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Researching the Fruits of Experience
in the Alister Hardy Religious Experience

Research Centre Archive

by

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A thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Warwick, Department of Education

Studies

September 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iii
Declarations.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
Acronyms.....	vi
Part One: Background and Theoretical Research	
1. The Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre Archive and approaches to research.....	1
2. Fruits of experience in religion.....	39
3. Interpretations of the fruits of mystical, religious and spiritual experience in the scholarly literature.....	68
4. Non-Religious interpretations and a new typology.....	107
5. Prevailing attitudes towards self and others.....	147
Part Two: Empirical Research	
6. Empirical research into the fruits of RSEs in the RERC Archive.....	180
7. Detailed analysis of the fruits of RSEs in the RERC Archive.....	216
8. Nurturing the fruits.....	242
Part Three: Conclusions	
9. A turn to altruism.....	274
10. From I to we.....	304
References.....	323
Appendix A.....	350
Appendix B.....	353
Appendix C.....	355

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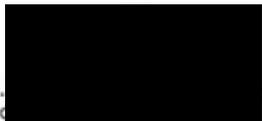
I am most grateful to my supervisor Revd Canon Professor Leslie J. Francis. For part of the period of study Dr Ursula McKenna of Warwick University became my second supervisor and I also benefitted from the initial guidance given by the Alister Hardy Professor of Religious and Spiritual Experience, Revd Professor Jeff Astley.

In addition, my heartfelt thanks are due especially to my husband, and also to my daughter and sister for their loving support throughout this venture.

DECLARATIONS

Declaration

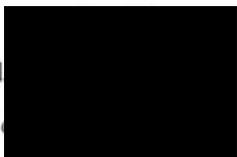
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Date..... 6. IX. 21

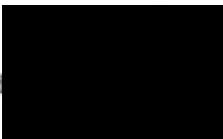
Statement 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed (candidate) Date..... 6. IX. 21

Statement 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Signed (candidate)

Date..... 6. IX. 21

ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is on the “fruits” or consequences of religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs) recorded in the Archive of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) held at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in Lampeter. The Archive is now available online and continues to receive contributions today.

This database comprises approximately 6,600 accounts of experiences, many of which were originally submitted in response to an appeal by Sir Alister Hardy for people to send accounts of awareness of, or influence by a presence or Power, whether or not called God, which appeared to be beyond their individual selves.

My first research question asks, “What, in the RERC Archive, are the ‘fruits’ of RSEs in terms of inner transformation and outward behaviour?” This is answered by a quantitative, numerical analysis of the range of consequences recorded on Microsoft Excel spreadsheets, indicating particularly a sense of comfort, guidance and love. Religious and spiritual changes are recorded, and specific accounts are explored in more depth to evaluate the fruits in a qualitative approach.

In view of today’s more secular society, my second research question became, “Is the designation ‘Intense Experience’ as expounded by Wesley J. Wildman in his *Religious and spiritual experiences* (2011) helpful for researchers when evaluating RSEs, particularly those of people who do not consider themselves religious?”. Might that categorisation enable RSEs to be accepted, as Sir Alister Hardy wished, as a natural part of human consciousness?

Study of the literature – religious and scholarly – gave rise to the third research question, “Can the hypothesis that a turn from self-centredness to altruism is the dominant category underlying the variety of fruits of experience be supported through analysis of the RERC Archive?” A mixed methods approach to the data appeared to lend support for this hypothesis.

ACRONYMS

Alister Hardy Trust (AHT); University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD); Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC); religious experiences (REs); spiritual experiences (SEs); religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs); ultimate experiences (UEs); intense experiences (IEs); near-death experiences (NDEs); out-of-body experiences (OBEs); end-of-life experiences (ELEs); after-death communications (ADCs); self-transcendent experiences (STEs); Pure Consciousness Event (PCE); Absolute Unitary Being (AUB).

CHAPTER ONE
THE ALISTER HARDY
RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE RESEARCH CENTRE
ARCHIVE AND APPROACHES TO RESEARCH

Summary

Beginning the research

The Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre Archive

Research questions

Fruits of experience

Methodology

Quantitative research

Qualitative research

Subjectivity and research

Credibility

Retrospective accounts

Ethical issues

Research linked to the RERC

Research in the RERC Archive

Global research

Similar collections

Mass Observation Project (MOA)

Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS)

Churches' Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies (CFPSS)

Society for Psychical Research (SPR)

Conclusion

Summary

The first chapter sets the scene for this research project by giving a brief overview of Sir Alister Hardy's understanding of Natural Theology, his aims and early research into religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs). A description of the establishment, development and composition of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) Archive follows, with an example to indicate the format in which the accounts of RSEs are held.

An explanation of the choice of research questions and the methodological approach taken is given. The data from the Archive underlie the structure of the whole dissertation and thus empirical data are included in part one of the thesis. A brief overview of the work of scholars linked to the RERC Archive and research within it is followed by a comparison with other archives, which might be expected to be similar.

Beginning the research

Sir Alister Hardy had impeccable credentials as a scientist. In 1957 he was knighted for his services to marine biology, was a Fellow of the Royal Society and held Professorships at Hull, Aberdeen and Oxford, in Zoology and Natural History. Yet since his own early experiences of nature mysticism, he had regarded humans as religious animals, *Homo sapiens* as *Homo religiosus*. He considered spirituality to be a natural aspect of human consciousness, and a youthful vow to reconcile the theory of evolution with human spiritual awareness was never forgotten, and eventually fulfilled on the award of the Templeton Foundation Prize for Progress in Religion in 1985 (Hardy, 1997/2004, p. 2).

Hardy first outlined his ideas on religion after retirement from Oxford, when he delivered the Gifford Lectures of 1963-4 and 1964-5 at his alma mater, Aberdeen University. The title *Evolution and the spirit of man* reflected Hardy's approach and led to two publications (Hardy, 1965, 1966/1978). The aim of the Gifford Lectures as set out in Lord Gifford's will, was:

Promoting, Advancing, Teaching and Diffusing the study of Natural Theology, in the widest sense of that term. ... I wish the lecturers to treat their subject as a strictly natural science, the greatest of all possible sciences, indeed, in one sense, the only science, that of Infinite Being, without reference to or reliance upon any supposed special, exceptional or so-called miraculous revelation. (Hardy, 1965, pp. 11-12)

Natural theology lay at the heart of Hardy's research, as it "concerns a Theism which is derived empirically from the study of nature, man and human history" (Hardy, 1965, p. 11). He set out to explore the spiritual side of humanity, which he viewed as including a response to the adventure of life, the arts and the beauty of the natural world.

Hardy saw himself in the tradition of the great nineteenth century naturalists, who collected biological specimens on which the science of zoology was based. His aim was to collect examples of awareness of the divine as found among ordinary people, establishing a natural history of human religious experience, on which "a science of man's religious behaviour" (Hardy, 1966/1978, p. 220) would be based. His was a comprehensive approach, and while acknowledging the importance of his numerical findings, he stressed that it was "the inner sense of spirituality in the lives of individuals, as revealed in the

written records, which, while not a part of quantitative science, must be the more profound aspect of our work” (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 16). This approach is reflected in my mixed methods approach.

Hardy later gave the Hibbert Lectures, with a more detailed analysis of his research into the written records of religious experience (Hardy, 1975/1977). He was aware of critique from former scientific colleagues, who assumed the materialist position and thought he was wasting his time (Hardy, 1975/1977, p. 18), and also from religious fundamentalists, who doubted that his research would prove anything because everything was already there in the Bible (Hardy, 1971, p. 2), a view widely held (Smart, 1969/1984, pp. 12-14). Some felt that sceptics would never be swayed, whereas experiencers simply “know” and need no further justification for their beliefs (Donovan, 1979/1998, pp. 74-75). He was in danger of falling between two stools, which is still at times a difficulty faced by researchers into RSEs.

From 1925 onwards, Hardy had collected articles on religious experience through a press agency, but in 1969 (at the age of 73) he began his own empirical research, intending to show that religious experience was widespread in the population. To obtain his data, he frequently posed a version of 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?” which he would link to an article or interview, illustrating the kind of experience he meant. In his analysis of his research Hardy described this “Power which appears partly transcendent, and felt as the numinous beyond the self, and partly immanent within him” (Hardy, 1966/1978, p. 236) and in a

pamphlet, he explained more clearly what he sought, giving a subtler understanding of the nature of the experience, including that of a power within and making mention of the effects:

All those who feel that they have been conscious of, and perhaps influenced by, some Power, whether they call it God or not, which may either appear to be beyond their individual selves or partly, or even entirely, within their being, are asked to write a simple account of these feelings and their effects. (Hardy, 1971, p. 2, 1979/2006, p.20)

After a meagre response from the religious press, his appeal was published more widely, in the *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Times* and *Daily Mail*. The press appeals, supplemented by pamphlets and questionnaires as well as articles published in the USA, Australia and New Zealand, resulted in a flood of accounts from members of the public, describing a wide range of experiences. This gave Hardy a self-selected database of written material, descriptions of RSEs sent in by people of all ages, from varying backgrounds and of different levels of education, which formed the early Archive of the original Religious Experience Research Unit (RERU), which he established at what was then Manchester College in the University of Oxford.

Hardy's eminence as a scientist was crucial. Respect for his standing encouraged people to write to him about experiences which they had never shared before, such was the fear of being thought insane, or at the very least extremely odd. Many correspondents expressed relief at being able to acknowledge their experiences. These were predominantly positive; a result of the formulation of the question and the examples given, although some negative accounts were also

submitted. Some people offered support for his research, and others even included cheques.

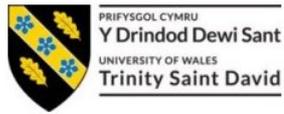
In 1979, Hardy published *The spiritual nature of man*, describing the results of the first eight years of research. This is the starting point for my empirical research and Hardy's classification system, particularly of the consequences of the experiences, is considered in Chapter 6. My research is based on the RERU Archive Hardy established and includes accounts collected since.

The Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre Archive

Since its move from Oxford in 2000, the renamed Archive of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) has been located at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) in Lampeter. It now comprises over 6,600 accounts of a great variety of experiences sent in answer to Hardy's appeal and often deemed to be religious or spiritual by those who submitted them. The original documents, many of which were handwritten, are currently unavailable to researchers, as the Archive has now been digitized. For this study, only online transcripts will be used, and my research focuses entirely on the accounts, which offer "a weight of *objective* evidence in the form of *written records* of these subjective spiritual feelings and of their effects on the lives of the people concerned" (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 4). The accounts have been anonymized, so there is no opportunity for further contact with the correspondents, who have the option of allowing or refusing permission for their accounts to be used by researchers. Those refusing permission have been removed from the Archive.

Although some people simply write to the RERC, many correspondents fill in a form (printed or online) giving their name, address, age, religious background and then a description of their experience. Other questions are asked, including one on the “Fruits of the Experience”. The form is shown in Appendix A.

The accounts have been transcribed and numbered, with sex and religious background recorded. A “Subjects” box, indicating the main topics of the experience is filled in by the transcriber from a given list, which I found unhelpful as I often disagreed with the “Subjects” chosen and instead searched within the text itself for particular aspects of RSEs. There have been various transcribers of accounts, including my own transcription of angelic experiences collected by Emma Heathcote-James (2001). The instructions given to transcribers by Jean Matthews, the former RERC Archivist are shown in Appendix B. The main guidelines recommend ensuring the anonymity of the correspondent and retaining the spelling and grammar of the originals, including errors. As the religious background of the correspondent was given, I noted any subsequent changes in religious attitude, either as described or implicit within the account, and recorded them in Excel spreadsheets. Unfortunately, paragraph divisions seem to have been lost in the formatting process, making reading lengthy accounts difficult. Here is an example of an account taken from the Archive, chosen for the clarity of the fruits, showing the information as recorded and the number of the account, which I give at the end of quotations as [001150]:



[Search](#) [MyAccount](#) [Admin](#) [Logout](#)
Information Screen

Account Number:

001150

Subjects:

Church of England reverence awe music mountains beauty church Services
confirmation depression meditation presences god guidance spirituality souls

Religious Background:

CHRISTIAN

Country:

England

Gender:

FEMALE

Date of Experience:

01/01/1937 00:00:00

Age at Time of Experience:

12...teens...24-33.....44

Date of Writing:

14/04/1970 00:00:00

Age at Time of Writing:

45

References:

Exploring the World of the Spirit by Sir Alister Hardy in The Times Easter

Saturday 28 March 1970

Text:

001150 14th April 1970 The Director Religious Experience Research Unit
Manchester College Oxford Dear Sir I read with much interest your article in
"The Times" ... and hope that my reply will not be too late to be useful to you. I
am now 45 years of age - a qualified Speech therapist ... I am aware of
experiencing a sensitivity of spiritual presence from my early childhood - at
special times such as Christmas hymns around a "crib". My parents were both
practising members of the Church of England - and I was their eldest child. As I
grew older I was often bored with Sunday church services - but glad when my
mother suggested I might like to go to Confirmation classes (12 1/2 years).
Confirmation was a special day for me - but not as much as I had hoped it might
be. As I grew through my teens I became intensely aware of a sense of reverence
and awe when in the mountains of North Wales & other beautiful country vistas.
Also music inspired me in this way. In church I often felt nearer to God when on
my own - or with one or two friends - rather than during church services. From
about the age of 24 onwards I passed through a difficult period - mental
depressions ending in a great crisis in my life at 33 years - followed by much
spiritual searching - leading to an awareness of the dedication of my life - and all
life to God. This was greatly helped by people I came in contact with at the time -
& by the practice of meditation. Just over a year ago I reached a further turning
point. ... I turned to God more deeply on my own through meditation. From then
I have felt illumined and helped at a completely new level - not in any one

dramatic incident, but with the feeling of the ever living presence of God - and receiving guidance touching every aspect of my life. If I can cooperate any further with your work, I shall be very pleased to hear from you. Yours faithfully

Other Titles Qualifications:

This example describes religious attitudes through various stages in life, from childhood onwards, including sensitivity to the natural world, states of depression and eventual equanimity and fulfilment. Such accounts of experiences over an extended period of time, are of particular interest for my research, as the correspondent has reflected on the RSEs and describes the fruits. This account expresses the kind of spiritual awareness which Hardy was seeking. However, he also received far more accounts of dramatic RSEs than he had expected, due, no doubt to correspondents' previous hesitation to share such extraordinary experiences. Overall, Hardy's work showed that RSEs were widespread in the population, although often unacknowledged.

The endurance of Hardy's legacy is ensured by the work of the Alister Hardy Trust (AHT) and two RERCs: the one at UWTSO, Lampeter and another at Bishop Grosseteste University in Lincoln. The Archive continues to grow as people write to the RERC after hearing of our work through lectures or AHT activities, with accounts sent by people expressing a range of religious beliefs, or none. It comprises extensive and pre-collected data, self-selected accounts usually sent in response to The Hardy Question, thus a homogenous selection, which is consulted by scholars all over the world, who join the AHT to gain access to the accounts.

Over the years, data collected through research by others have been added to the Archive, for example the accounts of near-death experiences (NDEs) and out-of-body experiences (OBEs) collected by Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick (1995) and experiences of angels and After-Death Communications (ADCs) by Emma Heathcote-James (2001, 2003). This has widened the scope of the Archive, but I have chosen to research the main body of accounts, rather than include these special collections.

Research questions

My first research question asks, “What, in the RERC Archive, are the fruits of RSEs in terms of inner transformation and outward behaviour?” and I have chosen, following James (1902/2002), to employ a metaphor, that of fruits to enrich my study. A range of transformations, particularly in terms of religious and spiritual attitude, is explored, with terminology and its analysis in the scholarship considered in Chapter 3. In this thesis I make use of Hardy’s understanding of spiritual and religious experience as “a deep awareness of a benevolent non-physical power which appears to be partly or wholly beyond, and far greater than, the individual self” (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 1). According to Hardy, spiritual experience is not the exclusive property of any one religion, or for that matter of religion in general, but can occur to anyone at all at any time (p. 1). Such experiences may be described in non-religious and even anti-religious language amongst those who for historical reasons are alienated from religious culture (Hay, 1998/2006, p. 23). In my analyses, like Wildman (2011) and Astley (2020, p. 12), I refer to religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs) in order to cover the whole field.

As many people these days would not describe themselves as religious, although possibly spiritual (Hay, 1998/2006, p. 211; Heelas, & Woodhead, 2005; King, 2008/2009, p. 2; Astley, 2020, p. 11), I explore the category of intense experiences (IEs) as defined in *Religious and spiritual experiences* by Wesley J. Wildman (2011) as an alternative category. The second research question became “Is the designation ‘Intense Experience’ as expounded by Wesley J. Wildman in his *Religious and spiritual experiences* (2011) helpful for researchers when evaluating RSEs, particularly those of people who do not consider themselves religious?” which is explored particularly in Chapter 4. The experiences are evaluated throughout the thesis, in the spreadsheets recording the fruits of experience in Chapter 6, in detail in Chapter 7 and in relation to attitudes to religion and spirituality in Chapter 8.

As each experience was embedded within a personal story, giving a great variety of individual fruits, I decided to draw out a common theme, or underlying pattern, by formulating a hypothesis. Study of the literature – religious and scholarly, plus several pilot studies – gave rise to the third research question, “Can the hypothesis that a turn from self-centredness to altruism is the dominant category underlying the variety of fruits of experience be supported through analysis of the RERC Archive?” This turn from a focus on the self to concern for others is an aspect which I wish to attempt to tease out of the data, as I believe it to be present in many accounts, even if not specifically mentioned. This will involve close analysis of accounts, with attention paid to the triggers or antecedents, the experience itself, its interpretation and the fruits.

Fruits of experience

In this study, I will focus on the inner and outer effects in the lives of correspondents, an aspect often omitted even when giving a wide-ranging account of religious experience world-wide (Smart, 1969/1984). Many scholars focus on specific types of experience, but I will explore how people were affected by their experiences. Some correspondents include a clear account of the consequences of the experience, but although the current RERC form for submission of accounts includes a section for “Fruits of the Experience”, not everyone uses the form, and in fact many correspondents do not mention any consequences at all, making research problematic as Hardy noted, due to the:

great disparity in the explicitness with which they are described; while one person will devote a couple of pages to the ways in which his or her life has been transformed, another will merely say, “I have never been the same person since.” (Hardy, 1979/2006. p. 99)

Some fruits are instantly evident – to the experiencer and the researcher – but particularly if there is a gradual growth in understanding over time, this may only be implicit in the account and the fruits often only become apparent when the narrative is studied carefully. Here is an unusually concise example, “Fruits (from questionnaire): My experiences have had a profound influence on my life. I now live with a refined purpose to uplift myself and in doing so to help uplift others where I can” [005505]. But most accounts are more challenging as regards understanding the fruits and careful reading is required in order to appreciate each individual case. Changes are found to be inner, in terms of religious and spiritual

beliefs and attitudes to self and others; and outer, in terms of behaviour relating to religious practice, relationships with others and often choice of profession.

Methodology

I have been working with the Alister Hardy Archive for over 20 years and as I know it so well, I decided to foreground data from the Archive from the very beginning of this dissertation. Familiarity with these data provides the structure for the whole dissertation and against which I have contextualised the wider literature. Then in the “results” section of this dissertation I have deployed data from the Archive in an original way in order to explore the fruits or consequences of religious and spiritual experiences.

My research does not involve interviews or questionnaires, as the accounts of RSEs contained in the RERC Archive comprise the data. Although deprived of the original documents, the convenience of being able to refer to all the accounts and to return to particular experiences at will, makes up for that. I have chosen a mixed methods approach to my research, with quantitative Microsoft Excel spreadsheet analyses followed by a qualitative in-depth engagement with the fruits of the RSEs in individual accounts, offering a comprehensive exploration of the data.

Due to the nature of the RERC Archive, a narrative inquiry (Hammond, & Wellington, 2013, pp. 110-111) into the corpus is required. Instead of considering the macro-level of religion, the authority of tradition or well-known mystics or religious figures, the Archive comprises the experiences of “ordinary people” (Morgan-Fleming, Riegle, & Fryer, 2007, p. 85) and a narrative perspective offers

an engagement with their experiences, the opportunity to hear their stories and their interpretations of their RSEs.

In order to do justice to the fruits of RSEs, an in-depth understanding of the situation in life and the mental and physical state of the experiencer is essential, together with a careful consideration of the way the experience is described and interpreted. My approach to the accounts was a careful reading of the narrative, putting myself into the place of the experiencers and allowing them to take me through their experiences and then absorbing the effects of the experience on them. The fruits were sometimes immediately evident, well-analysed and clearly expressed, but in many cases, had to be searched for and extrapolated from the account.

My research involved recording and analysing the fruits of 2,000 accounts on Microsoft Excel spreadsheets, followed by qualitative textual and content analysis of some RSEs. I decided that an attempt to record the total of 6,600 accounts would be beyond the scope of this research project, as the focus on the fruits requires an in-depth engagement with the experiences. Had a particular aspect been chosen where a word search had been appropriate, the whole Archive might have been covered. My choice to read and record the first and final thousand accounts using Excel spreadsheets was challenging but not impossible. That selection was to enable comparison over time – particularly in respect of religious background – as I expected the increasingly secular nature of society to be reflected and wished to explore whether that affected religious attitudes following the RSEs.

Quantitative research

For the quantitative categorization, I began with open coding, *a priori* codes derived from study of the literature and my own previous familiarity with the Archive (Rankin, 2005, 2008), as well as Hardy's account of his classification (Hardy, 1979/2006). I bore in mind the caveat that "Too much reduction and the integrity and detail of the data are lost; too little and data overload and loss of clarity ensue" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018, p. 668). As I explored the data, I added *a posteriori* emergent codes in order to establish the range of fruits (the first research question) in an inductive process. As new codes were added, I returned to earlier accounts to check for the new codes, eventually generating data which enabled me to calculate the most frequently found fruits of experience.

Once the principal fruits of RSEs had been established, selective coding, deciding which categories to omit and which to retain, enabled me to eliminate some of the rare categories. To make the research into the extensive RERC Archive manageable, instead of adding subcodes, expanding the categories, I decided to reduce the coding, enabling me to read and record a greater number of accounts in the Archive. An example of coding modification was that instead of including seven criteria for mystical experiences expounded by F.C. Happold (1963/1990, pp. 45-50), which were found to be extremely rare, I substituted "awareness of unity and interconnectedness". This is frequently experienced as a result of mystical experience, but is also found more widely in the Archive, leading to a recognition of our interdependence and intrinsic involvement with the lives of others. I found this to resonate with altruism, which I decided to explore in my third research question, as I considered the change from inward looking

self-centredness to an openness to others. Interconnectedness is also a term with links to consciousness studies, environmental awareness and quantum understanding (Polkinghorne, 1994/2005, p. 54), widening the applicability of my research.

Detailed analysis of the empirical approach is given in Chapter 6, which includes the composition of and results from four pilot studies and the two final spreadsheets and an analysis of the variety of RSEs, the percentages of IEs and the support (or the lack of it) for the hypothesis.

Qualitative research

Qualitative analysis is provided by exploration of the fruits found in particularly illuminating accounts from the RERC Archive. As the actual RSEs are inaccessible, the private experience of the individual, the data comprise correspondents' accounts of their RSEs. This requires understanding of the interpretation by the experiencers and awareness of the subsequent approach by the researcher.

I decided that the most suitable form of qualitative data analysis for the accounts in the RERC Archive was a narrative approach. "Narrative inquiry needs to be regarded as the 'portal' to human thinking and experience" (Hiles, Čermák, & Chrz, 2017, p. 157). I explored how the contributors to the Archive make sense of their RSEs and what they feel the consequences to be within their own life-histories. I attempt to stand in their shoes, taking an insider's view, while reflecting on their stories. I am "seeking to understand the way participants make meaning of the events that shape the way in which they have lived their lives" (Hammond, & Wellington, 2013, p. 110).

