigrate them.

7.4.3 *Individualism versus Relational Consciousness.* One cultural theme to emerge from the Enlightenment that has had particularly damaging effects on our natural spiritual awareness is individualism. Individualism is multitudinous in its origins (Lukes, 1973) and we do not have the space to enter into a detailed discussion of it in a short report. In its clearest and most uncompromising form it is typically traced back, in England at least, to the 17th Century materialism of Thomas Hobbes. His assumption that each of us is in a struggle for power against everyone else is based on a materialist metaphysics that states that 'minds never meet, that ideas are never really shared and that each of us is always and finally isolated from every other individual' (Hampton, 1986). Karl Marx saw this individualism in full flood in the masters of 19th Century Europe, depicting the typical capitalist entrepreneur as unencumbered by any social ties, '.... that is, an individual separated from the community, withdrawn into himself, wholly preoccupied with his private interest and acting in accordance with his private caprice... [for him] the only bond between men is natural necessity, need, and private interest.' (quoted by Michael Walzer, 1990).

7.4.4 Though he was writing in the 17th century, Hobbes continues to have contemporary relevance. C.B. MacPherson (1962), one of the most influential modern interpreters of

the 17th Century English Revolution, charges Hobbes with creating the doctrine on which bourgeois liberal society still operates, or as he calls it 'the theory of possessive individualism'.   Spiritual awareness in its essence is diametrically opposed to such individualism. Work completed two years ago by Hay and Nye (1998), on children's spirituality, suggests that 'relational consciousness' is the biological precursor of both spirituality and ethics. In *The Spirit of the Child* Nye describes this as having two aspects:

(a)   An unusual level of *consciousness* or perceptiveness, relative to other passages of conversation spoken by that child

(b)   Conversation expressed in a context of how the child *related* to things, other people, him/herself and God

7.4.5   It is because human beings have such an awareness that they can be religious in the first place. It allows the possibility of relationship to God, or, if people are non-theists, the possibility of an holistic relation to the Other, however they conceive of it. Once one accepts that relational consciousness is the precursor of spirituality, it also becomes clear that it must be the underpinning of ethics. We know from literally hundreds of conversations with adults about their spirituality, that the typical result of being directly aware of one's immersion in the physical and social matrix is the experience of a shortening of the psychological distance between oneself and one's surroundings. When a person realises this, it matters much more to them when some aspect of reality is damaged, whether it is another person or a part of the environment, for they are much more likely to experience it as a shared damage; the feeling is 'I too am damaged by what has happened to the other.'

7.5   ***Religious people have allies.***   There is a fundamental contradiction between relational consciousness and the possessive individualism that underpins much of the contemporary politico-economic system. Hence there is a real sense in which spirituality can be seen as potentially subversive of the status quo. This is one of the reasons why religion is in difficulties in Western style political economies. It also implies that Christian mission shares some of the perspectives of non-religious people of good will who are concerned with constructing a society built on justice and cooperation rather than self-interest. These are people who from a secular perspective would feel that the essence of their ethical struggle lies in the protection and promotion of relational consciousness, or to use the term more familiar in a religious context, spirituality. In other words religious people have a large body of allies in the secular world who share their recognition of the social and political importance of relational consciousness, and by implication are not at all hostile to spirituality.

7.6.1   ***Reconstructing the language of spirituality.***   The cultural history we have been discussing means that spirituality has the greatest difficulty in feeding into political legislation because it no longer has a widely plausible, common public language. How could we rediscover such a language?   We suggest that the first step is one of construction through engaging in simple conversation. But the conversation has to be of a type that leads beyond those aspects of self that are concerned with public image towards the deeper issues of relational consciousness.   Our experience of doing qualitative research in this area suggests to us that the methodology is well suited to this kind of spiritual reconstruction. Our role is to be listeners, with no purpose other than trying to understand what people are saying to us when they talk about their spirituality. This 'sounding board' approach seems to give powerful permission for people to speak about existential issues that are normally obscured in everyday life.

7.6.2   To express ourselves in the traditional Christian language, we believe that during our research we have been listening to how God the Holy Spirit is already communicating with people who, for one reason or another, keep clear of the institutional Church. This listening has been an important part of our spiritual re-education.   In a way our conversations have created a kind of mutual reflection on praxis. When this is at a sufficiently profound level it leads inevitably to a questioning of assumptions and a dynamic reconsideration of spiritual issues. Ideally what we discover together is a non-oppressive, mutually respectful mode of dialogue across the cultural divide (Yoshikawa, 1987) that increasingly separates the secular and religious worlds. In the process we find ourselves engaged in the reconstruction of a common spiritual language. We suggest that the development of this dialogue is the work of mission.

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APPENDIX A

Areas of discussion for Focus Groups:

- Experience of Church or Sunday School as children

- What does it mean to be religious or spiritual?

- Is religion/spirituality a private concern, or does it have social implications?

- What relevance does the notion of 'God' have in society and in their own lives?

- What relevance does prayer have to life today or to them personally?

- Do they ever read the Bible?

- Do they talk to their children about their beliefs?

- Why do they not go to church? Was it a conscious decision?

- Why do they think people still go to church?

- How would they change the Church if they could?

- What is the media's attitude towards the Church?

- When does the Church come across either positively or negatively?

- What image of God/religion does the Church portray?

APPENDIX B

Areas of interest for individual research conversations:

- Background information on childhood - any experience of organised religion?

- Issues around the institutional Church & Christian beliefs (including the Bible)

- Belief in God

- Issues around death and the possibility of an after-life

- Critical incidents in their lives

- Experiences of transcendence

- Meaning and purpose in life

- Attitudes towards the family and the wider community

- What does it mean to be 'spiritual'?

- Do you talk about these issues with other people?

APPENDIX C

Questions inserted in the *Soul of Britain* National Survey that are discussed in this report

17.   People sometimes talk about certain kinds of personal experiences which involve a non-everyday awareness of a presence or power. I am going to read out a list of some of the kinds of things they talk about. Have any of these ever happened to you?

A patterning of events in your life that convinces you that in some strange way they were meant to happen

<div align="center">YES/NO/DON'T KNOW</div>

An awareness of the presence of God   *YES/NO/DON'T KNOW*

An awareness that you are receiving help in answer to prayer

<div align="center">YES/NO/DON'T KNOW</div>

An awareness of a sacred presence in nature

<div align="center">YES/NO/DON'T KNOW</div>

Felt as though you were in touch with someone who had died

<div align="center">YES/NO/DON'T KNOW</div>

An awareness that you are in the presence of evil

<div align="center">YES/NO/DON'T KNOW</div>

35.   Some people don't believe that there is a God. Why do you think this is? (*positive responses expressed as percentages of the national sample shown in brackets*)

There is too much suffering, poverty and injustice in the world for God to exist (41%)

Lack of knowledge/teaching about God (31%)

Science has explained the mysteries of life (22%)

The concept of God is irrelevant to modern society (20%)

Other (6%)

Don't know (5%)