Mindful of the interpretations by the correspondent and the researcher, I found interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009/2012) to be a helpful approach. This involves a double hermeneutic, “The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (Smith, & Osborn, 2007, p. 53). Although IPA is predominantly used with small samples of homogenous groups and is usually based on semi-structured interviews (Smith, 2017), such an approach is nonetheless helpful in my research. Although no interviews take place, the accounts in the Archive are in a sense answers to an open question, The Hardy Question. People tell their stories, with which the researcher engages.

It does not seem that IPA has been used with RSEs before, although life transitions and identity are mentioned as topics suitable for IPA studies (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009/2012, p. 161). Religion and spirituality are not explored in examples of IPA research, and Schleiermacher is mentioned only in relation to his hermeneutics rather than his philosophy of religion (pp. 22-23).

I use this IPA method in Chapter 7 by choosing a particular account as an example of how RSEs are described and interpreted by the correspondent, juxtaposing this with the response of the researcher. Certain accounts lend themselves particularly to this methodology as they are clearly articulated and analysed and show how over a lifetime the experiencer’s thoughts, feelings and beliefs change. RSEs of various kinds affect the individuals concerned in different ways at different times, throwing light on the fruits. This is an approach which could be replicated throughout the Archive.

Subjectivity and research

My own involvement, not just in the choice of research topic but also my response to the data is fundamental. Narrative inquiry, in contrast to the positivist approach, aims to understand the particular, find meanings, listen to multiple voices and maintain distinctions (Morgan-Fleming, Riegle, & Fryer, 2007, pp. 81-98). Hearing the voices of correspondents and valuing their experiences is central to my research. I am also aware of my own perspective as researcher as I attempt to understand the experiences described. The range of RSEs is hugely varied, and at times it is difficult to ascertain the quality of the fruits. Some correspondents might have an inflated idea of themselves while others might be over-modest. That perspective of the experiencer is then modified by the perspective of the researcher and I found the IPA methodology illuminating in this regard.

Much research into RSEs has focused on “the descriptive, analytical, explanatory, and evocative elements” of religious experience (Proudfoot, 1985, p. xv) rather than looking at how the experiences have affected the experiencer, which is my focus. I am conscious that in order to gauge the fruits, the accounts require subtle reading and deep and sensitive understanding, as the fruits may be plentiful or scarce, in the eyes of the experiencer, as seen by those around them or as evaluated by the researcher. Hardy stressed the difficulty of assessing the experiences and the differences which might arise between scholars as “much is left to the subjective judgement or sympathetic imagination of the researcher ... two different observers may reach widely divergent judgements on a given sample” (Hardy, 1997/2004, p. 25).

David Hay (1990, p. 52) notes that research in the field of religion is influenced by the attitude of the researcher and offers his own biography to situate his work. In my own case, although I joined the AHT as a sceptic, after over thirty years of involvement with the organization, I have come to know and value the members and their accounts of their experiences, as well as those recorded in the Archive, and almost all have struck me as genuine.

Credibility

As the RERC Archive comprises self-selected, first person accounts of experiences sent initially to Hardy in response to an appeal, the veracity of such accounts may be called into question. When evaluating auto-descriptions of RSEs, Richard Swinburne's "Principle of Testimony" may prove useful:

the principle that (in the absence of special considerations) the experiences of others are (probably) as they report them. This later principle I will call the Principle of Testimony. I used this principle in claiming that (on the basis of what they tell us) very many people have religious experiences. (Swinburne, 1979/2004, p. 322)

This supports acceptance of the occurrence of RSEs, which were and still are, often dismissed by sceptics and materialists. It is nonetheless possible that people might exaggerate, fantasise, imagine or even make up such things, which is why fruits are so frequently cited as evidence of a genuine RSE. Hardy was aware that doubt might be cast on the honesty and validity of the accounts he received, but although admitting that some stories may have been exaggerated, a few perhaps even indicating mental illness, he felt that the great majority were sincere and many deeply moving (Hardy, 1975/1977, pp. 188-189). The response

he received from the public confirmed Hardy's view that such experiences, evidence of the spiritual side of human nature, were widespread. David Hay was of a similar opinion, "Hardy felt that no one with an unbiased mind could read the majority without being impressed by a sense of their deep sincerity. Having read a large number of them myself, I agree" (Hay, 1990, p. 32).

Like Hardy and Hay before me, I accept the credibility of the majority of the accounts in the RERC Archive. Some accounts can be disregarded as rambling and incoherent, and some, as both Hardy and Hay acknowledge, may be exaggerated, but the fact that someone has responded to an appeal for RSEs to be researched and held anonymously, indicates a genuine interest in that aspect of human life. There has never been any financial gain or opportunity for fame derived from contributing to the RERC Archive. The stories reflect a personal response to something not always understood, but nonetheless valued, and many correspondents admit to sharing their precious experiences for the first time. I have read extensively in the Archive and have found few accounts which did not seem genuine. The final arbiter is in fact the focus of my research – the reported fruits.

Retrospective accounts

Research into childhood experiences undertaken by Robinson (1977/1996) and Farmer (1988, 1992) indicate that some childhood experiences influence attitudes and decisions throughout later life. Some accounts describe the years before and after the RSE and draw comparisons, enabling the fruits to be more clearly understood and articulated. People often stress that they had never forgotten their early experiences although they frequently admit to having kept

them to themselves. It is possible that correspondents might imagine or embellish some aspects of what happened to them, particularly in the case of such childhood RSEs recalled many years later. Nonetheless, those retrospective accounts offer an insight into the long-term effects of the RSEs, particularly apposite for my research.

Some correspondents explain that they had forgotten their early experiences until a trigger in later life reminded them. The following account tells of a childhood experience, which is followed by its recollection years later. The accounts are linked through cross-references in the Archive to indicate this continuity:

When I was about ten years old, I was ill in bed with some childhood disease and a high temperature, It must have peaked in the middle of one night, because suddenly a vision of wonderful beauty and love came towards me. Amazing light, a sort of golden without and silver within, emanated from and shone around this warm and welcoming presence. I knew that once embraced, I would be safe and happy for ever. I was almost enfolded by bliss when, suddenly, the figure and its aura began to recede. "Don't go, please come back" I think I was saying as I became conscious of being held, and then totally conscious of being in bed with my mother holding me tight, saying "Darling its all right, I'm here now." ... by morning the fever had gone. Some of the detail of this account may be shaky. It happened over 50 years ago, but the wonderful light, the love, the peace, and the joy that came to me that night remain clear and true.

[005325]

That account was followed later by a second experience of light at the age of twenty-five, during an NDE at childbirth, “Slowly I felt my life ebbing away and at some point I left my body and hovered above my bed. A tunnel appeared, at the end of which there was light, love and peace” [005341]. The fruits of both experiences were recalled in later life (punctuation uncorrected):

See also Account No. 5325 Fruits of experiences of light When I was in my early fifties, highly active and very happy, a routine breast scan picked up an irregularity. Further tests confirmed cancer, and the months that followed were a nightmare. People were very supportive, and I lived through the days full of cheery, if phoney optimism. But the nights, oh those nights, they were very, very dark indeed. I seemed to staring into the cold eyes of a long and painful death. Then one night, I began to review my life, and almost immediately recalled my experiences of light. At once I was enfolded in that long remembered love and peace. “This is what I have to look forward to” I thought, and from that moment on, the nights held no fears. Indeed, when I realised that death was no longer imminent, I felt somewhat cheated. [005341]

This is a remarkable account of how forgotten experiences resurfaced in the hour of need, bringing much-needed solace. The intensity of that feeling of comfort was evident when the crisis was ultimately avoided.

Ethical issues

Accounts of RSEs were sent to the RERC on the understanding that they would be held anonymously and consulted for research purposes; contributors sign a form to that effect (Appendix C). The accounts of correspondents who

refused permission have been removed from the RERC Archive, with the number remaining but the account itself deleted. Thus, my data comprise only accounts with permission to be used in research.

Research linked to the RERC

This section gives a brief overview of scholarship related to the RERC, which publishes books on RSEs; the peer-reviewed *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience* (<https://rerc-journal.tsd.ac.uk/index.php/religiousexp>) and a series of online Occasional Papers (OPs). The latter includes the address which Hardy had planned to give on the acceptance of the Templeton Prize in 1985, which unfortunately illness prevented him from delivering (Hardy, 1997/2004). Most of these publications do not specifically focus on the content of the Archive itself and none on the fruits of RSEs but they have been an important source of my understanding of the field and offer an insight into the scholarship in which my thesis is situated.

The Hardy Question has been quoted by various scholars and used for further research (Hardy, 1979/2006, pp. 17-20; Hay, 1990, p. 54; Griffith-Dickson, 2000, p. 81; King, 2008/2009, p. 151; Sheldrake, 2017, pp. 16-17). Other scholars cite accounts from the Archive (Cohen, & Phipps, 1979; Franks Davis, 1989/1999; King, 2008/2009, pp. 86-87; Hay, 1998/2006). While not always directly focusing on the Archive, RERC Directors, AHT Trustees and associated scholars have undertaken research into RSEs and related fields (Donovan, 1979/1998; Crewdson, 1994; Morgan, & Lawton, 1996; Badham, 1997; Morgan, & Braybrooke, 1998; Francis, & Greer, 1999; Francis, & Loudon,

2000; Dossett, 2013, 2020; Francis, 2015; Astley, 2017b, 2017c, 2020; ap Sion, 2017).

Research in the RERC Archive

Some scholars have specifically focused on the RERC Archive (Hardy, 1966/1978, 1975/1977, 1979/2006, 1997/2004; Beardsworth, 1977/2009; Hay, 1990, 1994, 2007, 2011; Robinson, 1997; Jakobsen, 1999; Fox, 2003, 2008, 2014; Tobert, 2007). Such research includes in-depth interviews revealing qualitative data (Robinson, 1977, 1978) and mixed methods, offering a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, as respondents to questionnaires also give more in-depth replies (Robinson, 1977). Much research includes analysis as well as examples from the Archive (Hardy, 1979/2006; Hay, 1982, 1990; Maxwell, & Tschudin, 1990/2005). Although none of those scholars specifically focused on fruits as I do in terms of the effect on beliefs and attitudes; they did consider the consequences of RSEs in general terms. Their work, and that of those cited below, gave a steer to my research questions and empirical approach to the accounts in the Archive.

Michael Argyle, associated with Hardy's work from its inception, considers the effects of religious experience in terms of personal happiness and well-being; moral values and attitudes to other people; religious activity and self-esteem. He specifically mentions the social content of RSEs as "a feeling of unity with other people, and a determination to behave more kindly and altruistically towards them" (Beit-Hallahmi, & Argyle, 1997/2004, p. 95). Argyle's Occasional Paper (2009) concludes that RSEs are valid for those who have them and "that there is further evidence of **fruits of the spirit**: that is, that they lead to more

altruistic behaviour, more caring for others” (Argyle, 2009, p. 26, his boldface). These views are reflected in my hypothesis.

Having written on experiences in childhood, Edward Robinson (1977/1996) realised that those experiences “were not just memories to be looked back on ... Rather they were felt to be part of a process of growing understanding” (Robinson, 1978, p. 4); Robinson focused on spiritual growth as a fruit of experience in a subsequent publication, in which he edited in-depth interviews. My research differs from Robinson’s in that I have no opportunity to interview correspondents, but I do explore the process of spiritual growth over a lifetime.

David Hay, a zoologist like Hardy and his biographer (Hay, 2011) used The Hardy Question in his initial research into the frequency of RSEs in Nottingham (Hay, 1990, pp. 54-55), which led to a national sample of approximately 2,000 people undertaken by NOP (Hay, 1982, p. 113, p. 118), with about a third of the responses being positive. He undertook further surveys using Gallup Poll (Hay, 1990, p. 57) and recorded the results of a range of surveys in UK, USA and Australia (p. 79). His own research involved questionnaires and a mixed methods approach including quotations of accounts from the RERC Archive (Hay, 1990). Quantitative research is continued today and includes surveys using various questions (Astley, 2020, p. 28) many using Greer’s question “Have you ever had an experience of God, e.g. his presence or his help or anything else?” (Francis, & Greer, 1999; ap Sion, 2017; Astley, 2017b). This thesis focuses on the RERC Archive, where correspondents usually refer to the Hardy Question or send accounts as a result of events linked to the AHT. The

Hardy Question offers more opportunity for answers not expressed in terms of a relation to God, while nonetheless giving a steer to the transcendent.

Hay proposed relational consciousness as lying at the heart of religious experience (Hay, 2011, p. 271). Although previously predisposed to find spiritual awareness in solitude, influenced by James's definition of religious experience (James, 1902/2002, pp. 29-30), while working on childhood spirituality (Hay, 1998/2006), Hay became convinced that, "relational consciousness is the primordial, inbuilt precursor of publicly-expressed (and hence socially-constructed) spirituality. It is thus a biological reality and is the immediate source of the religious impulse" (Hay, 2011, p. 271). Hay found a very strong link between spiritual awareness and ethical behaviour (Hay, 1998/2006, p. 29) with evidence of a turning away from self-centredness leading to altruism, which is the main focus of my research, "Spirituality by definition is always concerned with self-transcendence. It requires us to go beyond egocentricity to take account of our relatedness to other people, the environment and, for religious believers, God" (p. 157). Like Hay originally, I am predisposed to find spiritual experiences more prevalent in solitude but consider that a major consequence is a change in attitude to others.

Meg Maxwell and Verena Tschudin (1990/2005) compiled an anthology based on 5,000 accounts collected by the RERC over the first twenty years of research. They classify the accounts into single and multiple experiences grouped as to content, including experiences of a continual awareness of the spiritual as well as the more dramatic accounts, to give a balanced selection. I too include

both types of RSEs but did not find the categories of single and multiple experiences suitable for my research, as both yield the fruits on which I focus.

Maxwell and Tschudin stress that, as the accounts sent to the RERC are from self-selected correspondents, no “statistically-based generalisations can be made from the collection” (Maxwell, & Tschudin, 1990/2005, p. 5). In my research I calculate percentages in the various categories, to indicate frequency of occurrence within the Archive. This results in a comprehensive study of the fruits of the experiences contributed to the RERC but does not enable any further conclusions to be drawn beyond the Archive.

Like Maxwell and Tschudin, I found that “what the person perceives to be different afterwards”, is “clearly adapted to the needs, circumstances and knowledge of the person who receives it ... immediately practical, healing, change, good feelings” (Maxwell, & Tschudin, 1990/2005, p. 36). Although it is often suggested that RSEs and mystical experiences in particular, are experiences closely related to religious concepts (Proudfoot, 1985, pp. 120-124), Maxwell and Tschudin found that in fact it is more often personal dilemmas or traumas which are resolved. This aspect reflects a divide between theories relating to RSEs and religion, and the intensely personal nature of many RSEs recorded in the Archive. However, they stress that although the fruits are geared to the individual, they also have universal validity (Maxwell, & Tschudin, 1990/2005, pp. 31-41), which indicates that hearing about the experiences of others might be effective for spiritual searchers, as opposed to Otto’s view that only someone having experienced the numinous could benefit from reading his *Idea of the holy* (1923/1958, p. 8).

Merete Demant Jakobsen's Occasional Paper (1999) focused on negative spiritual experiences taken from the RERC Archive, analysing the 4,000 accounts which were available to her at the time. She found 170 which contained negative accounts or discussions of evil (4.25%), an aspect I explore in my spreadsheets as I consider the negative consequences of RSEs.

Mark Fox, one of the first researchers in the Archive, was able to read the original hand-written letters, which are now unavailable to researchers and his work contains numerous examples of RSEs from the Archive. He explored three themes: near-death experiences (Fox, 2003); experiences of light (Fox, 2008) and love (Fox, 2014) and focused on those specific topics, using keyword searches but as explained, this approach was not suitable for my study.

Jeff Astley discusses "ordinary theology – that is, the religious beliefs of those who have not studied religion in any academic or scholarly way" (Astley, 2007, p. xiii), the very people who interested Hardy and other scholars linked to the RERC and who are the focus of my research. He also explores the relation of religious doctrine and theology to religious experience and considers the fruits of RSEs (Astley, 2017c; 2020, pp. 75-78).

Natalie Tobert, a medical anthropologist, wrote an Occasional Paper (Tobert, 2007) exploring accounts in the RERC Archive relating to mental health. She considers the RSEs in a cross-cultural framework, from a Western and non-Western viewpoint, which she demonstrates sheds light on their interpretation and the value placed on them. Tobert echoes my caveats about the "Subjects" box – or keyword search system being inadequate.

Research into OBEs and NDEs cross-culturally was undertaken by Gregory Shushan (2011, 2018), leading him to engage with the prevalent constructivist interpretations of mystical and religious experiences (Forman, 1990/1997) that “there are no fundamental, ‘essential’ characteristics of a religious experience that are to be found below its specific religious and cultural expressions” (Astley, 2021, p. 85). Shushan demonstrates that constructivist interpretations “are based upon a number of mutually reliant but unproven culturally-situated philosophical axioms” (Shushan, 2014, p. 384). This closely argued paper is refreshing reading, as the assumptions of the constructivists are so often taken as unassailable (Katz, 1978) and RSEs as a consequence lose much of their significance (Kripal, 2019, p. 39) as they thereby lose their universal significance. Having read accounts of so many spontaneous RSEs in the Archive, which are often surprising or even overwhelming to the experiencer, and frequently not in line with religious expectations, I have never been able to agree with constructivist interpretations of such experiences. Fruits feature frequently in Shushan’s examples (Shushan, 2014, pp. 71-72) as NDEs are some of the most transformative experiences, but they are not his principal focus, whereas they are mine. My own research is aimed at showing the similarity in the fruits of NDEs and RSEs more generally (Rankin, 2019).

Bettina Schmidt, Professor in Study of Religions and Anthropology at UWTSD is the current Director of Research of the RERC. Along with her anthropological studies (2016a), she has edited a scholarly volume of research methodologies into RSEs (Schmidt, 2016b). It includes the problem of essentialism, the view that there is an underlying similarity in RSEs beyond

cultural differences in interpretation (Astley, 2021, pp. 83-84) versus contextualism in the study of RSEs (Shushan, 2016). But the focus of the collection is not on the contents of the Archive, nor is it on the fruits of experience, apart from one chapter by Tristan Nash (2016), who considers the value of RSEs to lie in what is revealed by the experience rather than in its origin. More recently, Schmidt and Leonardi (2020) published an interdisciplinary study of religious experience and health, which considers the consequences of RSEs in terms of well-being, but again, the focus is not on the Archive. In terms of methodology, Schmidt's students approach research in the Archive by using specific search terms and compiling spreadsheets to identify particular themes and to extract evidence from the database.

My own previous work combines quoting existing examples of RSEs from the Archive as well as collecting original accounts personally, which were later added to the Archive. That enabled me to give a broad introduction to the field of RSEs (Rankin, 2005, 2008). I was surprised at the number of people keen to tell me their experiences once they realised that I would take them seriously. I found that the fruits of RSEs in general were expressed in a variety of ways, including setting up religious orders and charities, as well as being expressed in art, music or poetry (Rankin, 2008, pp. 220-230). The aim of this study is to explore the fruits of experience recorded in the Archive in more depth, in terms of inner and outer transformations.

Global research

In order to explore whether RSEs are found worldwide, the RERC undertook research in the form of a Global Project, beginning in 2004, supported

by the Templeton Foundation (Rankin, 2008, pp. 234-238). An extensive survey was carried out in China, led by RERC Director Paul Badham and Xinzhong Yao, Professor of Chinese religion and ethics at Lampeter and adjunct Professor of Philosophy in Beijing (Yao, & Badham, 2007). Later surveys took place in Turkey and in Tamil Nadu, with a linked survey undertaken in Taiwan.

The survey in China, where religion had been suppressed from the revolution in 1949 until about 1980, reported a very low adherence to religion (between 1.5% and 4.4%) but when questioned further, 56.7% admitted to RSEs. This is on a par with Western European nations, where affirmative responses to the Hardy Question in various surveys have yielded figures of between 31% and 49% (Yao, & Badham, 2007, pp. 8–9, 184). Here is dramatic evidence of the difference between instances of RSEs and belonging to a religious tradition, an aspect which I will explore in the Archive. It was also reported that RSEs did not often take place during religious activities (p. 44) but in daily life and were found to be predominantly positive (pp. 45-46).

Professor Cafer Sadik Yaran of Istanbul University undertook a national survey of Muslim religious experience in Turkey. He took The Hardy Question and other similar questions into consideration and transformed them into the most easily understandable and culturally appropriate form of question, which established that 64% of people interviewed reported having a religious experience (Rankin, 2008, pp. 236-237).

A 2006 survey in Tamilnadu, South India by Jonathan Robinson with Peter Ravikumar estimated that 68.4% of the people interviewed had had what could be regarded as a valid religious experience and that 78.5% of the people

would see themselves as “religious” – a high percentage, as might be expected in India (Rankin, 2008, pp. 237-238).

The findings of this Global Project offered evidence that RSEs are indeed a universal phenomenon and also highlighted the difference between belonging to a religious tradition and having RSEs. Both aspects are of value to my research, as I consider whether the capacity for RSEs is innate and explore whether or not such experiences are necessarily linked to religion. Although fruits as such were not explored, some consequences of the RSEs were recorded by the researchers.

The neuroscience of religion, also sometimes known as neurotheology and as spiritual neuroscience, seems to confirm the findings of the Global Project, as d’Aquili and Newberg explain:

It has become fashionable in the social sciences to eschew any comparisons of meaningful similarity among the various religions. The assumption has been that religions are so culturally complex and idiosyncratic that there could be nothing but a superficial comparison between them. ... the neuropsychological approach to religious phenomenology will establish that there are core elements that appear to be universal and that can be separated from particular cultural matrices. (d’Aquili, & Newberg, 1999, pp. 4-5)

Similar collections

It is useful to compare the RERC Archive with similar collections of first-person accounts of experiences, particularly of a spiritual nature, in order to ascertain whether or not it is a unique collection. If other archives hold similar

material, comparisons regarding their scope and the approach taken by scholars of such data could be made, which might be helpful in the present study.

Mass Observation Archive (MOA)

Comparison with the archive containing material gathered by the Mass Observation Project highlights some similarities but also some important differences from the RERC Archive. The original Mass Observation social research organisation gathered data from 1937 to early 1950s and since then the Mass Observation Project has collected material about daily life in UK, retained in the Mass Observation Archive (MOA) at the University of Sussex. Although both archives contain experiences of “everyday” people and the use of keywords as a useful research tool, the MOA contains regular input from anonymised contributors, “Observers”, who are given pseudonyms, and guidelines or “Directives” for subject matter several times a year. The archive lends itself to longitudinal study and research into various aspects of social life, which would not be possible in the RERC Archive.

The RERC Archive is composed of vastly differing first person accounts of RSEs sent in response to The Hardy Question. There is no regular input and almost every correspondent sends only a single account, although often with more than one experience, so it would be almost impossible to follow any particular person across time as is possible with the MOA. The two archives are thus too different for any comparison to be useful for the present study.

The Institute for Noetic Sciences (IONS).

The Institute for Noetic Science in Petaluma, California was established by astronaut Edgar Mitchell, who had a mystical experience, which he compared

to the Buddhist experience of Samadhi, on his way back to earth after working on the moon's surface. It transformed him, as he became aware of the essential interconnectedness of all life and led him to establish the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS) in 1973.

On their website (<https://noetic.org/about/noetic-sciences/>) noetic is defined as “meaning inner wisdom, direct knowing, intuition, or implicit understanding”. Noetic is also one of James' marks of mystical experience (James, 1902/2002, p. 295). IONS has undertaken various scientific projects and surveys relating to consciousness studies (Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007) but no archive is kept and material from those studies has not been retained. The institute has recently offered to send accounts of RSEs which they receive, to the RERC.

The Churches' Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies (CFPSS)

The Fellowship was founded in the 1950s for the study of psychical and spiritual experiences in a Christian context and in order to support people confused by their experiences. The CFPSS remains a vibrant community and continues to work on integrating psychic phenomena into mainstream Christianity. Like the AHT, they hold conferences and organise lectures. However, no archive is kept of the accounts sent to the CFPSS by members of the public, although some are published in their journal *The Christian Parapsychologist*.

The Society for Psychical Research (SPR)

A collection of accounts of psychic and paranormal experiences is held by the Society for Psychical Research, of which Hardy was President from 1965 to

1969. The SPR manuscripts archive is held at Cambridge University Library. Much of the work done by the SPR is through experiments, whereas the RERC Archive comprises what has been labelled as “anecdotal” evidence, disregarded in much recent research in favour of repeatable experiments, because in order to counter alternative explanations for the phenomena, meticulous controls need to be established. However, as J.B. Rhine, one of the founders of the study of parapsychology suggested, what is learned through the study of spontaneous cases is useful in setting the conditions for laboratory research. Furthermore, it was the occurrence of spontaneous anomalous events which triggered the study of psychic, spiritual and religious experiences in the first place. Today there is more recognition of the value of personal testimony from ordinary people (Roe, 2019) and Roe recommends:

coding cases according to pre-specified content categories based on a priori (often theoretical) distinctions, usually supplemented by refinements suggested by the application of the coding scheme to a subset of data so as to test the power to map salient features comprehensively and sensitively differentiate between types. (Roe, 2019, p. 5)

This has been my own methodological approach to exploring the fruits of RSEs. Professor Chris Roe, the current SPR President, specifically mentions the Alister Hardy Trust and the RERC Archive as ripe for exploration from a parapsychological perspective (Roe, 2019, p. 5). He and Rebecca Linnett undertook a study of spontaneous cases of psi (paranormal phenomena) in the RERC Archive (Roe, & Linnett, 2017).

The unique nature of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre Archive is evident from comparison with other organisations which have not retained similar data. Only the SPR holds comparable records, but those relate to psychic and paranormal experiences, which are anomalous phenomena inexplicable by mainstream science; rather than religious or spiritual experiences, which involve meaning and value of life, terms explored in Chapter 3. Thus, although a useful exercise of exploration, no help for this study was acquired from these comparisons.

Conclusion

In my opening chapter, I have given the background to this research project, by describing the composition of the RERC Archive and its origin in the vision and research of Sir Alister Hardy. The research questions chosen, and the methodology adopted in this study have been explained in some detail. The first question focuses on the variety of the fruits of RSEs contained within the Archive, explored quantitatively by means of spreadsheets and subsequently qualitatively using an IPA influenced approach. The second considers interpretation, whether or not religious or spiritual RSEs, with a focus on non-believers, can be considered as IEs. The third question, in the form of a hypothesis, links the fruits of such experiences to an underlying turn to altruism.

I have considered the approaches of a number of scholars to the material in the RERC Archive, to illustrate a range of different foci and methods. Over the years the Archive has moved, the work of the RERCs has been extended and research into RSEs continues. The Global Project began an exploration into whether RSEs are found universally. Comparisons with other similar collections

of first-hand religious, spiritual and paranormal experiences have established the unique nature of the RERC Archive.

Until now, no research has been undertaken with a specific focus on the fruits of experience within the RERC Archive. My study offers an avenue for an in-depth engagement with the stories of individual correspondents, as I consider how those correspondents interpret their experiences and how their lives have been affected.

CHAPTER TWO

FRUITS OF EXPERIENCE IN RELIGION

Summary

Metaphor

The metaphor of fruits

Fruits in Christianity

The Parables of Jesus

The parable of the sower

Faith and fruits

Fruits of mystical experience in different religious traditions

Conclusion

Summary

A consideration of metaphor, and in particular the metaphor used in the thesis, that of the fruits of experience, is given. This is followed by an exploration of its use within the Christian tradition, including by Jesus in his parables, with that of the sower examined as an example. Hardy's experimental faith is considered as an important fruit of his research, and the fruits of mystical experiences are explored in relation to interfaith perspectives.

Metaphor

According to *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, the word metaphor comes from the Greek *metaphorein*, meaning to transfer. It is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. Aristotle was the first to draw the distinction between literal and metaphorical, and neither he nor Plato approved of the use of metaphor. I choose to differ. Unlike a simile, where something is said to be "like" something else, a metaphor indicates that something "is" something else. This illuminates the object by transferring some of the meaning of the one concept to the other in such a way as to enhance understanding.

According to John Hick, metaphorical meaning is generated by the interaction of two sets of ideas, so that speaker-meaning differs from the literal dictionary meaning, generating an indefinite range of associations and feelings (Hick, 1993, pp. 99-101). He explains that these depend on shared associations. This common frame of reference may indicate that the effectiveness of metaphors might diminish over time and not translate well across cultures, as the shared associations with the original fade. However, "a good metaphor moves us to see

our ordinary world in an extraordinary way” (McFague, 1975/2002, p. xvi) which may well be relevant through the ages.

Such usage can be particularly helpful in philosophical enquiry, such as in theories of mind. The brain may be seen as a radio, offering a variety of programmes on different wavelengths, none of which are contained within the radio itself, illustrating the view that the brain transmits but does not produce consciousness, as opposed to consciousness being produced by the brain as asserted by materialists (Kripal, 2019, p. 52).

Metaphors are “figures of speech, which – unlike analogies – do not literally apply but suggest images and generate cognitive insight” (Astley, 2020, p. 124). As no human language would be adequate for ultimate reality, Astley acknowledges that such figures of speech offer imaginative and illuminating ways to gain an understanding of God, although not literally, as “father, mother, king, shepherd, friend; even a lion, a fortress or a rock” (Astley, 2020, p. 137). Metaphors are used in the Bible to aid comprehension of God (Kanagaraj, 2006) and of Jesus as “servant, brother, Logos, healer, shepherd, king” (McFague, 2002, p. xvii).

Much religious language is metaphorical, as spiritual concepts are beyond the everyday; “in soteriology, metaphors are inevitable” (Gombrich, 1996, p. 42). As religious and spiritual experiences are difficult to describe, even deemed ineffable (James, 1902/2002, p. 295) “we would expect metaphor to play a large part in religious language” (Hay, 1998/2006, p. 236). Hay considers metaphors as much more than rhetorical devices, in that they shape the way we think about reality by suffusing language in ways of which we often are unaware, as the metaphors become absorbed into everyday language.

As for religious metaphors, Hay mentions the difficulties arising from them being inappropriate to other cultures, such as Eskimos being enjoined to “feed my lambs”, or the outdated cosmology in liturgy leading to a picture of God in the sky (Hay, 1998/2006, pp. 235-237). Church services continue to use these metaphors, which are not always effective for the contemporary religious seeker. The sense of God as imminent, which appears frequently in the RSEs in the Archive, is seldom reflected in Bible readings or in the Anglican liturgy, where for example the Nicene Creed requires the congregation to assert that Jesus “ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father” (*Common Worship*, 2000, p. 173). This is a metaphor which gives the impression of God as a separate being, somehow above the universe, which presents a problem in contemporary understanding of science and spirituality (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 136). Such metaphorical statements offer an easy goal for critics of religion such as Richard Dawkins, who takes them literally (Dawkins, 2007, pp. 207-208), asserting that many in the congregation also understand them in that way. Indeed, religious texts may be read literally or metaphorically, and it is recognized that “many things said of God are not true, and are not taken to be true, on a literal interpretation” (Alston, 1991/1993, p. 266).

It is notable that in ancient times, the difference between literal and metaphorical was not as clearly drawn as today and “the entire biblical language about God and God’s manifestations in the world is largely metaphorical” (Hick, 1993, p. 42). A metaphorical reading encourages greater reflection, wider application and deeper understanding than a literalist approach (Hick, 1993; Ward, 2004b, 2019b; Race, 2013, pp. 14-15). Hick explains that a metaphorical understanding of the divine incarnation in Jesus makes more sense than a literal

reading of the New Testament (Hick, 1993, pp. 101-111). Such a view of the incarnation is likely to appeal to people who have rejected literal interpretations, enabling them to respond in a deeper way to the Christian message. It also allows for greater understanding of RSEs as offering insights into an integrated understanding of the interaction of the human and the divine. Nonetheless, many evangelical churches take a literalist approach and appeal to people longing for certainty.

As mystical, religious and spiritual experiences resist description, literal use of language seems to be inadequate and the use of metaphor illuminates the study of RSEs and other aspects of spirituality. Cathedral studies is an area in which the power of metaphor has been recently re-asserted in a way compatible with the approach of the present study. Descriptions of cathedrals as “shop-windows of the Church of England”, “religious railway stations” or in the words of Pope Paul VI as “veritable ships of the spirit where matter not only has a use but a meaning” and in particular the new metaphor “sacred space, common ground” throw light (another metaphor) on the role of cathedrals in contemporary society (Muskett, 2016). Metaphors illuminate what is often beyond literal language but is latent in experience and understanding. Similar links between sacred and profane are evident in the Archive, with examples of RSEs taking place in both religious and non-religious settings, blurring the distinction.

The metaphor of fruits

Having decided to focus on the consequences of RSEs, the choice of the metaphor of fruits arose quite naturally as it is widely used, by Jesus (NRSV, 1995, Matthew 7:15-16) and St Paul (NRSV, 1995, Galatians 5:22-23) in

scripture and in scholarship notably by William James (1902/2002, p. 186) as the criterion for evaluating whether or not an RSE is genuine. As such experiences are subjective and open to doubt by third party observers, Jesus, Paul and James stress that it is “by their fruits” that they are to be judged. My focus is less on fruits as proof of veracity, more an exploration of the range of effects of RSEs in the lives of the experiencers and specifically on whether altruism is a principal fruit.

Rather than merely discussing the consequences of RSEs, as other researchers have done (Hardy, 1979/2006, pp. 98-103), or as reality-transforming (Batson, & Ventis, 1982, p. 63), or considering moral effects (Hay, 1982, pp. 152-154). I decided that, as has been seen above, a metaphorical view of the outcomes of RSEs as fruits (James, 1902/2002, pp. 186-187; Franks Davis, 1989/1999, p.17; Hick, 1999, p. 167; Astley, 2020, pp. 75-81) in contrast to their roots (Donovan, 1979/1998, pp. 126-130) opens new avenues of thought. Fruits grow, develop, ripen and can be shared and nurtured, but may also be left, ignored and even rot.

Fruits are manifest in the spirituality of the individual as well as having social and moral repercussions. Some RSEs lead to prolific fruit, changing people fundamentally, in terms of beliefs, attitudes and behavior, whereas other experiencers maintain that they were not much affected. The seeds are an important part of the metaphor, as the effects of some RSEs are far-reaching, leading to further growth and new fruits.

Literally, fruits are “the edible product of a tree, shrub, or other plant, consisting of the seed and its envelope” and in figurative usage, “anything (concrete or abstract) produced by an activity, process etc.; product, outcome” (*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*). But etymology is less important

here than our general understanding of fruit and its effectiveness as a metaphor. Worldwide, there is an enormous variety of different kinds of fruit, but all bear the seed necessary for producing new plants and this is their principal function. In the same way that the seeds have a life of their own, so the consequences of RSEs can have far-reaching effects on individuals and societies across continents and generations.

Most varieties of fruit are nourishing and delicious, but some can be poisonous and bad fruit will be considered, as negative RSEs are noted. Discernment in the selection of real and metaphorical fruit, in this case spiritual nourishment, is important. Fruit ripens slowly, is edible only when mature and needs to be eaten before it rots, so timing is important. What we understood of religion as children will need to be revisited; what might suit us spiritually in adolescence may need revision as we mature and often the effects of RSEs are not felt until later in life.

We can receive fruit, but we can also give it, sharing our produce with others. This is how the metaphor is most usually understood, that the RSE has the effect of changing our behaviour for the better, which is very often interpreted in spiritual terms. Although we till the ground and work in the vineyards (to use biblical terminology) we ourselves cannot produce fruit without the help of the processes of nature on which we are dependent, on God in a theistic interpretation. This is recognized with gratitude in Jewish first fruit offerings of *Bikkurim* (NRSV, 1995, Exodus 34:26; Deuteronomy 26:2,10) and in Christian Harvest Festivals in which fruits are brought before God in thanksgiving. Similar practices are common to many other religious traditions and particularly evident

as *Prasada*, food offered in Hindu and Sikh temples. In Buddhist temples offerings of fruit, signifying the fruit of enlightenment, are made to the Triple Gem of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha all year round.

The use of the metaphor of fruits for the consequences of RSEs in the scholarship stems from William James (1902/2002) and not only serves to differentiate what is to be considered a genuine religious experience from an illusion or even delusion, but also provides an insight into how experiencers are affected by their RSEs. The whole context of the experiencer's life and beliefs are involved in an RSE and, "The advantage of emphasizing fruits rather than roots is that it turns the attention away from the 'feel' of the experience and takes account of its meaning within that wider context" (Donovan, 1979/1998, p. 127). As RSEs are so very varied, a focus on the concept of fruits leads to a comprehensive exploration of the outcomes – not as static but as organic, growing and spreading seeds – rather than a focus on the origins.

Fruits in Christianity

This overview of the teachings on fruits within the Christian tradition begins with the Bible, where there are many references to fruit, from creation onwards, when God enjoined Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply (NRSV, 1995, Genesis 1:28) and to eat the plants and fruit of the earth (Genesis 1:29). Biblical usage stresses the profound effect of fruit, beginning with the tale of the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3) which eventually led to expulsion from Eden. In the Old Testament, as Richard T. France points out, there are references to "fruit for humans to harvest and enjoy" (France, 2013, p. 51), but the focus of this study is

on the fruit “we are expected to produce, by the sort of people we are and the way we live” (p. 51).

In the New Testament, John the Baptist demanded good deeds from men as fruit of repentance (NRSV, 1995, Matthew 3:8) and warned of the penalties of not bearing fruit: “every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:10). Similarly, in one of the best-known statements attributed to him, Jesus uses the metaphor to differentiate between a genuine spiritual transformation and its imitation, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:15-16). In a partial parallel in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus says, “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. ... The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil” (Luke 6:43-45). Here Jesus seems to stress that outward actions flow naturally from the inner response to God, that while some people tend to proclaim their faith, their actions belie their words. Fruits offer an overt and ethical criterion for testing an inner religious or spiritual state (of true allegiance to God), also applicable to RSEs. It assumes that “a person’s true nature is perceived by how they behave” (France, 2007, p. 485).

Jesus spoke of himself as the vine, with his followers as the branches, saying, “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit” (NRSV, 1995, John 15:5) and he then continues, speaking of love, the Father’s love for him and his love for his disciples. He commands them to love one another and illustrates this with the ultimate example of altruism, that of laying down one’s life for a

friend. Jesus commands his disciples to “go and bear fruit, fruit that will last” (John 15:16) and again enjoins the disciples to love one another.

St Paul, whose own RSE led to a complete volte-face (NRSV, 1995, Acts 9:1-31), lists the attributes expected of followers of Jesus, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22,23). These amount to nine and have been analysed by Thomas Keating, who suggests that they are the ripe fruits of an inner transformation wrought by the Spirit and explains that these fruits are “the direct opposite of the bitter fruits of the false self – also listed, in Galatians 5:19-21: promiscuity, licentiousness, enmity, contention, jealousy, quarrelling, factionalism, and envy” (Keating, 2007, p. 13). In the tradition of the Catholic Church, there are twelve fruits of the Spirit: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control and chastity. These attributes may be found as fruits of experience in the Archive, but I do not intend to search for them as such, as my focus is not biblically based. At the heart of this thesis is a focus on the consequences of RSEs in terms of inner convictions, the awareness of an all-encompassing love as described by Jesus, leading to love for others, altruism. I will bear in mind that fruit can appear immediately or grow more gradually.

The Parables of Jesus

As has been seen above, metaphor is one of the modes used by Jesus in his parables, “the language of Jesus is the language of hyperbole, symbol, metaphor, icon, prolepsis, epitome, paradox, parable and sublation” (Ward, 2017, p. vii). Jesus used metaphors to aid understanding of spiritual truths by means of

illustration using familiar objects. In her introduction to, and exposition of, the parables of Jesus, Eta Linnemann (1966/1975) explains that the parables are primarily addressed to those who oppose Jesus, who many will not understand the allegory, but which would be intelligible to the initiated, his disciples (who nonetheless often need illumination). The parables offer the opportunity to reflect on a situation and to gain a new perspective, as do RSEs, and the parable of the sower in particular illustrates how “It is not every grain that bears fruit” (Linnemann, 1966/1975, p. 118). The RSEs in the Archive were evaluated as to the range of fruits they bear in the spreadsheets as reported in Chapter 6, with a detailed analysis given in Chapter 7 and the relation to religion and spirituality considered in Chapter 8.

In his parables, Jesus takes his illustrations from the Middle Eastern world around him, that of lakes and fishermen, sheep and shepherds, vines, vineyards and fig trees. These metaphors would have been familiar to his listeners, the vine or vineyard representing Israel; a son and father as Israel and God. In his teachings, Jesus intended to “break open the prevailing worldview and replace it with one that was closely related but significantly adjusted at every point” (Wright, 1996, p. 175). Similar transformations are often evident in the responses to RSEs as described in the Archive accounts.

Parables do not need to be believed to be effective (Franks Davis, 1989/1999, p. 7), they settle the listeners or readers into a situation and then throw a different light on things. They draw us into Jesus’ experience of the kingdom of God by involving us in stories which elicit a response. A threefold pattern may be discerned in the parables, as hearers or readers are challenged to change their lives

through “the gift of revelation, the awe of the revolution, and the strength of the resolution” (Crossan, 1973, p. 358). In the Archive accounts a similar pattern may be discerned in the response to RSEs, although not usually so clearly analysed by the experiencers.

Although the setting is not the world of most people today and thus the parables have lost some of their impact over time, nonetheless, the stories are relevant to similar contemporary situations. The parables face the listener with a situation in which they choose to identify with particular aspects of the story and become aware of the consequences of their choices. It was evident to his listeners then and is to his readers today, that those teachings require reflection for understanding and that the lessons may then be applied in their own lives.

Sallie McFague considers Jesus’ parables to be extended metaphors, where the meaning is contained within the story itself. A parable does not merely teach a lesson but:

it is itself what it is talking about. ... The world of the parable, then includes, *it is*, both dimensions – the secular and the religious, our world and God’s love. ...a world in which the “religious” dimension comes to the “secular” and reforms it. (McFague, 2002, p. xvii, her italics)

This could apply to RSEs, which are lodged in the real world, but also transcend it, throwing a new light onto the situation. According to McFague, it is important to remember that the setting of a parable is triangular, involving the:

source or author (Jesus as narrator), the aesthetic object (the parable narrated), and the effect (the listeners to whom the parable is narrated) ... *Jesus told stories to people*. All three factors should operate in any

analysis of the parables, for they cannot be abstracted from their source or from their listeners. (McFague, 2002, pp. 60-61, her italics)

This triangular schema could be applied to RSEs, with the experience as the aesthetic object; it is reported by the experiencer – the source – and the response is the effect. Now a fourth perspective is added, in that the researcher analyses the whole situation – before, during and after the RSE – in my case to ascertain what has been learned, or changed through the experience, for good or ill.

Metaphors and parables have a powerful effect on the listener, touching a deep level, involving them in a situation and eliciting a response. Edward Robinson found that giving the same lecture had different consequences, depending on whether or not he concluded with a folk-tale:

Leave out the story, and I get a lively follow-up; put it in, and it seems to leave no more to be said. I now recognize that this is an old technique, seen at its best in the Gospels ... there is a level of the mind to which one can appeal which is untouched by proof and impervious to it: a level at which we are all unexpectedly vulnerable. (Robinson, 1978, p. 16)

The stories in the Archive can have a similar moving effect, touching the reader or listener. People love to hear of the experiences of others, they empathise with them and enjoy a vicarious experience. The change of perspective offered in the parables is also evident in the accounts, where a place or relationship is often transformed by an experience.

The parable of the sower

Extending the metaphor of fruits to include the parable of the sower, recounted in all three synoptic Gospels (NRSV, 1995, Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:3-20; Luke 8:4-15) reminds us that not all seeds bear fruit. The parable is about grain crops and “The English language distinguishes between ‘fruit’ and ‘crops’ of grain, and so on, but Hebrew and Greek make no such distinction in terminology: ‘fruit’ covers it all” (France, 2013, p. 51). In the explanation of the parable, Jesus, the sower of the word, offers an analysis of the four different types of ground onto which the seeds fall, and the effects of seed landing on the path, rocky ground, among thorns and on good soil. This illustrates the patterns of response to his message, which has the result that only that which falls on good ground brings forth fruit. If for the word, we substitute RSEs, those patterns can be explored through consideration of accounts from the Archive. An analysis of the different responses could be undertaken to gauge the fruits, whether there are none or whether they “bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold” (Mark 4:20). This is attempted in Chapter 8, exploring the nurturing of RSEs by religious or secular responses.

Each synoptic Gospel account has a slightly different focus. In Mark the parable stresses the responsibility of the hearers, as the focus is on the types of soil; Matthew reflects that the parables about the coming Kingdom are told in public and interpreted privately; Luke emphasizes the perfection of the harvest and indicates a judgement of the hearers; as to those without discernment, the parables are obscure. Such analysis might be applied to the RSEs in the Archive, as different experiencers and readers will find different meanings. I have given an

example of how this might be done by reporting the effects on an experiencer and juxtaposing my analysis in Chapter 7.

Here is an extract from a lengthy account in the Archive, quoted because it makes direct reference to the parable of the sower, as well as to Hardy and his research and to the fruits of experience. The prevailing mood of the experiencer is one of restlessness and depression, which is often a precursor to an RSE, and the subsequent reflection and the fruits of the experience are unusually articulate and revealing.

The setting for the experience is 1917, a soldier between battles on the Somme is taking a walk by moonlight along a canal towpath:

A feeling that I was being absorbed into the living surroundings gained in intensity and was working up to a climax. Something was going to happen. Then it happened. The experience lasted, I should say, about thirty seconds and seemed to come out of the sky in which were resounding majestic harmonies. The thought, “that is the music of the spheres” was immediately followed by a glimpse of luminous bodies - meteors or stars - circulating in predestined courses emitting both light and music. I stood still on the tow-path and wondered if I was going to fall down. I dropped onto one knee and thought, “How wonderful to die at this moment.” ... Wonder, awe and gratitude mounted to a climax and remained poised for a few seconds like a German star shell. Then began the foreknown descent. ... Some would say that I had been moonstruck: a short interlude of lunacy. Others might think I had had an attack of minor epilepsy with hallucinations of hearing and vision. Others, that I had worked myself into

a state of hysteria. But others, perhaps including William James, might think that the experience had not been pathological.

After the war ended, the soldier occasionally thought about the incident, but he did not write it down until:

I heard that my old friend A.C.Hardy had become interested in experiences of this sort. ... When, therefore, I came to write the story, I asked myself how it compared with the generally similar experiences of other people. St. Paul's account came to mind. It prompted the following line of thought. By their fruits you shall know them. This had early been borne home on me. But what determined the nature of the fruits? At least three things, among which the following stood out: first, how far you were prepared to receive the experience before it occurred; second, the intensity of the experience itself; and third, what your attitude was to it afterwards. ... My actual tow-path experience had been vivid and memorable, though it had involved no personal message such as had been conveyed to Paul by a vision and a voice. But no inner change had been wrought: I was the same man after as before: my behaviour, purposes and conduct were the same; no one saw, or knew of any difference. As for the sequel, it had depended on personal choices and decisions. It had depended on my interpretation of the tow-path experience, on the value I was prepared to place on it, on what I did with it, on how I allowed (or encouraged) it to guide my conduct. I now ask myself; what has in fact been the influence of this experience on my conduct during later years? I cannot, I find, answer

this question. But of this I am certain: that it has not had the effect it might have had if I had more of it.

The correspondent then analyses his experience with reference to the parable of the sower, in terms of seeds germinating over time:

Scepticism may have reduced the potential fertility of the soil. But I cannot at the same time say that it had no effect. Some of the seeds may have germinated over the ensuing years without my knowledge. Others, it now occurs to me, may yet germinate, half a century later. The remarkable thing, as I now see, about such seeds - stored as bare memories of past experiences which, in the past, have fallen on unreceptive ground - is their capacity to remain dormant for long periods, perhaps waiting inertly for an auspicious change in the soil which contains them. I would like to think that my old friend A.C. Hardy, who had unwittingly prompted me to include my neglected tow-path experience in a biographical sketch of the first war, may have been responsible for a (perhaps belated) improvement in the receptivity of an area of ground wherein there has been insufficient change for too long. [000035]

This is a moving and detailed account of an experience which took place under extreme conditions and which was never forgotten. However, it was not until the experiencer heard that Hardy, whom he knew, had begun his research, that the former soldier returned to his experience and began to analyse it. He drew up three stages: before, during and after, where he considered his subsequent behavior – the fruits. As he wrote his account, to be added to the Archive, he reflected that the response to such an experience could vary “from contemptuous

skepticism to enthusiastic acceptance and gratitude” but he realized that in his case, “no inner change had been wrought” and, like the seeds scattered on stony ground in the parable, his later scepticism may have reduced the potential fertility of the soil, leading him to ignore the experience. However, he felt that perhaps the incident had nonetheless had an effect on his life. He reflected that other seeds which may have fallen on unreceptive ground might lie dormant for long periods before “an auspicious change in the soil” enables them to germinate. He ended his account with gratitude to his old friend Hardy for reminding him of his tow-path experience and thereby showing him that it is never too late to respond to an RSE.

In my research, the variations within religious, spiritual and non-religious responses to RSEs will be considered, the equivalent of the different locations where the seed falls, and parallels drawn between the different responses to experiences. As the focus is on fruits, it is important to consider what constitutes the good soil which can lead to good fruit. Some people find support in religious or spiritual practice or in groups, enabling them to build on their experiences, whereas others go it alone. Is there a difference in the fruits, depending on whether or not they are spiritually nurtured? Might some fruit develop just as well in the absence of spirituality altogether? This will be explored in Chapter 8. In his analysis of the parable, France suggests:

Here there is no explicit identification of what the fruit itself represents, but since the seed in the good soil represents those who “hear the word and accept it” (Matthew, “understand it”) we seem to be in the same area of practical response to the gospel message that we noted at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. (France, 2013, p. 53)

According to the account in John's Gospel, Jesus also uses the metaphor of seed falling to the ground, transformed through dying and ultimately producing fruit, to explain his forthcoming death and resurrection in these terms, "unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (NRSV, 1995, John 12:24). There is a parallel to the effects of NDEs, where people embark on the dying process and even though they return to this life, they are usually completely transformed and almost always bear fruit. Others who have a close brush with death but who do not experience NDEs, even though they may treasure life more, are in general not transformed in the same way. This was recorded by Pim van Lommel and his team in his prospective, longitudinal research into the effects of NDEs compared with survivors of cardiac arrest without an NDE (van Lommel, 2007/2010, pp. 66-69). Although the early examples of NDEs in the Archive are from before the term was coined (Moody, 1975/1976) thus not referred to as such, the fruits are clear, "I became a new person and changed my whole life. I became much kinder, more compassionate and 'good'. I felt as though I had been handed a new set of values and beliefs on a plate" [005474].

Faith and fruits

Whether religious beliefs necessarily entail fruits has been a topic of contention and is addressed by Mikel Burley in his appraisal of the views of D. Z. Phillips and theological realists (Burley, 2008). In the course of his article, he raises the question as to whether claims of belief in God could be credible without fruits, whether such a claim automatically entails more than mere verbal assent. This links to the claims that fruits reflect the genuine nature of an RSE. It raises

the question as to whether there is an expectation of fruits – on the part of experiencers and others, which I explore. In many cases, fruits are reported, and I plan to analyse the range of positive and negative fruits.

Many accounts in the Archive reflect an attitude of “profound sincerity”. The admission that help is needed often precedes the experience, which leads to inner transformation and eventually to the fruits, as recorded in this remarkable account:

Eventually I realised that the only logical thing to do was to give myself wholly, in every respect, to my creator, and on my knees I told God (aloud) that I would be His for all time. ... I returned to my office on Monday morning, and immediately people wanted to know what had happened to me by the mere look in my face. I told them straight out that I had given my life to God ... A few months later I had the thought in my quiet time of listening in the morning that I should leave Cook's ... and go up to Oxford with a view to giving my life to christian service possibly through the ministry. I had saved no money, but the thought came to ask to see the Provost of Worcester ... and tell him that I felt it was God's plan that I should come into the College:- (i) on the basis of faith and prayer financially (ii) that an Entrance Examination would have to be waved {sic}, as I had done no academic study since I left school (iii) that I should come into the College in the middle of the year, and not wait until the beginning of the academic year. When I spoke to the Provost along these lines I told him that I felt he would understand the guidance of God, being a christian minister, and that if God wanted me to come to the College on

these terms I expected him to comply. He asked me to see the Bursar, to whom I presented the case, and within a few days I had a letter from him accepting me on my terms. Incidentally I got my degree, and I was the only man in the College who, without fail, paid his bills on the day they were presented. I prayed for every penny, and every time I had the need the money came in in a quite astounding way from many different donors.

[000285]

Here the inner transformation led to public witness and a complete conviction of the path to be taken. The account describes some dramatic results, including reliance on financial help being received as necessary, an example of seed falling on fertile soil. In similar vein, William James writes of the experiences of George Müller (Garton, 1963/1987) who achieved the most remarkable results in founding and funding a number of orphanages in Bristol from prayers “of the crassest petitional order” (James, 1902/2002, p. 361). Somehow Müller’s needs for food, staff and money were always met through prayer and petition. Many people do call upon their faith in this way and they seem to receive what is necessary, while others experience an inner change but do not interpret their faith in such a manner. James criticizes Müller for being unphilosophical and for treating God as a business partner but there is no denying Müller’s success and the fruitfulness in his altruistic ventures.

Jesus linked love of God and love of others in emphasizing two commandments, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (NRSV, 2015, Matthew 22:37) and then, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). Jesus speaks of the

one naturally following the other. A Catholic understanding of Christian mystical moral living, the outward expression of profound inner conviction, is summed up as “Excellence in virtue will be seen as the fruit of discipleship” (Keating, 2002, p. 275). I will find out whether that progression is a pattern borne out by the fruits of experience in the RERC Archive.

Do the experiences lead people to focus on the divine, however named, and thence to feel love and compassion for their fellows? In some accounts, for the experiencers, there seems to be evidence of a transcendent reality or divine grace. However other accounts disregard any such notion, yet nonetheless exhibit a turn from self-centredness to altruism. Whether there is an intrinsic difference between them will be further explored through analysis of the Archive.

Fruits of mystical experience in different religious traditions

Many commentators on RSEs in the past limited themselves to the Christian tradition and although the research begun by James and continued by Hardy was within a Western and Christian context, both expressed the hope that further studies would extend to other cultures (Hardy, 1979/2006, pp. 141-142). Both believed that RSEs were integral to human nature, an aspect which I am exploring in my research as I record how RSEs can be considered natural, unrelated to spiritual or religious beliefs or practice. In the Archive there are accounts from followers of most of the major religious traditions and it seems clear that the fruits of religious and spiritual experiences are found across cultures and within a range of religions. It is also increasingly evident that people of no religious or spiritual persuasion also report what have been called RSEs and a non-religious interpretations will be considered in Chapter 4.

As a background to my study of the fruits of RSEs in the Archive and in relation to their universal application, I considered mystical experiences, which are found in all the major religious traditions. Much has been written about mystical experiences, considered to be the most intense type of experience, often of unity with the universe and of absorption into ultimate reality (Otto, 1932/2016; Katz, 1978; Cohen, & Phipps, 1979; Happold, 1963/1990; Carmody, & Carmody, 1996).

As the range of RSEs is so wide, for the purposes of exploring the fruits of RSEs, the concept of a continuum ranging from a momentary awareness of something beyond the everyday, to the most intense, life-changing mystical experience, may be helpful (Happold, 1966/1980, p. 171; Rankin, 2008, p. 11). Mystical experiences often illustrate the most dramatic transformations and thus are particularly important for the exploration of fruits. The fruits are often manifest in action, as mystics are not only focused on the inner, but can also be great achievers, as were St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross (Underhill, 1911/1995, p. 173).

Mystical experience may be defined a “direct experience of ultimate reality” (Carmody, & Carmody, 1996, p. 10) which they describe as “what is unconditioned, independent of anything else, most existent, dependable, valuable” (p. 10) whether conceived of as God, Allah, Brahman or as the impersonal Taoist Way or Buddhist Nirvana (Griffiths, 1982; Happold, 1963/1990, Hick, 1999). Another definition of mystical experience might be, “a state of being in which all distinctions seem to disappear, even the distinction between the individual as

subject and all other objects. A sense of union with the divine commonly follows, making this a kind of pantheistic experience” (Meister, 2008, p. 474).

William James’ analysis of mystical experiences is well-known, the four marks which distinguish them being ineffability, noetic quality and to a lesser extent, transiency and passivity (James, 1902/2002, pp. 294-295). Happold adds to these: “*consciousness of the Oneness of everything ... sense of timelessness ... the familiar phenomenal ego is not the real I*” (Happold, 1963/1990, pp. 45-48, his italics) making seven criteria. William Alston suggests “what is taken by the subject to be a direct experiential awareness of the Ultimate” (Alston, 1991/1993, p. 258). Astley distinguishes theistic and monistic mysticism and discusses the distinctions made by Stace, between extrovertive mysticism and the more profound introvertive mysticism. He also refers to Forman’s pure consciousness event (PCE) and Zaehner’s and Huston Smith’s elaborations on the theme (Astley, 2020, pp. 37-39). However, these analyses focus on the insight into ultimate reality and union with it, rather than on the effects of mystical experience.

In exploring the Archive, I found it helpful to consider a more inclusive analysis of mystical experience which extends “the restricted meaning of the term ‘mystical’ to include a *type of awareness and a mode of thought* which has affinities with that of the mystic and which leads to a similar outlook on the world” (Happold, 1966/1980, pp. 116-117, his italics). There are many examples of experiences leading to that outlook, accounts given by ordinary people who are far from being religious adepts or mystics themselves. Pilot studies in the Archive, which included James’ and Happold’s categories, revealed that mystical

experiences were extremely rare, so I decided instead to record an awareness of unity and interconnectedness as reflecting the fruits of such experiences and found more widely.

Mysticism is not always and everywhere the same; there are similarities and differences between mystics of East and West (Otto, 1932/2016; Braybrooke, 1999) but they are united in leading to a deep understanding of our interconnectedness and essential unity with the transcendent, each other and our environment. Thus, one of the principal fruits of mystical experience is bringing religions together, whereas doctrinal differences can tear them apart (Radhakrishnan, 1939/1990; Suzuki, 1957/1962; Happold, 1966/1980, 1963/1990; Ward, 1987/1998a).

Some thoughtful practitioners explore different religions in depth and draw particular traditions together: Christianity and Buddhism (Hanh, 1995; Wallace, 2009), Christianity and Hinduism (Griffiths, 1983). Sri Ramakrishna explored the mystical experience of union at the heart of worship of Kali, Allah and Christ and after his own ecstatic experiences, proclaimed that the different religions are paths to the same ultimate truth, that of God-consciousness (Harvey, 2003, pp. 135-137). Aldous Huxley considered mystical experience to be a common factor in all religions, expressing a Perennial Philosophy (Huxley, 1945/1989), a view which was also that of Huston Smith (1958/1991, 2012, pp. 6-9). Hardy also thought it a helpful step towards eliminating disagreement between religious traditions and quotes Huxley:

the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul

something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the immanent and transcendental Ground of all being – the thing is immemorial and universal. (Huxley, 1945/1989, p. 9; Hardy, 1997, p. 6)

For such profound experiences, lyrical descriptions are apposite, “Mystics are people who have a talent for sensing places where life's carapace is cracked, and through its chinks they catch glimpses of a world beyond” (Smith, 2001, p. 29), they are those who experience “those rare moments when the veil is lifted and we catch a glimpse of the Absolute” (Radhakrishnan, 1939/1990, p. 318).

Although mystical experiences seem to transcend ordinary language, studies and anthologies of uplifting mystical writings from within the major religious traditions have been compiled (Cohen, 1983; Happold, 1963/1990; Harvey, 1996, 2000) and the insights linked to experiences in the RERC Archive (Cohen, & Phipps, 1979). These volumes contain inspirational expressions of deep mystical experiences, eliciting spiritual responses in the readers, which may be considered inner fruits, and the texts are often shared in retreats or talks and articles, spreading like seeds.

Much analysis of RSEs has focused on the veridicality of the experiences as offering evidence for the existence of God or the divine, however conceived, where the fruits are a manifestation of salvation or liberation (Hick, 1989; Keating, 2007). It does seem evident that a significant finding of the study of the fruits of RSEs is the evidence for convergence between the various religious traditions in their teachings on how to live life. While doctrines and beliefs may conflict unless pared down to basics by advocating abandonment of exclusivist

claims (Alston, 1991/1993, pp. 262-264), in terms of the teachings on morality, there is far more harmony than dissent. As guidance for behaviour, the Golden Rule “that we should behave towards others as we would wish others to behave towards us” (Hick, 1999, p. 227) is found in all the world religions (Hick, 1989, pp. 313-314; Hick, 1999, pp. 227-228; Küng, 1984/1993, p. 23; Morgan, & Braybrooke, 1998, pp. 2-3). Mutual respect leads to “kindness, love, compassion, where we find the ethical evidence of the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness” (Hick, 1989, p. 314). Hick maintains that whereas speculations about metaphysical questions and cultural differences lead to disputes between religions, there is broad agreement on how one should behave towards one’s fellows.

The interfaith movement reflects these convergent values and conferences and gatherings of people of different faiths are inspiring, offering individual and communal religious and spiritual experiences. They are frequently well-documented, and participants refer to the spiritual uplift they experienced (Storey, & Storey, 1994).

Attitudes to ethics bring religions together and a “Declaration towards a global ethic” signed by members of the Assembly of the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago in 1993, “represents the **minimum of what the religions of the world already have in common now in the ethical sphere**” (Küng, & Kuschel, 2011, p. 8, their boldface). The values encapsulated within the declaration recognize our interdependence as a species and our dependence on the earth. For peace among the nations, peace among the religions is needed (Küng, 1993, p. 443). Individual responses to the declaration from within the various

religious traditions and from a non-religious point of view were explored by Morgan and Braybrooke (1998). Küng wrote the foreword to an interfaith approach to civilization by Marcus Braybrooke, Joint President of the World Congress of Faiths (Braybrooke, 2005), which is itself a significant fruit of its founder Sir Francis Younghusband's own mystical experience. Braybrooke's work suggests that recognition of our interconnectedness would lead to living in harmony with each other and the environment. This aspect of interconnectedness is explored in my spreadsheets and addressed in the third research question.

Along similar lines, the Dalai Lama urges people to go *Beyond religion* (2011/2012) to find *Ethics for a whole world*, his subtitle, explaining that all major religions promote a cessation of self-centredness. He recognizes the need to go beyond tolerance and understanding between religious practitioners, and to include everyone in a path of secular ethics (Dalai Lama, 2011/2012, pp. 14–18).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the fruits of experience in relation to religion through metaphor and mysticism. In matters relating to the spiritual, metaphors enable a deeper understanding, as literal interpretation is often found to be limiting. The use of metaphor has been chosen to widen the scope of this study, with that of the fruits of religious experience leading to an appreciation of references to fruit within Christianity. The parables of Jesus have been considered as examples of teaching through metaphorical stories, showing their effects on his listeners and our response today, with a particular focus on that of the sower, a recurrent theme in this thesis.

Mystical experiences, recorded in this study in terms of awareness of unity and interconnectedness, have been shown to link religious traditions beyond doctrinal differences, leading to agreement on values and ethics. This worldview has been briefly explored with reference to various thinkers and seen as the basis for interfaith co-operation. The fruits of RSEs more generally will be considered in the next chapter through the work of major scholars in the field.

CHAPTER THREE

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE FRUITS OF MYSTICAL, RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE IN THE SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

Summary

Terminology

Religious and spiritual experience

Friedrich Schleiermacher

William James

Rudolf Otto

Richard Swinburne

Caroline Franks Davis

John Hick

Keith Ward

Steven Katz

Robert K.C. Forman

James Keating

Peter Donovan

Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew Newberg

Alister Hardy

Conclusion

Summary

This chapter offers an overview of the terminology relating to religion and spirituality, as well as to religious and spiritual experience. This is followed by a critical evaluation of the approach to the fruits of RSEs by a number of scholars in the field. Among many who have written on the subject of RSEs, these have been chosen as major scholars in the field and to offer a chronological continuum beginning with the well-known early figures, followed by a selection of later scholars who often respond to each other's research and analysis; ending with Hardy, on whose work this thesis is based.

An appraisal is made of the approach to fruits of religious experience in the work of scholars Friedrich Schleiermacher; William James; Rudolf Otto; Richard Swinburne; Caroline Franks Davis; John Hick; Keith Ward; Steven Katz; Robert K. C. Forman; James Keating; Peter Donovan; Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew Newberg; Alister Hardy.

Terminology

In this section, the terms experience, religion, spirituality, and religious and spiritual experience will be considered. I begin with experience, which may refer to an event, activity or occurrence, which can be internal and subjective, or an objective perception of external reality (Astley, 2020, pp. 4-5). Experience for Franks Davis "is a roughly datable mental event which is undergone by a subject and of which the subject is to some extent aware" (Franks Davis, 1989/1999, p. 19). Donovan widens experience to include everything we have ever been aware of, especially memorable events but also the effect these have on us and how we learn from them (Donovan, 1979/1998, p. 11). I suggest "modification of

consciousness” (Rankin, 2008, p. 11), a vague but all-embracing term, neutral as to the presence or reality of any object.

When considering the terms religion and spirituality, categories which are endlessly debated, the idea of a family resemblance, as suggested by Wittgenstein (1953/1968) in relation to games, is helpful. Rather than being able to pinpoint exactly what is meant - an overarching similarity, such as is evident between family members, or games, offers a helpful understanding of religion and spirituality. This language-game view has been discussed in relation to religious experience by Franks Davis (1989/1999, pp. 5-6), highlighting the problems of communication between different language-games. However, the notion of gathering various categories under one umbrella has been realized in this thesis by using the term RSEs, to include both religious and spiritual rather than just one or other category.

People sending accounts to the Archive may be religious, religious and spiritual, religious but not spiritual, spiritual but not religious or neither spiritual nor religious - which includes atheists, agnostics and people who stress that they have no religious beliefs. Many people do not define themselves in these categories; they are extrapolated from the accounts of RSEs by the researcher. Some people tell of their transformation from one category to another, often from atheist to religious or spiritual while others turn away from formal religion after their experience.

The term religion has been defined in so many different ways, that final agreement on a definition might be impossible (Wildman, 2011, p. 78) but the understanding of an engagement with ultimate reality, whether conceived of as

personal or impersonal, might be taken as all-embracing. Exploration of the terms religious and spiritual in the literature (Hick, 1999, pp. 2-4; Rankin, 2008, pp. 11-15; Wildman, 2011, p. 268; Astley, 2020, pp. 5-12) lead to a view of religious that means beliefs and activities related to religious traditions, whereas spiritual refers to a more general response to the meaning and value of life and to ultimate reality (Heelas, & Woodhead, 2005; King, 2008/2009; Wildman, 2011; Astley, 2020, pp. 10-12). Hardy quotes the definitions of religion given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (6th edition) as:

Particular system of faith and worship (*the Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, religion*) ... Human recognition of superhuman controlling power and esp. of a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship; effect of such recognition on conduct and mental attitude. (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 3, his italics).

Hardy uses both definitions but prefers “transcendental” to “superhuman” and explains that he prefers to consider religion as the human recognition of a transcendent power, that God is “not a person *out there* but nonetheless an equally important *personal* reality of a psychological nature” (p. 3, Hardy’s italics). That definition is useful in this study, as correspondents describe answers to prayers and write of strengthened belief and trust in a power beyond the self, which they do not usually describe as a person “out there”. In his research, Hardy was “essentially concerned with man’s spiritual feelings in general: with increasing knowledge about this sense of awareness and with finding out more about the effect it may have upon a man’s life” (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 2). It is that effect in the experiencer’s life which lies at the heart of this study.

The use of the term spirituality originated within Christianity, “the Latin word *spiritualitas* is derived from the noun *spiritus* and the adjective *spiritualis*, whose use can be traced back to the translation of the biblical terms *pneuma* and *pneumatikos*” (King, 2008/2009, pp. 6-7). The meaning embraces the idea of breath and applies to that which comes from the spirit of God, often set against a worldly attitude to life. Within religious traditions, a spiritual attitude may designate a depth and sincerity of worship or practice, but outside religion the concept is more widely applied. Nowadays, spiritual is more likely to refer to a fully integrated approach to life and a sense of value and meaning

A detailed consideration of scholarship and surveys related to the terminology is given in relation to a Young People’s Values Survey (Francis, Laycock, & Penny, 2016). It is suggested that religious may be considered as concerned with “conventional religious beliefs and practices, and with ideas about God, Jesus, church and prayer” and spiritual “as concerned with human rights and human equality across the sexes, races and sexual orientations, and with a range of eclectic beliefs about spiritual presences and spiritual forces” (Francis et al., 2016, pp. 1-2). Although spirituality is seen as wider than religion, the concepts remain intertwined (King, 2008/2009, p. 18), and King takes issue with Tacey (2004) in his assessment of “a radical split” between them as an overly Western perspective (King, 2008/2009, pp. 2-4). Astley links spirituality to “what a person takes to be ultimate for her or him. ... the ‘human faith’ commitments in which (all) people trust and in which they find meaning in their lives” (Astley, 2020, p. 11). These days in the UK, spirituality is frequently contrasted to formal religion, particularly as traditional religious practice has declined; a survey discussed in

2005 reported a proliferation of organisations based on a spiritual rather than religious approach to life (Heelas, & Woodhead, 2005).

Anti-religionists tend to deny any value in religion or spirituality and dismiss RSEs as illusions. This is due to their materialist assumptions, discussed in Chapter 5 under the predominant culture. They will presumably not have sent any accounts to the RERC, but their objections may be borne in mind when analysing accounts in the Archive, as I explore whether people feel that their inner transformation is linked to religion or any spiritual path. Of course, even if the spiritual dimension is denied, religious people might suggest that the Transcendent is nonetheless working through RSEs. If humans are spiritual creatures, as maintained by Hardy (1979/2006, pp. 3-4), then such experiences are natural and will continue to occur and to bear fruit even in a secular culture and whether or not any kind of religious or spiritual origin is acknowledged. The categories religious and spiritual are useful in understanding the background and thought processes of the correspondent and in tracing how the experience was analysed and subsequently nurtured to obtain any fruits.

Religious and spiritual experience

When considering religious and spiritual experience, Hay warns, “There is in fact a chaos of overlapping terminology as one moves through different religious and scholarly traditions” (Hay, 1990, p. 63). Indeed, terms relating to RSEs also encompass mystical, numinous, transcendent, prophetic and peak experiences (Maxwell, & Tschudin, 1990/2005, p. 15); mystical, paranormal, charismatic, regenerative experiences (Donovan, 1979/1998, pp. 13-31). Studies of particular types of RSEs variously named, include peak and plateau (Maslow,

1964/2014), transformative (Peters, 2008), awakening (Taylor, 2010), self-transcendent (STEs) by Yaden (2021) while a flip in perspective from a materialist persuasion to a recognition of consciousness as fundamental is described by Kripal (2019).

Religious experience is defined by Hick as “*any* modification of consciousness structured by religious concepts” (Hick, 1999, p. 99, his italics). Perhaps due to James’ seminal work, much of what has been written on RSEs specifically refers to religious experience, which may be understood as lying at the heart of all religion, in the revelatory experiences of the founders and maintained by the practices of the followers of the traditions (Hardy, 1966/1978; Smart, 1969/1984; Macquarrie, 1995; Hick, 1999; Ward, 2004a). The correspondents themselves frequently refer to their experiences as religious, because often that is the only language which enables them to make sense of what happened and most scholars accept that such experiences should to be taken as defined by the experiencer (Franks Davis, 1989/1999, p. 31).

Within the scholarship, the term religious experience is frequently found in the title of a work (James, 1902/2002; Robinson, 1977, 1978; Donovan, 1979/1998; Smart, 1984; Proudfoot, 1985; Franks Davis, 1989/1999; Hay, 1990; Hood, 1995; Hardy, 1997/2004; Francis, & Greer, 1999; Yaran, 2004; Rankin, 2005; Cole, 2005; Yao, & Badham, 2007; Schmidt, 2016b; Connolly, 2019).

Hay suggests that the understanding of religious experience came to prominence when religion began to decline, and it became possible to “*imagine a range of human experience that was not religious*” (Hay, 1990, p. 10, his italics). The first printed reference to religious experience in the English language

appeared in 1809 (p. 10). Experiences related to religious life, whether the revelatory experiences of the founders of the various religious traditions, or their followers, would be included in this category, as well as experiences of “individuals who claim to have had visions of God, or to have experienced the oneness of Brahman, or to have seen an angel, or to have spoken in tongues ... these sorts of esoteric or numinous experiences” (Meister, 2008, p. 473). An inner awakening such as *Zen satori* and other experiences of ultimate reality, of union or interconnectedness might be referred to as mystical rather than religious experiences; the differentiation between categories is not always easy to define, so my suggestion of a continuum of intensity may be helpful.

Franks Davis admits that precise definitions of religious experience can do more harm than good, and suggests that the quest for a neat, precise definition is “fruitless” so she offers extensive guidelines, comparisons and borderline experiences (Franks Davis, 1989/1999, pp. 29-65). Wildman defines religious experiences as “the experiences people have by virtue of being religious or being involved in religious groups” (Wildman, 2011, pp. 78, 268) and his wider categorization will be fully explored in Chapter 4.

I decided on the somewhat lengthy, but inclusive, “experiences that confirm the tenets of a religious tradition, those that merely ‘conform’ to such tenets; and those that simply take place during religious observance or practice, or are the results of some lengthy training or discipline” (Rankin, 2008, pp. 11-13). Those definitions emphasize the link to religious traditions, in contrast to spiritual experiences. I describe the latter as experiences which do not reflect any specifically religious beliefs or context, but which give an indication of an

influence which is inexplicable in any down-to-earth way. This is because so many people who shared their experiences with me stressed that they were not religious, but spiritual, as do many RERC correspondents.

Some scholars include both religious and spiritual experiences in their titles, the term religious reflecting that tradition of scholarship, while also appealing to a wider readership through the use of the word spiritual (Fox, 2003; Rankin, 2008; Wildman, 2011, Astley, 2020). Others write only of spiritual experiences or spirituality (Braybrooke, 1999; King, 2008/2009; Fox, 2008; Foster, 2010). “For many, spirituality has more positive connotations than ‘religion’, which is a word that is often popularly regarded as ‘too thing-ish, too static, too exterior and institutional’” (Astley, 2020, p. 11). Spiritual experiences may be comprehensively defined as, “the beliefs and teachings, but more importantly the practices, capacities – and (particularly) – feelings, attitudes (including dispositions and values) and experiences that express what a person takes to be ultimate for her or him” (Astley, 2020, p. 11). As a definition, this is inclusive of many aspects of such experiences and is helpful for the scholar. However, as most experiencers are not scholars, there is a division between the first-hand report of the self-selected contributor to the Archive and the language used to study the experiences. I am careful to acknowledge both in my research.

As such experiences have been considered ineffable, perhaps any term chosen will be inadequate to some degree. Hardy, probably wisely, did not define what he was looking for in his research, but posed the open Hardy Question or a paraphrase of it, linking it to an example of the kind of experience he was seeking.

That allowed for a wide interpretation by his readers - religious, spiritual or non-religious – who then sent their accounts to him.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith suggested a new perspective, reconsidering religions in terms of faith and cumulative traditions, where faith is the personal commitment of the individual, in other words, their experience in contrast to formal religious belief and practice (Cantwell Smith, 1962/1991). This suggestion, which seems helpful, has not been widely adopted (Ward, 2004a, pp. 10-11) as is evident in the lack of scholarly references since.

Ann Taves suggests “special” rather than any of the previous terms for things deemed religious. She considers a range of experiences to which religious significance has been attributed and suggests “*simple ascriptions*, in which an individual thing is set apart as special, and *composite ascriptions*, in which simple ascriptions are incorporated into more complex formations, such as those that scholars and others designate as ‘spiritualities’ or ‘religions’” (Taves, 2009/2011, p. 9, her italics). Although adding “deemed religious” can be a helpful descriptor, in my view, the word “special” is overused these days and is too vague to catch the differences between the more established categories of mystical, religious and spiritual.

The above lists straddle different terminology and cover various analyses of RSEs but in those approaches, the fruits of experience are seldom mentioned, apart from in relation to the understanding of religion and spirituality, when the term consequences is more usually found. Fruit and fruits are not often found within titles but do include fruit in Keating (2007) and Miller (2008), and fruits in Bodhi (2008) and Underhill (1981/2010). However, those works tend toward the

devotional rather than the analytical. In his introduction to the first edition of Underhill's work, her husband described it as "intended to stimulate meditation [rather] than give information" (Underhill, 1981/2010, p. 3). Might that indicate why, when the academic focus of religious studies is on fruits, it is more often on fruits as proof of veracity, rather than an exploration of the range of effects on the individual and society and how this might be nurtured?

The following section offers an overview of some of the main scholars in the field of RSEs, a consideration of how they approach the experiential aspect of religion and how they view its effects.

Friedrich Schleiermacher

For the Protestant theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher, often named as "the father of liberal theology", feelings (*Gefühle*) and intuitions (*Anschauungen*) of the infinite and a sense of absolute dependence lie at the heart of religion, which is found wherever the infinite is reflected in the finite. He highlights the experiential aspect of religion as opposed to the institutional and doctrinal, elevating the non-rational over the rational. In 1799, Schleiermacher wrote what has been translated as *On religion: Speeches to its cultured despisers*, the latter referring to his contemporaries in Berlin, who were disillusioned with contemporary religious practice, which had become dry and institutionalized. He criticized the religion he found around him as having, "degenerated into a code of empty customs and a system of abstract concepts and theories ... all the dead slag was once the glowing outpouring of the inner fire that is contained in all religions" (Schleiermacher, 1988/1996, p. 99). That inner fire was what he wanted to recapture, urging his readers to return to their own sense of the divine. In

Schleiermacher's view, the fruits of such experiences would be a renewed understanding of religion as innate and based on a deep response to our human situation in the universe.

Such views were anathema to Christian theologians such as Karl Barth, whose approach to religion was through the revelation in Christ as found in scripture (Barth, in Astley, 2020, p. 150). This Christocentric view is also found among fundamentalist Christians and leads to a tendency to read the Bible literally, which not only disregards biblical scholarship since the eighteenth century but results in narrow views (Ward, 2019b). This approach is exclusive, not only of more liberal understandings, but of the value of religions other than Christianity.

Schleiermacher's cultured despisers might be compared with many in today's sceptical populous, who consider religious ideas outdated, and focus on doctrines which mean nothing to them, as a reason to disregard religion altogether. Schleiermacher brings the focus onto the condition of being human, to the experience of our dependence on powers beyond our control for our birth, life and death. Although a feeling of absolute dependence is rarely mentioned as such in the Archive, many accounts do refer to feelings of depression, fear or helplessness preceding the experience, which seem to be alleviated by the RSE.

William James

The Gifford Lectures, given by William James in 1901-1902 and published as *The varieties of religious experience*, are still frequently the starting point for the study of RSEs. His well-known definition of religious experience (for the purposes of the lectures) is "the feelings, acts, and experiences of

individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (1902/2002, p. 11, pp. 29-30)

This definition is frequently cited, often without acknowledging that it is limited to the experiential aspect of religion, not a full definition which would include the social aspects (Wildman, 2011, p. 71). As a psychologist, James’s focus is on personal experience, indicated in the subtitle *A study in human nature*. To his friend Revd Henry William Rankin he writes, “The mother sea and fountain-head of all religions lie in the mystical experiences of the individual, taking mystical in a very wide sense. All theologies and all ecclesiasticisms are secondary growths superimposed” (James, 1902/2002, pp. xxxiv-xxxv). James stresses the importance of RSEs, including mystical experiences in a very wide sense, not limited to ecstatic experiences such as those of Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross but considering contemporary experiences of ordinary people – the very people Hardy sought and whose RSEs comprise the database.

As a pragmatist, James draws a distinction between the scholastic philosophers, who focus on the origins of beliefs, and his own focus (and mine) on the outcomes. In *The will to believe*, first published in 1896, he as no philosophical position has ever been universally agreed upon, he proposes instead the pragmatic approach:

Not where it comes from but what it leads to is to decide. It matters not to an empiricist from what quarter an hypothesis may come to him ... if the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it, that is what he means by its being true. (James, 1896/1969, p. 472)

A further exposition of the pragmatic approach is found in Robinson (2003), “Far from relativizing truth, the pragmatic standard makes explicit the actual connection between the consequences of an action and the validity of the belief that grounds it” (Robinson, 2003, p. 769). My research into the fruits of experience focuses more on the practical consequences of RSEs, although the underlying beliefs are relevant in the interpretation of and response to the experiences.

As far as religion is concerned, James adopts the hypotheses that there is a wider world than that of our everyday consciousness and that there is a higher power, which produces real effects in the world and so, although unseen, is a reality (James, 1902/2002, p. 398). In the postscript to the *Varieties of religious experience*, James stresses the importance of the consequences entailed by the existence of God, with whom we can commune through prayer and reinforces that the fruits of the inner change are shown in our outward conduct (p. 398).

In evaluating the consequences of conversion, James suggests that “The collective name for the ripe fruits of religion in a character is Saintliness” (James, 1902/2002, p. 212). He enumerates the features of universal saintliness, of which the fourth is “A shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections, towards “yes, yes,” and away from “no,” where the claims of the non-ego are concerned” (p. 213) and “the love of self eradicated” (p. 187). This transformation influenced the formulation of my hypothesis, that the principal fruit of experience is a turn from self-centredness to altruism. James suggests that although isolated examples of saintliness appear in non-religious individuals, there is a difference in how someone with “a sense of the divine” offers help

which is “inward as well as outward, for his sympathy reaches souls as well as bodies” (p. 287). Whether only religious individuals have that sense will be explored in my research.

Many examples cited by James are taken from the experiences of conversion collected by Edwin Starbuck in his *Psychology of Religion*, published in 1899. It was in fact Starbuck, a former student of James, who first began to explore religious experience through questionnaires, a line of research followed by scholars linked to the RERC to this day. In his foreword to Starbuck’s book, James admits that he tried to discourage Starbuck from what he was proposing to do as he felt such research would be a waste of time (Hardy, 1997/2004, p. 3). James was not only converted by Starbuck’s book, but wrote the foreword (Starbuck, 1899, pp. vii-x) and used examples of experiences collected by Starbuck in his own work. These provided rich pickings “The only difficulty is to choose, for they are so abundant” (James, 1902/2002, p. 214). He found plenty of examples of various fruits but quoted an “increase in tenderness ... I began to work for others, - I had more tender feeling for my family and friends ... I felt every one to be my friend” (p. 219).

The experiences in the Archive are more wide-ranging than Christian conversion, Starbuck’s focus, where there is a turn to God, to living a new life in Christ. The fruits of the spirit then seem to be expected, by the experiencers and by those around them, indicating the genuineness of the conversion experience. I consider whether such fruits are also found in other contexts, focusing in particular on the turn from self-centredness. James goes on to suggest that the fruits of the spirit may be found “outside of Christianity altogether” (p. 187) and

that the fruits are “the same in all religions” (p. 212). This opens up avenues for further exploration of the origins of such experiences and the context in which they are nurtured, whether or not within any religious tradition, to be found in Chapter 8.

Although he admitted to selecting dramatic accounts in order to emphasize the range of experiences, James warns of the danger of excess, “The fruits of religion ... are, like all human products, liable to corruption by excess” (p. 265). This needs to be borne in mind when reading certain effusive accounts in the Archive, some of which are very similar to James’ “extravagant” (his adjective) choices.

Frequently it is what James refers to as unifying states of mind, typical of the mystical experience, which lead to altruism. In his last lecture, James sums up his conclusions, in a comprehensive list of characteristics, which are frequently found in the Archive accounts:

1. That the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance;
2. That union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end;
3. That prayer or inner communion with the spirit thereof – be that spirit “God” or “law” – is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world.

Religion includes also the following psychological characteristics: -

4. A new zest which adds itself like a gift to life, and takes the form either of lyrical enchantment or of appeal to earnestness and heroism.
5. An assurance of safety and a temper of peace, and, in relation to others, a preponderance of loving affections. (James, 1902/2002, p. 375)

The second part of characteristic 5 sums up my third research question, as I focus on altruism. James offers this evaluation of RSEs, religion and fruits:

If the *fruits for life* of the state of conversion are good, we ought to idealize and venerate it, even though it be a piece of natural psychology; if not, we ought to make short work with it, no matter what supernatural being may have infused it. (James, 1902/2002, p. 186, James' italics)

Rudolf Otto

A sense of awe before the mystery and majesty of God, expressed as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (Otto, 1923/1958, pp. 12, 31) led Rudolf Otto to coin the word “numinous” from the Latin “numen”, meaning holy power. This “creature consciousness” (p. 10) leads to feelings of humility before the divinity and may be reflected in deep mystical experiences. In the accounts in the Archive, there are times when the overwhelming sense is that of humility, even if not expressed in the theological terms used by Otto. He declared religious experience to be *sui generis*, a category of its own, defying description:

The reader is invited to direct his mind to a moment of deeply-felt religious experience, as little as possible qualified by other forms of consciousness. Whoever cannot do this, whoever knows no such moments in his experience, is requested to read no farther. (Otto, 1923/1958, p. 8)

This seems a harsh injunction, but the difficulty of describing RSEs and the feeling that only those who have had such experiences can truly understand them, is frequently found in the Archive. It is one of the reasons why Hardy's research resonated with so many. Others, however, who have had experiences but who have difficulty in making sense of them, benefit from works such as Otto's. Rather than refraining from reading about them, as Otto suggests, many people find that reading the accounts of others can be inspirational in their search for spiritual understanding and it is quite possible that Otto's *The idea of the holy* has been read by many who have not themselves experienced anything similar, but who nonetheless learned much from the book. The biannual journal of the Alister Hardy Trust took the name *De Numine* to indicate the nature of the contents, which include accounts of RSEs and reflections upon them.

In discussing religious language, Leon Schlamm evaluates Rudolf Otto's account of the numinous experience. Although Otto maintains that only one who has experienced the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* can understand it, that it is beyond words, nonetheless he attempts to convey the experience through language, and Schlamm suggests that the mystics' stress on ineffability is to "draw attention to the fact that they regard what is unspoken about experience as of greater significance than what is spoken about it" (Schlamm, 1992, p. 547).

In the Archive, rather than a sense of the numinous, it is more frequently the case that individuals, often not thinking in religious terms at all, but in desperate straits, admit that they cannot cope and hand over to a higher power. Once they do this and receive help, they may then feel the awe described by Otto.

Richard Swinburne

In relation to religious experience, Swinburne admits that as none of the arguments for the existence of God offer conclusive proof, it is religious experience which tips the balance in favour. In order to ensure the genuine nature of such experiences in the face of sceptical dismissal, he formulated two principles of evaluation of religious experience, the “Principle of Credulity - that (in the absence of special considerations) things are (probably) as others are inclined to believe that they have perceived them” (Swinburne, 1979/2004, p. 322) and the “Principle of Testimony” (p. 322) which validates people’s accounts of their experiences, quoted to support the credibility of reports of RSEs in Chapter 1. In my research, as my focus was on the fruits, I accepted the reports of changed attitudes and behaviour as described. Although these principles support the case that theism is more probable than not, Swinburne suggests that it is a person’s lifestyle which offers evidence of the veracity of the report of religious experience, in other words, the fruits of the experience are conclusive.

Swinburne’s principles are echoed in the attitudes of researchers of the Archive, who accept the accounts as given, without conclusive evidence. As mentioned in Chapter 1, despite the very occasional suspicion of exaggeration and some rambling stories, almost every RSE recorded seems genuine and research is based on that assumption (Beardsworth, 1977/2009; Hardy 1979/2006; Hay, 1990; Maxwell, & Tschudin, 1990/2005; Fenwick, & Fenwick, 1995; Fox, 2003, 2008, 2014).

Caroline Franks Davis

“Fruits” are seldom included in the indices of books on RSEs, but an exception is found in *The evidential force of religious experience* by Caroline Franks Davis (1989/1999) who has six entries for “fruits of experience” in the index. At the outset she suggests that for many who have RSEs, it is actually the fruits, the practical effects in their lives, rather than any cognitive content which is important. She describes fruits which, “help people cope with fear of death, promote social integration, help people recover from such things as alcoholism and depression” (Franks Davis, 1989/1999, p. 119), very much in line with my own findings. She is familiar with Hardy’s work and quotes widely from the Archive.

While Franks Davis focuses on the cognitive components as evidence for religious claims, in making the cumulative case for theism, she stresses the importance of the fruits of religious experiences, highlighting the expectations which religious experiences arouse. RSEs are expected to be transformative, and in fact in the Archive, some correspondents mention the fact that they feel more change should have taken place.

Regarding religious affiliation, she explains that many people are led away from their previous “shallow institutional religion” to “genuine religiosity” (p. 118) after their religious experience, which I explore in my research on changes in religious attitude. Franks Davis explains how non-religious people who have RSEs are often challenged by what has happened to them as they have no context in which to understand such events. They need help, which is often found through a spiritual search or exploration of religious text. This is especially the case for

experiences in childhood, which are often only understood later, when concepts such as God are learned. She cites the work of Edward Robinson (1977/1996) to illustrate this. Many people have approached the AHT in order to try to make sense of their experiences – particularly in the early days, when Hardy’s appeal offered people their first opportunity to admit to experiences they had not previously shared at all, but who may eventually be aided by an all-embracing category such as an IE.

That religious experiences can lead to false beliefs and may even be dangerous should also be borne in mind, according to Franks Davis. She addresses the issue of religious experiences being private and the data we have being people’s own descriptions of their perceptual experiences. Using Swinburne’s terminology, she suggests that such accounts may be “internal” or “external”:

An “external” description such as, “I was aware that of the presence of Christ near me, comforting me” ... if used as the basis of an argument from religious experience would beg the question. An “internal” description is less ambitious; “I had an experience of its seeming to me that Christ was near me, comforting me,” does not entail anything about an external object, event, or state of affairs but only about the way things seemed to the subject to be. (Franks Davis, 1989/1999, p. 22)

Most accounts use external description and sometimes it is a relief to read a more measured internal expression of what took place, allowing for doubt or a different perspective. This classification is similar to Smart’s degrees of ramification (Smart, 1997, p. 169), both helpful in assessing analysis. Franks

Davis also suggests that people's attitudes to religion colour their descriptions, with many associating religion with its institutional form, whereas she has a broader understanding of what she terms "intrinsically religious" experiences (Franks Davis, 1989/1999, pp. 30-31). I would prefer the term spiritual for such experiences, but whatever designation is chosen, it is often the researcher who labels the experience rather than accepting the auto-description given. However, each person records what he or she felt and thought, and a degree of respect and care is due when analysing and classifying these accounts.

In her earlier paper *The Devotional Experiment*, Franks Davis begins by stating her hypothesis, reminiscent of James, "that there is an ultimate, holy, transcendent and benevolent force with which human beings can come into contact, in which they can find their greatest bliss, and without which they cannot be 'whole' or live life to its fullest" (Franks Davis, 1986, p. 17). She refers to Hardy's experimental faith as she conducts her own investigation. She notes six characteristics of experiences which give them religious significance. The second of these is:

Spiritual fruits: the experience inspires peace, serenity, or deep joy, a sense that both external and internal evil and disorder have been overcome, new strength or hope, increased love for others, "saintly virtues" such as humility, a zeal for moral and spiritual pursuits, or increased self-knowledge. It need not necessarily be a pleasant experience; the recognition of one's own failings, for instance, can be very painful.

(Franks Davis, 1986, p.17)

Here she lists some of the ways in which people are changed through RSEs, including making sense of life, and although she does not mention any underlying turning away from the self, she does refer to inner and outer changes, including increased love for others. She also acknowledges that negative experiences can lead to positive effects, where people face their fears and failings and are eventually enabled to turn away from their own troubles to help others, an aspect I too have found.

John Hick

The pluralist hypothesis which underlies John Hick's philosophy, is not only helpful in bringing the religious traditions together, but also offers an insight into the fruits of experience. Hick's view is that the theistic God, variously named and worshipped and the impersonal ultimate reality of other faiths such as Buddhism, are all phenomenal understandings of a transcategorical, ineffable Real (Hick, 2006, p. 206). He refers to the "apparent parity in value of the fruits in life of the different forms of religious experience" (p. 206) as supporting that pluralist interpretation of religion globally.

This view is based on Kant's understanding of our inability as humans to know the true nature of reality: *das Ding an sich*, the thing-in-itself, the noumenon. Humans can only know the phenomena, the world as it appears to us, not as it really is. In religious terms, the different ways of experiencing the Real, as the *personae* of Jahweh, the heavenly Father, Allah, Vishnu and *impersonae* of Brahman, the Tao and the Dharmakaya are all different phenomenological awarenesses of the same noumenal reality as found in, for example, the concept of *Nirguna Brahman* and Eckhart's *Gottheit* (Godhead) (Hick, 1989, pp. 13-15, pp.

236-237). In Hick's view, within all these traditions, there is evidence of salvific change, the transformation, "from self-centredness to Reality-centredness" (Hick, 1989, p. 36), "which produces compassion/love towards other human beings or towards all life" (Hick, 1989, p. 301). However, Hick also stresses that holding any religious belief at all is unnecessary and that there are also "secular" saints (Hick, 1999, p. 170).

Hick's analysis influenced the formulation of the hypothesis of my third research question, although I explore whether the change of focus from the self to altruism is necessarily linked to awareness of ultimate reality. For Hick, RSEs are evidence of the Real, "for although we cannot describe absolute Reality as it is in itself, we *can* describe its effects on the lives of men and women" (Hick, 1999, p. 165. Hick's italics). He seems to indicate that perhaps even secular saints are responding "to the claim upon them of the ultimately Real as encountered in the inextricably interrelated moral and political needs of humanity" (Hick, 1999, p.170) and he cites the effects of experiences in the RERC Archive (pp. 112-113, 115-116) as being of permanent value to the correspondents.

The question as to why we should "step into the circle of religious faith in the first place" (p. 167) is raised, and his answer is that as we are naturally spiritual beings, the fifth dimension of our nature, the transcendent within us responds to the fifth dimension in the universe and that "the fruits of this response are self-evidently such that we value and desire them" (p. 167). Hick does, however, admit to the ambiguous nature of the universe, that it may be interpreted naturalistically or religiously (p. 15) and evidently from the materialist viewpoint, so prevalent today, there is no fifth dimension.

However, whatever our persuasion, “What we do need to know is how to live now. This is the way of love, witnessed to by the saints and mystics of all the great traditions.” (Hick, 1999, p. 254). In Chapter 8 I explore whether people of no particular religious persuasion have experiences which lead to that path of love, and whether or not religious traditions are helpful. The fruits of experience, which are my focus, are described by Jeff Astley, writing on Hick as:

spiritual, moral, or even political change. ... many accounts of religious or spiritual experience do seem to bear witness to an accompanying changed sense of spiritual meaningfulness in life, and the development of more loving attitudes and behaviour towards other people (cf. Hardy, 1979, pp. 98-103; Fenwick, & Fenwick, 1996, p. 4; Fox, 2014). (Astley, 2017a, p. 14)

It may be argued that some people are simply kind and compassionate by nature, as it is a good way to live. The Archive was originally set up to receive religious and spiritual experiences and therefore most accounts do include some reference to the spiritual, even if it is to deny it or to explain how correspondents interpret ultimate reality without reference to religion.

Keith Ward

Keith Ward, a former AHT Trustee, has lectured and written widely on religions, spirituality and science (Ward, 2004a, 2014), in particular taking issue with a materialist view that reality is merely “collections of physical particles accidentally arranged in complicated patterns” (Ward, 2014, p. 1). Regarding the relationships between the great religious traditions (Ward, 1998a, 2019) Ward challenges Hick’s hard pluralism, suggesting a soft or revisionist pluralism, a

convergent spirituality, “ultimate spiritual Reality is not wholly unknowable, but is genuinely known in various partial ways in diverse religious traditions” (Ward, 2004a, p. 227). In a volume considering religious diversity Hick and Ward’s views have been juxtaposed (Meister, 2008, pp. 9-39) giving Ward’s response to Hick’s views.

Ward considers that religions ultimately aim at enabling humans to flourish (Ward, 2004a, p. 236) and for him, personal religious experience is crucial to faith, which is not a matter of assenting to facts or accepting rational arguments, but involves “discernments of value, commitments to moral goals, and attitudes of open-ness to personal or quasi-personal features of experience” (Ward, 2014, p. 97). Rather than referring to fruits, Ward links RSEs and values. The inner change is a result of an experience of a “spiritual reality ... of immense power and value, since it is the source of all the values that are perceived in experience” (Ward, 2014, p. 91). Ward clearly links inner spiritual experience to care for others and points the way to the turn from selfishness to altruism:

all should seek to realize the divinity within, though the selfish and competitive ego impedes and obscures that inner divinity. Each individual soul can become transparent to the presence and action of the universal Self, and will find its fulfilment in helping others in practical ways to freedom from hunger, pain, and ignorance. (Ward, 1998b, p. 31)

Steven Katz

In his philosophical and phenomenological study of mysticism, Steven Katz (1978) takes the contextualist position, that the “pre-experiential pattern informs the resultant experience” (Katz, 1978, p. 4) and that “There are NO pure

(i.e. unmediated) experiences” (p.26, his upper case); the cultural and religious context form the experience. However, in his linked papers on Eastern and Western mystical traditions, Katz (1992a, 1992b) focuses on the relation between ethics and mysticism, which is relevant to RSEs in general. He describes the change of focus from selfish living to life in harmony with others through the inner transformation wrought in mystics of different religious traditions through their various practices (Katz, 1992a, p. 258).

He sums up the relationship between spiritual views and behaviour in terms of Hinduism thus, “ethical behaviour and concern might fairly, even unmistakably, be described as the *effect* of a correct realization of ‘no-self’; ... Ethics is ... inseparably ontology and ontology inseparably ethics” (Katz, 1992a, p. 264). In Buddhism, Katz sees selflessness and compassion as mutually entailed (p. 266). Turning to Western mystical traditions, Katz links moral behaviour to religious experience, “Ethical practice, either as obedience or as purification or both, is elemental to the experiential journey towards Christ” (Katz, 1992b, p. 410) and “the Christian mystic performs acts of charity and love because God *is* charity and love” (p. 414). A similar pattern is found in the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah with its emphasis on *mitzvot* (prescribed religious deeds) and morality (p. 418). He highlights how turning from a self-centred view to a focus on God is essential for a follower of the Kabbalah (p. 421).

Katz argues that any mystical experience can only take place after preparation and will reflect the expected experiences embedded in the religion of the mystic, different in each religious tradition. This is based on the assumption that all mystical experiences are mediated by their cultural or religious contexts

and can only be interpreted within those contexts. This would disallow different names being given to the same mystical experience of oneness. However, this limits not only interpretation but precludes any cross-cultural comparisons (Schlamm, 1992, p. 545). Mystics themselves report that their experiences are not wholly constituted by their tradition and that expectations and practice are not necessarily confirmed by their experiences, nor can such experiences be guaranteed to occur at will. Schlamm quotes Katz as admitting that his position does not reflect what the mystics say about themselves but is one of academic self-consciousness. Schlamm's response is to argue that "if such 'academic self-consciousness' removes itself too far from what mystics say about themselves, then the question arises whether it is really capable of understanding the distinctive features of mystical experience" (Schlamm, 1992, p. 547). In exploring mysticism, Katz's constructivist views prevent him from drawing a conclusion that all these ways are paths to one transcendent reality, however named, as Hick and Ward do.

Katz concludes his papers on mysticism and ethics with this summation, "While seeking God, or the Absolute, or the One they recognize the visage of the divine in the human other" (Katz 1992b, p. 423). This is an aspect I will explore in the Archive and I consider how an experience of the unity and interconnectedness leads to love and compassion for others in Chapter 9. Katz has clearly illustrated the transformation which I am researching, but links it to specific practice, whereas most mystical experiences in the RERC Archive are not the result of special preparation but are spontaneous.

Robert K. C. Forman

A scholar who takes issue with the constructivist approach to mysticism of Katz (1978), that all mystical experience is shaped by prior beliefs, concepts and expectations, is Robert Forman. He notes that in academia generally, the contextualist position is taken as the norm. Thinkers tending towards a perennialist view, that of a “shared universal vision of the commonality of reality ... claimed similarity of mystical experience across cultures and historical epochs” (Katz, 1978, p. 57) are side-lined; accused of ignoring the context of experience and of gliding over differences in order to make their case.

Forman maintains that experience precedes analysis and argues that the contextualist interpretation makes spontaneous mystical experiences impossible. To refute that view, Forman mentions the unexpected experiences, initially puzzling of R.M. Bucke (Forman, 1990/1997, p. 20; Bucke, 1901/1905, pp. 6-9) and of Teresa of Avila (Forman, 1990/1997, p. 21). Both mystics took time to explore and understand what had happened to them. The RSEs and mystical experiences recorded in the Archive support Forman’s view. There are many instances of experiences in childhood, not understood until later, and adult experiences which required further investigation to make sense. Many correspondents mention how their experiences differ from what they would have expected according to their religious beliefs.

According to Forman, there is a core feature of all mystical experiences, which he names the Pure Consciousness Event (PCE), defined as “wakeful contentless consciousness” (Forman, 1990/1997, p. 21) which is unrelated to any religious tradition. Forman explains that the PCE is one form of introvertive

mysticism, which he investigates because it is relatively common (pp. 8-9), but he does not maintain that this is “the only important phenomenon in mysticism” (p. 8) and indeed there are far more RSEs than PCEs recorded in the Archive. In his book Forman explores theories of mysticism but does not mention consequences or fruits of experience. Those are addressed in a later publication, in the question, “What actual, practical differences do shifts like this make?” (Forman, 2010, p. 80). There Forman explores why the promise that in a state of enlightenment, right actions will flow naturally, is not automatically fulfilled. Descriptions of his own practice, retreats and failings are laid bare as he approaches the awareness that his inner silence, found in meditation, can be shared with others, “a mutual freeing, a joint raising of openness, a mutual birthing of the sacred” (Forman, 2010, p. 187).

He contrasts those who seem imprisoned by their religious traditions with his understanding that “religion should make us more alive, not less, more flexible, more responsive, not less” (p. 199). This contrast is often found in the Archive as people move away from the formality and strictures of religious traditions to an open, spiritual attitude. Forman’s spiritual journey is honestly told and rigorously analysed and ultimately leads him to freedom and a deeply lived life. But he does not seem to attain true altruism, perhaps never quite able to put the ego aside.

James Keating

The mystical moral theology advocated by James Keating is firmly rooted in Catholic life and in the parish, a focus on ordinary people. While respecting dramatic mystical experiences, such as those of Saint Teresa, which are

considered elite, he suggests that more low-level mystical experiences of awareness of the love of God are found more frequently, and in that sense, mystical living is available to all, “Many will never know ecstasy, but they will still know a level of divine presence as the fruit of faith, hope and love” (Keating, 2002, p. 266). He suggests that the focus should not be on the mystical experience but on how the experience is expressed in moral attitudes and behaviour and in particular among the laity. This is an approach which resonates with the content of the Archive, where deep mystical experiences are rare, but people’s understanding and attitudes to one another are often aided by RSEs, which enable them to grow spiritually.

The experience of the love of God through Christ is transformative according to Keating, and will be aided by prayer, “for we are judged on our discipleship not by the integrity of our union with God *in prayer* but by the *fruits of such prayer* in acts of love and virtue” (Keating, 2002, p. 274, his italics). This Catholic standpoint offers an indication of how religion might support RSEs but Keating’s discussion of involvement of the laity seems to ignore the reduced position of women within the parish. Although able to pray and to offer practical assistance, women are excluded from ministry and sadly, many men have abused their position of privilege, showing the opposite of the fruits Keating advocates. Although reality does not always match aspiration, this should not detract from the majority of Catholics who do live their faith and are supported by the church.

Peter Donovan

Peter Donovan, whose work is published by the RERC, explores the interpretation of RSEs but does not focus on the Archive. He highlights the

difference between religious and non-religious interpretations of the same experience in terms of their significance for the individual. The beliefs held affect the value placed on the experience, which may be altered as beliefs change and such changes may not necessarily be for the better. In a series of short sections, the first of which is entitled, "Roots or Fruits?" (Donovan, 1979/1998, pp. 126-130) he suggests that roots to a great extent determine the fruits and concludes that beliefs about the roots affect the value accorded to the experience, leading to the fruits (p. 127).

His focus is not on the fruits themselves, but rather on the underlying beliefs and subsequent interpretations. He assesses the validity of the interpretations, stressing the integrating power of religious explanations as being more comprehensive than a natural or scientific understanding, because RSEs are seen by the religious believer as part of a pattern, linked to a comprehensive worldview, "Through religion the meaningfulness of one person's experiences is related in the end to purposes embracing the whole cosmos and human life within it" (p. 144).

Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew Newberg

A biological approach to RSEs has been advanced through technology, which has enabled research to be undertaken by neuroscientists to explore how the brain and mind function in relation to mystical and religious experiences of ultimate reality and to religious practice and ritual. These studies also throw light on the effects of experiences considered religious, wherever found and however interpreted and offer results which are valid species wide, which is why such

research is cited as offering greater understanding of RSEs and IEs by Wildman (2011, pp. 31-68).

Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew Newberg (1999) show the neural correlates of experiences of pure consciousness, as reported by mystics throughout the ages and across religious traditions, which they refer to as experiences of Absolute Unitary Being (AUB). They describe various studies undertaken on meditators using different techniques, by means of MRI and CT scans giving anatomical images, and SPECT and PET scans yielding functional images. In the case of practiced Tibetan Buddhist meditators, they were able to demonstrate that blood flow to area of the brain associated with concentration increased, while it decreased to the area related to orientation, as the differentiation between the self and non-self was lessened during meditation experiences of unity. Research is ongoing, but such measurements indicate that the experience of unity and interconnectedness could be universal.

Taves suggests that such results are dependent upon the definition of RSEs investigated and that the definition underlying d'Aquili and Newberg's research is limited (Taves, 2009/2011, pp. 21-22). She suggests that they focus on a common core model of RSEs and the distinction between the self and non-self in experiences of unity, instead of exploring the processes of how people constitute what seems religious to them (p. 21). However, I suggest that the labelling by experiencers is often unclear; the labelling by scholars frequently a matter of contention and that the summary of scholarship relating to mystical experiences given by the neuroscientists is helpful (d'Aquili, & Newberg 1999, pp. 157-161).

Such research can lead to an understanding of how the mind works in relation to spiritual phenomena – mystical states, induced or spontaneous, including RSEs, OBEs and NDEs. This not a reductionist interpretation, as all experience can be related to brain function through brain and mind correlates, which does not prove that such experiences are nothing more than brain states, nor does it prove that consciousness is produced by the brain. These findings would naturally apply to human beings wherever and whenever they live, and d’Aquili and Newberg link their research to an understanding of Otto’s sense of the numinous and to “the fruits of compassion and caring” (d’Aquili, & Newberg, 1999, p. 143).

Further research by Newberg, with Mark Robert Waldman into the nature of belief, cited studies of brain scans of people praying, meditating and speaking in tongues (Newberg, & Waldman, 2006). They compared studies of Catholic nuns practising centring prayer with the results from the studies of meditating Buddhist monks undertaken earlier and found marked similarities in brain function, but differences in interpretation. Discussion with an atheist studied, established that nothing altered his view that there was no spiritual dimension.

It is interesting to note that Newberg’s work is appreciated by sceptics as well as believers, both taking his findings to support their point of view (Wildman, 2011, p. 1). Sceptics conclude that he has shown that religious experience is “nothing more than a neural confabulation within the brain” whereas believers consider that he has shown that human beings are biologically “hardwired for God” (Newberg, & Waldman, 2006, p. 178).

Alister Hardy

Like James (1902/2002), Hardy gave the Gifford Lectures (Hardy, 1965, 1966); he felt himself to be treading in James' footsteps (Hardy 1979/2006, p. 141) and in agreement with his conclusions. Hardy's first series of lectures, given in 1963-4, was published as *The living stream: Evolution and man* (1965). In those lectures Hardy established himself as a Darwinian and a Mendelian as far as physical evolution is concerned, but with the caveat that evolution is not merely governed by chance, but by selection, which he did not consider random, but due to mental processes, in particular reasoning and speech (Hardy, 1965, 1979/2006, pp. 10-12). He maintained that religious experience was part of human nature and that the theory of evolution did not necessarily undermine spirituality, as was, and still is, so often assumed.

In his second series, given in 1964-5 and published in 1966 as *The divine flame: An essay towards a natural history of religion*, Hardy foreshadowed his research, setting out as a naturalist, to consider human religious behaviour and experience, the sense of a relationship to a transcendent reality, which he considered innate and of evolutionary value (Hardy, 1966/ 1978). In *The go-between God*, John V. Taylor quotes at some length from "these magnificent lectures" (Taylor, 1972/2004, pp. 65-67) where Hardy explains that the divine element is part of the natural process, para-physical rather than supernatural and that a natural human response to this divine element may be studied by science.

Hardy did not accept the supposition that science was necessarily opposed to religion, maintaining that both were needed to understand the real essence of life. His aim was to "use the methods of science to make a systematic natural

history study of human experience” (Hardy, 1997/2004, p. 1). Hardy’s investigation into religious experience was not only following William James (1902/2002) but also Edwin Starbuck, who published his *Psychology of religion* in 1899 (Hardy, 1979/2006, pp. 4-5). Starbuck’s work furnished many examples of conversion experiences, which were used by James. Hardy regretted the dearth of similar research since their time, apart from anthropologists exploring the religion of what he referred to as “primitive peoples” (Hardy, 1979/2006, pp. 6-7).

Hardy’s own focus was on Western society, where religion has been sidelined, in his view due to the materialist interpretation of life which tends to prevail in the modern intellectual world, with religion often seen as having “elements in it of superstition on the one hand and wishful thinking on the other” (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 7). In his later Hibbert Lectures, published as *The biology of God: A scientist’s study of man the religious animal* (1975/1977) he expressed his view of the importance of the spiritual side of human beings, which he studied through “the *written records* of man’s religious experience” (Hardy, 1975/1977, p. 16, his italics).

Although Hardy focused on religious experience, he had a keen interest in psychical research “telepathy and other kinds of extra-sensory perception” (Hardy 1966/1978, p. 176) including hypnotism and apparitions. He explains that “psi-phenomena” (p. 177), are important to him as evidence to refute “scientific monism” (p. 176), the materialist view which denies the “non-material, spiritual ... part of the universe” (p. 177). Extra-sensory perception suggests “the existence of a non-physical part of the universe which may provide a location for man’s mental and spiritual experiences” (p. 186). A wider understanding of

consciousness would offer the possibility of a world religion “founded upon a flame of faith within the heart and reason in the mind, a reasoning based upon the findings of scientific studies in both natural theology and psychical research” (p. 244).

Hardy draws attention to the powerful effect of religion in human history, for both good and evil, and stresses the importance of understanding religious experience. After years of “a dearth of scientific interest in man’s spiritual awareness” (Hardy 1979/2006, p. 7) he notes at last a revival of interest, mentioning studies in the USA of peak-experiences (Maslow, 1964/2014) and various surveys undertaken there. In Britain he cites “the sociological studies of religious behaviour of Argyle (1958) and Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi (1975)” (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 8) and he sets the work of his research unit and his colleagues within this context. Hardy has been compared to James but criticized for the limited conclusions drawn from his research, despite his patient approach to description and classification (Wildman, 2011, pp. 74-76). Indeed, Hardy does cite James, “that great pioneer and master” and James’ conclusions (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 141), with which, after his own research, he finds himself in agreement.

However, an aspect of Hardy’s work which is given less attention than I think it deserves, is his suggestion of an experimental faith, alluded to at the end of both Gifford Lectures, subsequently expounded more fully (Hardy, 1965, p. 285, 1975/1977, pp. 224-233, 1966/1978, pp. 242-243, 1979/2006, pp. 139-141) and specifically explored by Caroline Franks Davis (1986). Although Hardy intended that the studies at the Religious Experience Research Unit would help to

build up an academic understanding of human spiritual nature, on a personal level, he hoped to provide evidence which might induce people to trust that greater power as an experiment and to make an act of faith through prayer, based on the words of Jesus, “Ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find” (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 140).

Hardy’s experimental faith advocated prayers different from the set prayers of the liturgy and undertaken in solitude. “They may sometimes be made without words, but more often they are spoken or thought in the extempore language of the heart, in a devotional love relationship” (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 137). He suggests taking the familiar words of the Lord’s Prayer slowly and reflectively as a starting point (Hardy, 1975/1977, pp. 231-232) and hoped that sincere prayer could be considered as fruit of his research:

I mean a prayer undertaken by an agnostic or an atheist who, having studied the records of experience, is now prepared, with profound sincerity, to attempt the quest for a period of, say, at least six months; it might perhaps be a prayer beginning something like this. “God, if there is a God, help me to find you, and having found you, help me to have the strength and courage to do what I feel to be thy will.” (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 140)

Hardy’s aim of building up a natural history of human spiritual awareness began as he set up his research unit and today the RERC Archive continues to grow. The results of Hardy’s initial research (Hardy, 1979/2006) form the basis of my approach to the data.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the terminology related to RSEs – to gain a fuller understanding of the topic. The elusive terms experience, religion and spirituality were explored, as defined by a number of scholars, shedding light on the topics under consideration in this thesis. The terms religious and spiritual experience were also examined, their use in titles explored and alternatives considered. In my work I have decided on the inclusive term RSEs.

The importance of the experiential aspect of religion in the work of a range of well-known scholars including Hardy was highlighted. Much analysis of RSEs is concerned with discussions of terminology, types of experience (mystical, religious and spiritual) and debates of theoretical issues, such as contextual or essentialist interpretations. As my own research will not focus on those theories, but on the consequences of RSEs, the inner and outer effects, I have focused on their views on the fruits of experience. Most refer to the ensuing transformations, the personal effects of the experience on the individual. However, although many scholars stress that the ultimate way to judge the authenticity of RSEs is by the fruits, most do not then examine those fruits in more depth.

Also considered in this chapter were the effects on the fruits of experience of different interpretations as recorded by the scholars. This aspect will be taken up in Chapter 4, in which I consider a new approach to RSEs, one which includes religious, spiritual and non-religious ways of interpreting RSEs.

CHAPTER FOUR

NON-RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATIONS AND A NEW TYPOLOGY

Summary

RERC Archive accounts with non-religious interpretations

Wesley Wildman's typology of religious and spiritual experiences

Intense experiences (IEs)

Responses to IEs

The five core features of IEs

Cognitive reliability of IEs

Fruits of IEs

Abraham Maslow's peak-experiences

Self-transcendent experiences

Conclusion

Summary

Many RSEs occur to people without religious beliefs, who may not interpret their experience in religious or spiritual terms at all, so the category of intense experiences (IEs) as expounded by Wesley J. Wildman (2011) is explored in answer to the second research question, as a potentially useful category for analyzing such experiences and for enabling those without faith to accept them as natural occurrences.

The chapter begins with examples from the RERC Archive showing a range of non-religious responses and interpretations, highlighting the need for a category which would offer understanding to the correspondents. Those accounts are followed by an appraisal of Wildman's religious naturalism, his typology of RSEs with an exposition of his more detailed phenomenology of intense experiences and his intensity hypothesis.

Another naturalistic interpretation, that of Abraham Maslow's peak-experiences is juxtaposed, to highlight similarities and differences with Wildman's schema, leading to a deeper understanding of both approaches to RSEs. Maslow described self-transcendent experiences (STEs) as offering another naturalistic understanding of RSEs and further research was undertaken by David Yaden.

RERC Archive accounts with non-religious interpretations

Many RSEs occur to correspondents who stress that they have no faith either before or after their experience. They have no interest in any reality other than the everyday and many also view those with religious convictions as deluded. They are neither religious nor spiritual, although some might admit to

the latter as a broad definition of their position. Yet these correspondents tell of unusual experiences, which they find moving, unsettling and mysterious, which is puzzling and even frightening to them, as they struggle to make sense of what has occurred. They do not feel able to share the experience with others, although some subsequently explore religious or spiritual traditions, hoping for help and understanding. Some send their accounts to the RERC asking for clarification.

The accounts quoted below are to be borne in mind when examining Wildman's category of IEs, to assess whether such a designation would be applicable to those accounts from the point of view of the researcher; also whether renaming and re-evaluating RSEs as IEs might be a helpful way for the experiencers to come to terms with their experiences, which they are neither able to understand, nor to deny, often due to a lack of any religious or spiritual context.

It is notable that as changes of belief occur in the lives of the experiencers, so do their interpretations of their experiences. The categorisation of IEs might enable people simply to embrace the experience and change the focus away from religious concepts or beliefs to an appreciation of what happened and what the experience might mean in personal rather than religious terms. Here is an example of someone without religious beliefs, who was afraid and unsure of what to make of an experience of nature mysticism:

since having a profound mystical experience, I, myself, have been attempting to explain the meaning of religion. My experience was of a typical mystical kind, yet I think stronger and more lasting than is usually reported. All of a sudden, when I was walking in the country near my home (not taking a walk, just going to the mail-box) everything came alive

around about me, and seemed to glow and breathe with animation - even the sticks and stones at my feet, and the mountains across the valley; the trees particularly I remember. It was a very beautiful and profoundly disturbing and frightening experience. ... I was frightened and puzzled and I was under great strain, particularly as I had to keep my feelings to myself. I was afraid for my sanity. ... I belong to no church, I do not believe in a personal god, I have no knowledge of everlasting life.

[000271]

Some correspondents are happy to treasure their experience for the rest of their lives without explanation or analysis. This correspondent never forgot the extraordinary event in Glasgow, which never reoccurred:

I have been deeply influenced all my life by the experience and I am now 72. I have never yet been able to know what to make of a wonderful experience I had as a youth. I was out walking one night in the busy streets of Glasgow when, with slow majesty, at a corner where the pedestrians were hurrying by and the city traffic was hurtling on its way, the air was filled with heavenly music; and an all-encompassing light, that moved in waves of luminous colour, outshone the brightness of the lighted streets. I stood still, filled with a strange peace and joy, and the music beat on in its majesty and the traffic and the pedestrians moved through the light. They passed on their way, but the music and the light remained, pulsating, harmonious, more real than the traffic of the streets. Then I, too, lingeringly moved on, looking back at times till I found myself in the everyday world again with a strange access of gladness and of love. ... in

the course of my long life I have never had a repetition of the experience; nor have I desired it. It entered so deeply into my being that my mind has rested in it all my days. [000208]

Some correspondents acknowledge that their experience would be considered religious by those with faith, yet the experience, while meaningful to them, does not entail acceptance of a religious interpretation. It may, however, lead to a reconsideration of the origins of religion and perhaps a new perspective on ultimate reality. Here is such an evaluation, which follows a description of several experiences:

But as a lifelong cynic and atheist I didn't think of what had happened as being spiritual in any way and was fairly certain that it had been induced by some physiological mechanism. Thinking about it, I decided that if the same thing had happened to anyone who was particularly religious or New Age, they might interpret these same events as being of a spiritual nature, an experience of God. ...before all of this occurred I was of the opinion, as many atheists are, that monotheistic religions arose out of people's need to have reasons for the existence of the cosmos; now I believe that many of them were based on an awareness of reality gained by similar states to the above. [005535]

The labels of religious, spiritual, mystical and related terminology do not resonate with non-believers yet many correspondents, much to their surprise, find themselves having experiences which they recognise as being somehow related to religion. The RSE below was transformative and led to a changed perspective on

life, but left the experiencer frustrated with formal religion, finding it an inadequate response to what she had experienced:

What impressed me the most was the feelings I had about religion. I'd never considered myself a religious person - only going to church as a child because I was made to. Yet the overriding thought was that this feeling was beyond myself and was religious yet at the same time I wanted to throw out God. All I could say to myself was, they've got it all wrong - and Christianity is not the whole answer. It has given me all the security I need for living my life. Although I still cannot accept the ritual and Dogma of the Church, I've since studied Theology, Phylosophy {sic}, Phsycology {sic}, but always home back to this thing I cannot name, yet which seems to be the essence of all three subjects and more, as though it is the "being" of man himself. My life has become completely changed - what seemed black became white - what was white became black. This life we live is but a moment in time and space. These two dimensions of time and space took on a slightly different meaning. [001214]

Experiences of nature mysticism often lead to an understanding of divinity which is all-embracing but which the experiencer does not consider adequately reflected in formal religion:

I occasionally experience a heightened awareness of the world, either through the beauty of nature, the bond between human beings or of an infinite feeling of love for another person. This takes the form of a soaring surge of happiness and well being, and hope even in a seemingly hopeless situation. This feeling I consider to be my personal interpretation of

“God”. It enables me to be aware of hope and love in the world which ultimately could unite all beings and therefore have some meaning in an often horrific world. ... This fact being lost because of all the clutter of organised religion. ... this “thing” religious experience is going to be lost if it is not changed and yet being changed, still recognised as all important.

[000831]

The following experience is a good example of the intensely personal nature of the experience. The correspondent is wary of sharing it, stating that she had not told others because such experiences are hard to express in ordinary language, and also because she was fearful of not being understood, but the fruits were clear nonetheless:

The experience and the presence are not things I much talk about, in some ways to talk about it depletes it. Unlike many of the others who wrote to you I have never felt the need to discuss it with others, feeling perhaps that truth is discovered within and not in the without, it was also very personal. ... Since my experience, and in spite of myself I am a better person.

[005551]

These examples from the Archive show a range of experiences which were important in the lives of the experiencers, recognised as being beyond everyday reality but considered as unrelated to religion. That they were submitted for research into spiritual and religious experience indicates an understanding of their nature, whether or not the experiencer had any religious convictions. The open formulation of the Hardy Question enabled correspondents to recognise its applicability to their own experiences. It was also evident that as beliefs changed

over time, so the interpretation was affected. All these accounts might be described as vivid and of ultimate significance in Wildman's terminology, and his aim is to help people such as those quoted above, to come to terms with their RSEs, as he considers them to be "typically the most potent conviction-producing and action-inspiring experiences of their lives" (Wildman, 2011, p.77). An understanding of RSEs as IEs, regarding them as a normal part of human awareness, might well have been helpful to the experiencers quoted above, enabling them to integrate their experiences without feeling obliged to acknowledge them as religious or even spiritual.

Wesley Wildman's typology of religious and spiritual experiences

Wildman's categorisation of the different types of RSEs: Vivid – constituted by Anomalous and Ultimacy experiences, Religious, Spiritual, Meditation, Mystical and Intense experiences, leads on to his more detailed focus on IEs. His aim in introducing the latter category is "seek out another class of RSEs, one that is as neurologically universal as possible within the human species, and thus as evolutionarily well established as possible" (Wildman, 2011, p. 28). In exploring the fruits of experience in the Archive, I record instances of IEs to ascertain whether that category was applicable to the accounts and give the findings in Chapter 6.

Wildman is a religious naturalist, which he defines as "a religiously positive form of naturalism that rejects both supernaturalism and supranaturalism" (Wildman, 2011, p. 266). He explains those terms as "supernaturalists (i.e. accepting disembodied intentionality) and supranaturalists (i.e. conceiving ultimate reality as a personal being with awareness and purposes and powers to

act)” (p. 23) which he considers the dominant viewpoints in most religious traditions although the naturalist view has nonetheless persisted among a minority. While not believing in a supernatural realm, the religious naturalist does take seriously concepts of salvation or enlightenment, conceiving God or the Dao as the ground of being, which opens the way for a pluralist view of religion.

In exploring the concepts of religious and spiritual, Wildman suggests that religious experiences are concerned with religious practice or groups, whereas spiritual experiences can include, “experiences that seem pregnant with existential and ontological significance and yet more or less obviously not related to organized religion” (Wildman, 2011, p. 81). Anomalous experiences are out of the ordinary and ultimacy experiences are defined as “the domain of existentially significant experiences which engage us with our ultimate concerns” (p. 268). The diagram below illustrates how Wildman’s categories relate to each other.

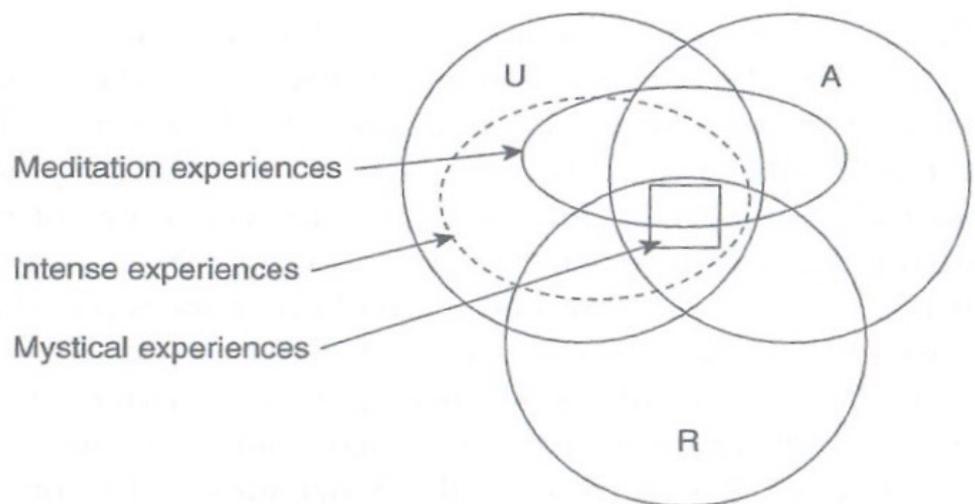


Figure 4.1 Relationships between categories of RSEs (Wildman, 2011, p. 98)

Wildman's map of various categories shows religious experiences (R) overlapping with ultimacy (U) and anomalous experiences (A). As is evident, IEs are considered a subset of ultimacy experiences, which may be short-term (discrete) or long-term (extended).

"Ultimate concern" is a term used by Paul Tillich (Tillich, 1968, p. 14) and referred to by Wildman as "serviceable within several religions and also outside religious communities" (Wildman, 2010, p. 208). Tillich suggests that "He who is ultimately concerned about his state of estrangement and about the possibility of reunion with the ground and aim of his being is already in the grip of the Spiritual Presence" (Tillich, 1968, p. 237). Indeed, in the Archive, a serious concern with ultimacy is frequently the starting point for spiritual exploration and a trigger of RSEs.

Wildman interprets ultimacy experiences as being of vital importance for people, leading to major decisions and choices in life. Whether or not interpreted in terms of ultimate reality, such experiences enable them to find the basis on which they will live. Ultimacy experience is a term acceptable to people who are religious, spiritual or neither, as it is of universal application.

In addition to the categories described, Wildman widens his analysis to introduce his concept of intense experiences, discussed in detail below, as "the means by which we engage the valuational depths of reality" (Wildman, 2011, p. 183). In the Archive there are many accounts from people who, while recording the transformative effects of their experience, deny any link with religion or transcendent reality, although they may accept that the experience could fit into a broad definition of spirituality. They are people with no religious affiliation,

which some stress at the outset. They are convinced of the authenticity of their experience and absorb the message, allowing the changed perspective to inform their lives, but they maintain that this has nothing to do with religion. For them religion is institutional, static and involves ceremonies which do not seem to relate to their RSEs. Hardy, too, considers humans to be spiritual by nature but recognises that this may not be linked to belief or practice (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 1).

Intense Experiences (IEs)

The full definition of intense experiences given by Wildman is:

A subset of ultimacy experiences involving: (i) strong and broad neural activation, corresponding to existential potency and wide awareness, involving both strength of feeling and interconnectedness of ideas, memories, and emotions in such a way as to engage a person with ultimate existential and spiritual concerns and leverage significant personal or social effects; (ii) brain connectivity not present in other species and probably not in humans prior to 50,000 years ago, and the so-called “great leap forward”; and (iii) an intensification of ordinary sense perception that permits (without guaranteeing) cognitively reliable perception of, and imaginative engagement with, the aesthetic and moral depths of reality. (Wildman, 2011, pp. 268-269)

This definition is the basis of Wildman’s comprehensive intensity hypothesis, which “paves the way for a species-wide theory of religious and theological experiences, beneath their intricately varying cultural and circumstantial embeddings” (Wildman, 2011, p. 269). He recognizes this as not

only important, but also controversial and in need of further exploration (p. 107). For my purposes, points (i) and (iii) were borne in mind when noting the experiences in the Archive which seemed to fulfil those criteria. I did not follow up point (ii) although covering developments in the field of neurotheology (d'Aquili, & Newberg, 1999; Newberg, & Waldman, 2006).

Further investigation of Wildman's detailed analysis of IEs enabled me to gain an insight into the significance of his definition, as my research involves an assessment as to whether the categorisation of RSEs as IEs might be more inclusive and helpful for non-believers. Wildman considers human beings to be conditioned by IEs and he lists 16 features (Wildman, 2011, pp. 96-97) to illustrate their variety within a family resemblance and their importance to individuals and society. In summary, he points out their significance for people, their unpredictability, diversity and their range – from pleasant to terrifying. His view is that most people have such experiences and that they occur to mentally ill as well as to perfectly healthy individuals. Although many people are uncomfortable about calling them religious, they may trigger religious interest, belief and activity. The wisdom traditions include techniques to induce IEs; they can be encouraged through spiritual practice or induced by drugs. Wildman's last point is that "The intense experiences of non-religious people are sometimes difficult to assimilate for lack of any conceptual framework or social context for making sense of them" (Wildman, 2011, p. 97). Unfortunately, he gives no examples other than his own, nor does he indicate where he obtained the data on which the list or his map is based.

Although spiritual and even religious interpretations can be accommodated within the category of IEs, there is no necessary link to religious or spiritual traditions, ideas or practice. This makes IEs attractive to people in today's secular society. The importance of such an approach for my research is "to open up the realm of spirituality to many people who consider themselves non-religious and even cultivate a degree of antipathy toward organized religion" (p. 115-116).

Wildman explains that the lack of religious or social context makes IEs difficult for non-religious people to assimilate and this is a feature often found in the Archive. As was shown above, correspondents frequently report having an experience which made no sense to them initially, but which nonetheless had a profound impact and could not be dismissed. Further exploration was needed, which in many cases did lead to a spiritual search. As Wildman explains, "Intense experiences often provoke religious interest, belief and activity" (Wildman, 2011, p. 96) which I consider in Chapter 8.

In my exploration of IEs in the Archive, I found the interconnectedness of ideas, memories and emotions to be particularly important, as correspondents describe and struggle to make sense of their RSEs. Wildman includes ultimate existential and spiritual concerns as well as referring to "personal change and social effects", relevant to my focus on fruits. He elaborates:

Intense experiences are particularly useful for my purposes because *their distinctive characteristics open a pathway to a species-wide understanding of the nature, function and value of RSEs*, an understanding that encompasses their evolutionary origins, their cognitive structure, their

emotional texture, their neurological embedding, their bodily and social effects, and their existential and cultural importance. (Wildman, 2011, p. 104, his italics)

These are sweeping claims, as Wildman offers a comprehensive theory of the relationship between different types of RSEs in order to highlight their relevance to and value for development in human beings. This separates them from religious beliefs while keeping open the possibility of a religious or spiritual interpretation. Like Hardy, Wildman considers the propensity to have such experiences, however interpreted, to be innate and his appraisal of their evolutionary origins seems to entail the assumption, again shared with Hardy, that such experiences have survival value.

This inclusivity of humanity as a whole, across time and cultures, offers IEs an importance hitherto unafforded to such experiences, as they were frequently considered limited to religious believers. The link to a spiritual view of life is retained, without necessarily a link to formal religion. Wildman makes the important point that:

Anthropologists appear to have found no human group lacking this capacity, which is deeply, and perhaps characteristically, human. Also, intense experiences are probably the principal experiential driving force behind human spirituality ... whether designated religious or not.

(Wildman, 2011, p.106)

Wildman's criteria resonate well with the content of the Archive, as a strong emotional response and a powerful new understanding of the significance of ideas and events are frequently found. The range of intensity found in the

Archive extends from mild, gently comforting experiences or an awareness of significant patterns in life, to profound, transformational, mystical experiences. These are often expressed in emotional terms and the category of IEs embraces all those aspects. Such experiences, often interpreted as bringing the sacred into everyday life, seem to be found universally and interpreted differently according to belief and culture:

Wherever intense experiences engage us authentically with the valuational depths of reality – whether in a glorious sunset, a traumatic episode, a thought-provoking idea, or a captivating curve – there we find the holy, and it is sanctified through being manifest as holy in that experience of intensity. (Wildman, 2011, p. 256)

The following excerpts from a lengthy account in the Archive illustrate much of what Wildman's IEs encompass. The account includes experiences in childhood, a description of nature mysticism, an elusive, yet noetic understanding of reality and a sense of comfort. The experiencer found no help in religion and the ensuing search for an interpretation leads him to make contact with the RERC in the hope of illumination:

From a recent newspaper article that you are inviting reports of what might be classed as religious or mystical experiences. ... As in the traditional account of all such things, they are literally indescribable, being outside all our normal concepts: yet they seem very important, perhaps more important than anything else. They were frequent in early childhood - in fact I have the impression that at times they were a more or less continuous state of awareness, but this may be a trick of memory. As I

grew up ... they became less frequent and spontaneous. ... I do not follow any organised religion, and they have given me something to hold on to at times of great despair. The two categories are these: 1. An aesthetic response to some particular object, or landscape, or music, etc., which is completely different from normal sensuous enjoyment. ... It seems to convey some immense truth about our relationship to the universe which I have, as it were, temporarily forgotten under the stress of everyday living; however, I cannot quite grasp this truth, which remains just outside the fringe of awareness, radiating encouragement. ... 2. A momentary, almost instantaneous heightening of the above experience, as if a camera shutter had opened into another order of reality, or a different dimension. I am briefly aware that there is a part of me against which my normal personality and its activities are almost completely insignificant. For a moment I can grasp the hidden truth, remember what I "really" am, and see a glimpse of home, but this glimpse is timeless and cannot be extended in time for dissection by the intellect. Its beauty and conviction are inexpressible. I know that there are many interpretations of such experience: I have studied them for some ten years, since as a student I first felt the need to formulate my own ideas. Perhaps your Unit can produce the definitive interpretation for our century: I hope so, and very much envy you your task. [000157]

Wildman critiques much previous scholarship on the subject of RSEs as limited or even misguided, considering that his category of IEs transcends the more limited perspectives of other thinkers (Wildman, 2011, pp. 122-124) who

offered only partial perspectives, whereas his formulation of IEs can encompass a wide range of RSEs found within and outside religious traditions, including, “Schleiermacher’s absolute dependence, Otto’s *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, Maslow’s peak experiences, Forman’s pure consciousness events, and Newberg’s experiences of absolute unitary being” (Wildman, 2011, p. 105).

Wildman’s definition of IEs certainly appears to be broad enough to encompass the experiences listed above, which he considers to be partial perspectives. Indeed, those scholars admit that they have focused on a specific aspect of spiritual or religious experience, whereas Wildman is aiming to encompass a wide range of different spiritual experiences linked in a family resemblance, an umbrella category. Maslow’s peak-experiences will be examined as an illustration of how further research might investigate Wildman’s claims regarding the other thinkers he cites within the study (pp. 122-124).

If a large number of RSEs are able to fill Wildman’s criteria and be considered IEs, that would be of significance for the validity of his intensity hypothesis. As far as my research is concerned, it would seem that the accounts quoted at the beginning of this chapter could all come under the heading of IEs as defined by Wildman. That designation would enable people to gain an understanding and acceptance of IEs as natural, as opposed to anomalies, and remove the inevitable link to religion or spirituality (Wildman, 2011, p. 264). It would also set such experiences in an evolutionary context, and open the way for further exploration (p. 265).

Responses to IEs

Wildman elaborates on his descriptions of IEs and cites two of his own experiences for “first-person phenomenological analysis merged with philosophical reflection” (pp. 108-111). He analyses his own response and that of his friend to their visits to the Vietnam War Memorial and to Auschwitz in order to extrapolate generalizations about IEs from particular instances of them. This approach leads Wildman to formulate three impulses or pressures as the immediate effects of IEs: the pressures to silence, to speak and to move. He then explores the effects of these pressures on his formulation of five features or faces of IEs, those of depth, horizon, scale, complexity and mystery.

While understandable responses in the two instances of IEs cited, the three pressures are not frequently found in the Archive accounts, which record experiences of a quite different nature from the two examples given by Wildman, in that they are mostly either spontaneous or triggered by particular need. There are, of course, a few experiences which take place during formal situations, such as concerts, art exhibitions and religious services, which could be analysed to establish whether they might then lead on to the pressures cited.

A great many experiences recorded in the Archive take place in solitude and involve alterations of perception. They lead to an emotional response, often with a sudden new understanding and frequently to a longer-term transformation of outlook and behaviour. Although the pressure to silence can often be extrapolated from the accounts, the pressures to speech and movement are rarely mentioned as immediate responses. Wildman focuses on movement, admitting the difficulty of discerning correlations with IEs, but gives only a brief mention of its

opposite, stillness, which might in fact be a more apposite response to RSEs. It is what I have found to be the more usual response in the RERC Archive accounts.

“The intensity of things sometimes conjures the pressure to silence” (Wildman, 2011, p. 110) resonates with many RSEs in the Archive, and his reference to allowing the experience to have “a chance of sinking in, of transforming me, of being honoured in me” (p. 110) through silence and the suspension of analytical thought is very much how some people feel. In this account an experience of the beauty of sunrise is described as being beyond analysis or articulate expression:

These are moments of pure beauty. ... The past is forever alive at the moment in you, the individual mind is taken into the whole. At times it feels that the physical brain is not big enough to let it through. [000651]

Another aspect of silence is evident in people’s response to their experiences – so many neither spoke about their experiences, nor admitted to having had an RSE at all until writing to the RERC. Wildman also alludes to the failure of language when describing experiences, something found in many accounts in the Archive, as the experience seems to be beyond what can be expressed in ordinary language, reminiscent of James’ ineffability.

The five core features of IEs

Wildman introduces the five core features or faces of IEs, the metaphors of depth, horizon, scale, complexity, and mystery (pp. 115-121). He considers humans inherently able to have IEs and that these five features or faces are likely to prove structural universals. Wildman explains how the pressures to silence, to speak and to move arise in relation to each of the five faces. This was found to be

somewhat extraneous to my exploration of the fruits of experience in the Archive and I did not record the faces and pressures of IEs. Here I simply give a brief summary of those five faces of IEs, to indicate the extent of the analysis given by Wildman, and to note whether or not that was helpful for my research into the fruits of experience in the Archive.

Depth, according to Wildman, encompasses “feelings of intense fear, joy, or bliss” (p. 117), and leads to a recognition of the need to surrender to “something that may or may not be worthy of trust, but which is trusted nonetheless” (p. 117). This is reminiscent of Schleiermacher’s understanding of the feeling of absolute dependence as a precursor to faith; surrender is also evident in Twelve Step Programmes dealing with addictions; these include recognition of dependence and spiritual awareness (Dossett, 2013). The pressure to silence is evident as the experience is beyond language, but the associated pressure to speak through glossolalia and to move through trance dancing has not been reflected in my findings so far.

Horizon recognizes “difference, such as fascination, alienation, fear, disgust or hate” which requires “interpretation, comparison and dialogue” (Wildman, 2011, pp. 117-118). Further analysis explains this as “internalised as failure to recognize oneself or a part of one’s body ... externalised into powerful senses of presence, which may be hostile or benign” (p. 118). Although I have not come across a failure to recognise part of one’s body in the accounts, this definition would seem to include the sensation of leaving one’s body as in OBEs and NDEs and looking at oneself from an external vantage point. Sometimes benign or malignant entities are involved. This category would also include the

sensation that people have of an invisible presence which is often found in the Archive (Beardsworth, 1977/2009) and which may be interpreted as an angel or an after-death communication (ADC).

Scale refers to awe, particularly evident in the experiences of the nature mystic (such as Alister Hardy) through being overwhelmed by “oceanic calm or the anxiety of agoraphobia, vastness, or emptiness, and which leads out into feelings of benevolence, compassion, wideness of heart, or loss of self” (Wildman, 2011, p. 118). This resonates with my research findings so far as I have found that experiences of nature mysticism lead to a profound awareness of the vast and interconnected universe and a sense of the insignificance of the individual as seen in the example in Chapter 7. That experience of our intrinsic connection with others and the environment can lead to fellow-feeling and altruism as is explored in my third research question. Hardy’s overwhelming feeling was one of gratitude for the beauty of nature and an awareness of a power beyond the self, which Wildman does not mention.

Complexity “is registered in feelings of confusion, disorientation, irritation, surprise and wonder” (p. 119) and is linked to science and to activities such as problem-solving and textual exposition, which may be considered a religious experience (Rodwell, 1999, pp. 6-7). This is not a category which crops up frequently in the Archive, although it is of interest when exploring the relationship between science and religion.

Mystery lies at the heart of human life, as despite much progress in human understanding, “the primal mystery of our existence remains” (Wildman, 2011, p. 121). This is widely reflected in my research as so many people are desperately

trying to find answers or at the very least illumination in the face of the fundamental questions of life and the intensity of the search is often a trigger for the experience or a change of perspective.

Religious institutions are deemed the “social forms that most directly recognize the recurrence of experiences of mystery in human life. Ritual, sacrament, vestment, and symbol are the lifeblood of the liturgical recognition of mystery” (Wildman, 2011, p. 121). While this is so for many, as Wildman recognises, religious hierarchy and authority often close off exploration by the curious, which can lead to a feeling of exclusion. Wildman’s pressure to awed silence, as in the face of Otto’s “mysterium tremendum et fascinans” (Otto, 1923/1958, pp. 12, 31) resonates particularly with the mystical experiences in the Archive. According to Wildman, precise liturgical requirements determine movement, although kneeling in stillness might be a more heartfelt response to mystery and one more likely to be found in the Archive.

Examples of Wildman’s five faces of IEs can be found in the Archive and quantitative research might be undertaken to ascertain their frequency and qualitative research to explore them and their associated pressures as described (Wildman, 2011, pp. 104-121). As my focus is on the fruits of experiences, the complex divisions set out by Wildman are limited in their applicability. They are, however, useful in evaluating the experiences themselves, as they highlight the different aspects of IEs in the more general context of RSEs. In my research I recorded instances of IEs, as defined by Wildman, rather than with a focus on the more detailed analysis given.

Perhaps missing from Wildman's categories are experiences of light and love, which I have found to be very frequent, and particularly important features of RSEs and NDEs in particular. Indeed, the feelings of being loved and then of wanting to give love, lie at the heart of the fruits of experience, particularly in relation to the change of focus from self-centredness to altruism which I explore. Neither light, love, compassion nor altruism are referred to by Wildman, nor do they feature in his index (pp. 300-303).

However, it is the "strength of feeling and interconnectedness of ideas, memories, and emotions ... [which] engage a person with ultimate existential and spiritual concerns and leverage significant personal or social effects" (pp. 268-269) which make IEs meaningful for the individual. Wildman explains the difference between short-term and long-term ultimacy experiences: the former include sensory alterations, a sense of presence and self-alterations, while the latter "involve existential potency, social embedding, transformation of behaviour, transformation of personality, and transformation of beliefs" (p. 124). These might also be considered as fruits of experience rather than aspects of experience. As the fruits of sudden, short-term experiences stretch out over time and people are changed, experience and fruits seem to meld into each other. There may also be a lapse of time between the experience and the response, as people come to terms with what has happened and absorb the new insights they have received.

Wildman mentions alternative terminology which might be considered for intensity, as profundity or richness. I have found "transformative experience" to be a viable alternative to IE, as most people are deeply affected, and many are eventually changed, in terms of beliefs and behaviour. These experiences frequently

occur when people are at their lowest ebb, enabling them to “let go” in surrender, allowing transformation to take place. For some, hope is given in the face of despair, faith replaces doubt and for others, a sudden illumination changes their lives for ever.

Other designations of RSEs might be transcendent moments (Cottingham, 2014, p. 60), transformative experiences (Cottingham, 2014, pp. 64, 66), or spiritual transformations (Peters, 2008) and transformative experiences which can be analysed in relation to decision-making (Paul, 2015). Another possibility is awakening experiences (Taylor, 2010) reflecting an element of enlightenment, or the more scientific term of experiences of enhanced consciousness (van Lommel, 2010, p. 210).

Cognitive reliability of IEs

The issue of the reliability of RSEs in terms of religious beliefs is given detailed consideration by Wildman. Although he concluded that “the complex cognitive-emotional journey from intense experience to interpretation to belief formation is not generally reliable” he explains that cognitive reliability of RSEs may be presumed if three conditions are met, “a naturalistic cosmology, an ecological-semiotic account of perception as a dynamic engagement, and a symbolic account of religious cognitions” (Wildman, 2011, p. 257). He admits that his reliability argument relies on those three components being present and without that, it may collapse (pp. 166-167). Wildman gives a detailed analysis of his criteria for cognitive reliability (pp. 152-156) but admits that those who experience RSEs are unlikely to insist on the rigour he demands. This is because, “people *need* answers to the reliability question. In particular, they need those

answers to *do important work* for them” (p. 152, his italics) as they make sense of their RSEs in terms of religious beliefs and attitudes to others. The interpretation by the experiencers is thus not as stringent in its requirements for reliability as Wildman’s criteria.

Of Wildman’s conditions stated above, for my thesis, the ecological-semiotic understanding of perception as a dynamic engagement will not be explored, as the focus is on the consequences of RSEs not on how they arise. The discussion of metaphor in the scholarly literature above addressed the issue of literalism in religion.

Cosmology is an important factor in interpretation of RSEs and their consequences, particularly in terms of attitudes to religion and spirituality. The naturalistic cosmology espoused by Wildman considers God as, “the Ground of Being, *Esse Ipsum*, God beyond God, *Nirguna Brahman*, or the *Dao* That cannot be Daoed” (Wildman, 2011, p. xiii). As Wildman indicates, this is an ancient view, expressed by mystics in major traditions and is a similar understanding to that of Paul Tillich (1963/1966, p.13) and John Hick (1999, pp. 88-91).

There are, of course, many religious believers who would in fact subscribe to a supernaturalist or supranaturalist understanding of God, possibly the majority of those involved in Christian worship. They would probably disagree with the designation of IE, preferring the adjectives religious or spiritual for their experience. On the other hand, convinced materialist atheists would reject this naturalistic cosmology as too religious. The naturalistic cosmology would, however, appeal to a great many people who have had RSEs but who do not

subscribe to any particular faith, in particular those who would describe themselves as spiritual but not religious.

Wildman goes on to say that this religious-naturalist framework can “affirm the value of RSEs ... even while exercising scepticism about the meanings people often attach to such experiences” (Wildman, 2011, p. xiii). Indeed, readers of accounts may disagree with the interpretations of experiencers, but in fact individuals will always interpret their own experiences in their own way, whatever anyone else may say. RSEs are powerful personal experiences, which are set in the context of an individual life and are very often simply treasured without interpretation. Accounts in the Archive show that RSEs often seem to come to people when they are in need and are received as answers to those needs. Correspondents may try to understand what happened and admit that they cannot make sense of the experience, but nonetheless value it. Some find that their interpretations vary over time, in accordance with their changing beliefs as is shown in the example analysed in Chapter 7. Further interpretation often does not occur at all. The fear of personal, deeply moving but puzzling experiences being examined by sceptics or even scholars, is sometimes the very reason that people do not share them.

Scholars of RSEs tend to be critical and attempt to evaluate RSEs objectively. There may be a danger that Wildman here is imposing his own theories on the experiences of others, even though he may consider that he has sound reasons for doing so. He advocates *caveat emptor* or buyer beware, regarding motivation in research, not only to the research undertaken, but often also to the conclusions arrived at and warns that “in this area there is a special

danger of unconscious distortion of data and biased interpretation” (Wildman, 2011, p. 11). In considering his own research too, this needs to be borne in mind. He sets out his own motivation as “inquiry, criticism, and practical humanism” (p. 77). Wildman expresses:

respect for people who explore RSEs because they want to break bad habits and forge good new habits through religious disciplines, achieve enlightenment through meditation, recover mental and physical health for themselves and others through shamanic interventions, or cleanse the doors of perception with entheogens so as to see the world as it truly is. ... I take refuge in the precise evidential requirements of the sciences and the disciplined interpretive practices of the humanities, making micro-moves and trying to build expert consensus. (Wildman, 2011, p. 11)

He admits that this timidity is in contrast to the adventurers of the spirit, many of whom actually attempt to trigger RSEs or reflect on their own experiences. While an honest assessment, this is nonetheless an admission of his own limitations. Wildman’s focus is on the interpretation as understood philosophically and scientifically, whereas the accounts in the Archive are descriptions of first-person experiences, many of which were spontaneous, where the value lies in the meaning for the individual. Wildman is concerned with drawing up a coherent analysis, rather than dipping a toe into the turbulent waters of the spirit, and he does not include the experiences of these adventurers of the spirit in his schema. The danger here is that expressed by Schlamm (1992, p. 547) in relation to Katz, that theoretical assessment which does not take actual reports

and analyses of experiencers into consideration, risks misunderstanding what is being investigated.

Indeed, this is evident in the book (Wildman, 2011) as there are only two examples of RSEs, both Wildman's own, which were "set pieces" or situations where a spiritual response would be expected and from which Wildman extrapolates different aspects of IEs. This puts him at some remove from my study of the RERC Archive with its enormous range of people, many of whom were caught unawares by their experience, although others have admitted that they were indeed searching for meaning. Most correspondents were prepared to be changed by their experience rather than interested in theorising from it.

Wildman's stated aim is to interpret RSEs in a way which, "is more culturally general and less theologically specific than James' or Hardy's interpretations, and nowhere near as theologically aggressive as interpretations such as those of Zaehner or [Huston] Smith" (Wildman, 2011, p. 76). Wildman disagrees with Smith's perennialist worldview (Wildman, 2011, p. xiv) but he does admit that:

Direct study of intense experiences across cultures, while rare, has occurred. The perennial philosophy's advocates (including Aldous Huxley 1945, Fritjof Schuon [1948] 1953, and Huston Smith 1992) are not merely speculating when they say that there is a common core of mystical experience, awareness, and belief across the world's religions. They are reporting on the experiences of those who have lived in more than one religion, including themselves – Smith spent a number of years in each of the world's major religions. ... the phenomenological testimony of the

perennialists adds significant weight to their claim that the capacity for intense experiences is culturally wide-spread. (Wildman, 2011, pp. 137-138)

This seems to contradict his own position, as he allows that the personal experiences of others, which lead to different conclusions from his own have merit, in this case the perennialist position, with which he disagrees. Might not the interpretations of those who have actually had direct experience be more valid than those of one who admits his own (possibly limited) theoretically based approach? Experiences within different religious traditions are not so rare these days; in addition to well-known mystics like Bede Griffiths (1982, 1983), Thich Nhat Hanh (1995) and Andrew Harvey (1996, 2000), many people explore a range of religious and spiritual traditions, especially through meditation. However, the establishment of IEs as found species-wide would be valid for perennialist as well as opposing interpretations.

Wildman aims to establish that RSEs are to be valued not for what they reveal about any supernatural beliefs or other spiritual worlds, but “because they open up to us the value-laden depths of this world” (Wildman, 2011, p. 264). This would appeal to many correspondents, and as above, particularly those who would consider themselves SBNR.

Fruits of IEs

Wildman considers a case study of a terrifying demonic experience to assess the effects of IEs, looking at various attempts to deal with and evaluate the experience from “intra-group discernment, inter-competitor comparison, and external assessment” (Wildman, 2011, p. 126). This may seem a strange choice, it

is most unusual when compared to the majority of accounts in Archive, which are benign. He then moves on to consider mental and physical health effects of IEs which are open to scientific evaluation, including meditation and NDEs but finds them “extremely difficult to assess” (p. 127). He mentions the acquisition of new beliefs and the gulf between the assessment of the experiencer and that of outside advisors. He also refers to the cumulative effects of IEs, particularly in relation to acquiring skills.

In fact, in the Archive many people offer self-assessment without reference to any group or outside opinion. They describe the effects of their experiences on them, how they felt, what changed and how that affected those around them. From those testimonies it is not difficult to glean just what the fruits were perceived to be by the experiencer. They ranged widely from lifting of depression or fear; giving up drugs or alcohol; finding a new direction in life and above all experiencing love – feeling loved and expressing love for others. Beneath the range of fruits, I detected a transformation from a focus on the self to a full, loving engagement with life and the world.

In relation to the consequences of RSEs and reliability, Wildman concludes, “Finally, I noted that even cognitively unreliable experiences can still foster authentic transformational engagement, which may be the most important consideration in evaluating the functional effects of RSEs” (Wildman, 2011, p. 257). In other words, despite his own strictures for reliability, the fact that experiencers put their faith in unreliable factors or simply do not analyse their experiences at all, perhaps makes scholarly reliability unimportant in relation to the fruits in their own lives, which are nonetheless valued.

Here, just what is understood as being cognitively unreliable would be open to discussion – whether in the eyes of the experiencer or evaluated as such by Wildman, with the necessary criteria met. As the focus in this instance is on the consequences, not the origin of the experiences, if people are jolted into reappraising their lives in a way which leads them to fulfilment or to love and compassion for others, then the experience has value in itself, whatever its provenance or interpretation. Ultimately, in the eyes of the experiencer, whether the experience is considered valid by anyone else is unimportant, as the message seems to be just for that person at that time.

In reading through the accounts in the Archive, it is sometimes questionable as to what actually happened to the correspondent and the focus on fruits enables me to avoid evaluating the actual experience or its interpretation, but to concentrate on the effects. The importance of the “value-laden qualities of RSEs” is stressed by Wildman, arguing for a more prominent place in the appraisal of RSEs for the effects on people’s moral judgements, social participation and understanding of themselves (p. 155). The fruits of experience will become ever more important:

the more the mechanisms of RSEs are understood, the more judgements of their meaning and value, their authenticity and reliability, depend on effects and the less such judgements depend on their putative causes. This is a case of “by your fruits you shall know them” – no matter how RSEs come to us, what they produce in our lives and in wider social contexts is what matters most. (Wildman, 2011, p. 242)

As IEs become accepted as part of human nature, rather than being considered unusual, “the meaning of those experiences will become increasingly tied to their consequences rather than to the sheer fact of their occurrence” (p. 248). This is a very important aspect of research into such experiences. Widening acceptance of them as being an integral part of human nature, making them more widely known outside religious or spiritual circles would lead to their normalisation. As Wildman suggests, this would have the effect of changing the focus to the fruits, enabling people to understand what humans can be in terms of their own full potential as well as how they might best respond to the needs of others.

Abraham Maslow’s peak-experiences

Alongside Wildman, I have chosen to consider another scholar, Abraham Maslow, a thinker familiar for his hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), whose well-known categorization of RSEs as peak-experiences (Maslow, 1964/2014) also enables a non-religious interpretation. It is possible to relate the RSEs cited at the beginning of the chapter to Maslow’s categorization as well as to IEs. Maslow is cited by Wildman in his appraisal of scholars whose categorization of aspects of RSEs can be subsumed into the wider category of IEs. This juxtaposition offers an opportunity to appreciate the similarities and differences of both and is an example of how Wildman’s claims regarding other scholars might be investigated.

Maslow stresses the difficulties of language when discussing RSEs, there being in his view, no alternative to religious language, and he admits that such experiences have, in the past been described in religious terms. He stresses that

this does not accurately reflect his analysis. His, like Wildman's is a naturalistic interpretation:

it is almost impossible to speak of the "spiritual life" ... without using the language of traditional religion. ... This makes an almost insoluble problem for the writer who is intent on demonstrating that the common base of all religions is human, natural, empirical, and that so-called spiritual values are also naturally derivable. ... I claim that it is not necessary to appeal to principles outside of nature and human nature in order to explain these experiences. (Maslow, 1964/2014, p. 23, Footnotes)

Maslow's view that, "Man has a higher and transcendent nature, and this is part of his essence, i.e., his biological nature as a member of the species which has evolved" (Maslow, 1964/2014, p. 15) is similar to Hardy's understanding of humans as spiritual beings. In addition to peak-experiences of unitive consciousness, Maslow reflects on high plateau experiences, which are considered more gentle and long-lasting states of consciousness and can be learned and maintained. Again, there is a similarity with Hardy's search for experiences of a constant awareness of the spiritual, not just seeking dramatic RSEs, and also with Wildman's ultimacy experiences, discrete and extended.

It is Maslow's assessment that religions rest upon the peak-experiences of the founders, which were ascribed to transcendent origins. The visions were then taken over by followers, rituals were organized, and the inspiration became institutionalised and moribund, a similar position to that of Schleiermacher (1799/1996). Similarly, according to Maslow there is no need for religious attribution for RSEs, as such experiences are to be considered part of human

nature and available to all, with no need for formal religious practice, as they are naturalistic (Maslow, 1964/2014, pp. 17, 70). This is in line with Wildman's assessment of ultimacy and intense experiences (Wildman, 2011, pp. 268-267).

Maslow separates people who are "serious" about values and ethics, in his terminology, the mystics, from those who just do religion one day a week - the legalists. While taking institutionalised religion to task for being anti-intellectual, arbitrary and authoritarian, he also berates science for its reductionism, lack of values and for ignoring the purpose of living, for throwing out the fundamental questions of life along with the answers given by religions and also for ignoring personal experience. He stresses that ultimate concerns remain of primary importance and should be given serious consideration by both science and religion. However, he concludes by stating that "leading theologians and sophisticated people in general, define their god, not as a person, but as a force, a principle, a gestalt-quality of the whole of Being ... the universe as 'organismic,' as having ... meaning" (Maslow, 1964/2014, p. 67). This is an attitude similar to that of Wildman and of many who sent accounts to the RERC. Indeed, although religious ritual seems to promote the concept of God as a person, which suits a good number of Christians, many who describe their RSEs have a different interpretation, which often leads them to reject formal religion.

Maslow does not focus on fruits but refers to the values derived from peak-experiences. He regrets the collapse of traditional values, which he considers as having led to general malaise and suggests that a core peak-experience, in essence the same in all the major religious traditions, leads to an understanding of human nature which, while excluding the supernatural, considers goodness,

altruism, virtue and love as natural “spiritual values”. This is an interpretation more in line with the thinking of many correspondents than the detailed analysis of Wildman.

Some scholars would take issue with Maslow’s view of there being one core peak-experience at the heart of all religious traditions, whereas others would defend the possibility of a transcendent reality variously experienced (Carmody, & Carmody, 1996; Hick, 1989). Still others might consider that the plateau experiences could and should be learned and supported through religious institutions and practice. Hardy initially expected to receive accounts of plateau-type experiences in response to his appeal but was overwhelmed with people reporting peak-experiences. Perhaps this was because a growing spiritual sense is easier to come to terms with, as it is often grounded in religious practice, whereas peak-experiences pose more of a problem for people to understand, particularly as many come out of the blue. I found both types in the Archive and took care to look for resulting changes, inner and outer. From expecting only a few people to report peak-experiences, Maslow was surprised to find that almost everyone in his investigations had such experiences. This eventually led him to investigate those he designated “non-peakers” as suppressing their experiences, possibly because of a previously-held materialist *Weltanschauung* (worldview).

According to Wildman, “Intense experiences are prominent in what psychologist Abraham Maslow called peak experiences, though not necessarily with the connotations of ineffability or ecstasy or transcendence that Maslow gave them, nor are they necessarily joyful or exciting, or even affectively positive” (Wildman, 2011, p. 122). In fact, in the preface to a later edition, Maslow clarified

that he “would now add to the peak experience material a greater consideration, not only of nadir-experiences, ... but also of the ‘plateau experience’ ... [which] has a noetic and cognitive element” (Maslow, 1964/2014, p. 13) and which can be learned. In my research I have found that RSEs do frequently reflect ineffability, ecstasy or transcendence and are almost always positive in outcome.

Both Maslow and Wildman recognise that experiences previously labelled religious can be understood as naturalistic, allowing them to be accepted as universal occurrences, unrelated to religious traditions. Although the basis of natural theology excludes a purely materialist interpretation, it does include assessments of such experiences as spiritual, or spiritual but not religious (SBNR) and even those who would describe themselves as neither religious nor spiritual would be able to come to terms with such experiences if they were shown to be natural. If the sceptical, materialist worldview prevails, it is possible that people will no longer interpret these experiences as religious or even spiritual, yet being inherently natural, such experiences will still occur and will be felt and understood as intense – emotionally and in terms of meaning for the experiencer. They will still change lives.

Self-transcendent experiences

It appears that in later life Maslow amended the pinnacle of his motivational hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) from self-actualisation to self-transcendence (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). This was linked to his research into peak-experiences as leading to an awareness he named “cognition of being (B-cognition) that occurs in peak-experiences ... [which] can be relatively ego-transcending, self-forgetful, egoless, unselfish.” (Maslow, 1964/2014, pp. 71-72).

Koltko-Rivera amasses evidence from Maslow's later work to show the primacy of self-transcendence, often a result of peak-experiences, where individuals "come to identify with something greater than the purely individual self, often engaging in service to others" (Koltko-Rivera, 2006, p. 306). This points to the link between RSEs and altruism which I investigate in this thesis. However, as well as drawing attention to the positive aspects of self-transcendence, producing saints, Koltko-Rivera also refers to the negative side of such self-transcendence, where an individual is subsumed into a greater cause as is evident in religious terrorism.

David Yaden studies self-transcendent experiences (STEs) where:

the subjective sense of one's self as an isolated entity can temporarily fade into an experience of unity with other people or one's surroundings, involving the dissolution of boundaries between the sense of self and "other." ... transient mental states of decreased self-salience and increased feelings of connectedness. (Yaden, Haidt, Hood, Vago, Newberg, 2021, p. 143)

This reflects the feelings of unity and connectedness recorded in my spreadsheets. The article draws attention to the variable intensity of such experiences; a spectrum from routine experiences of absorption in activities to intense mystical experiences while remaining "neutral regarding secular or spiritual connotations" (p. 2). The title *The varieties of self-transcendent experience* is a reference to James (1902/2002) and the view is taken that James was "right regarding the positive psychological potential of STEs" (p. 2). Two aspects of STEs are highlighted in the paper, on the one hand that of a dissolution of the bodily sense of self and reduced self-salience, the annihilation component;

on the other, a relational sense of connectedness, even oneness with something beyond the self, the relational component. This elucidates the sense of unity and connectedness which I recorded. Although prosocial attitudes are considered as a possible fruit of STEs, they are not part of the topic of the paper; however, mystical experiences are seen as particularly intense STEs and “appear capable of generating positive effects on well-being and altruistic behavior that can last for many months” (p. 154).

Elsewhere, in another reference to James (1902/2002) who prioritised fruits over roots, Yaden was involved in an empirical study “Of roots and fruits: comparing psychedelic and nonpsychedelic mystical experiences” (Yaden, et al., 2016). There he explores whether RSEs triggered by psychedelic drugs are different in psychological impact from experiences triggered by other means. The results of his study indicated that experiences triggered through psychedelics can be at least as fruitful, possibly even more so than those derived by other means.

Conclusion

Categorising RSEs is a problem, not only for scholars, but also for experiencers, who are often unsure what to make of them, as examples from the RERC Archive showed. There are many terms for such experiences, usually referring to different aspects of RSEs, with their mystical, religious and spiritual connotations. Wildman’s category of IEs is a designation particularly suitable for non-religious people; and returning to the RERC examples given at the beginning of the chapter, it is evident that all could be considered IEs according to his definition. The category may be helpful, not only in offering a single all-embracing label, but also in enabling people to accept such experiences as normal,

rather than as puzzling anomalies. However, although Wildman's detailed analysis of IEs will be of interest to scholars, it will be less meaningful for experiencers, who may or may not be aware of the many different theoretical approaches to their experiences, which they simply accept as meaningful and lifechanging. As well as spiritual and non-religious interpretations, IEs can also accommodate religious interpretations, although to comply with Wildman's criteria, certain strictures are required.

A comparison of the views of Wildman and Abraham Maslow led to an appreciation of their similarities and differences. Both offer comprehensive categories of interpretation of RSEs for those of a religious and spiritual outlook but more importantly, both view such experiences as naturalistic, and thus include experiencers of no religious or spiritual views. Maslow offered peak-experiences as a naturalist interpretation of RSEs but later saw the need to widen the category to include nadir and plateau experiences, whereas IEs would seem to be a more comprehensive category. However, Maslow does consider loss of ego as a consequence of the experiences and is in general more interested in the effects of the experiences than is Wildman, whose focus is on detailed analysis of the experiences. Self-transcendent experiences (STEs) also focus on the loss of self-salience in favour of an outward-looking attitude of connection with others and with the environment; which is relevant to my hypothesis.

IEs encompass a wide range of experiences and along with neurological evidence indicate species-wide applicability. An understanding of IEs as natural and a recognition of their ability to enhance human life, might well allow an important development within the human species to take place. More positive

attitudes to oneself and others, despite an increasingly secular society might be a welcome fruit of IEs. Such attitudes will be explored in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

PREVAILING ATTITUDES TOWARDS SELF AND OTHERS

Summary

The predominant culture

Atheism and RSEs

Marx, Durkheim and Freud

A new paradigm

Self-centredness

Selflessness

Altruism, empathy, compassion and love

Altruism and religion

Pitirim Sorokin

Matthieu Ricard

C. Daniel Batson

Stephen Post

Conclusion

Summary

This chapter considers the environment in which RSEs are either accepted or rejected, the soil on which the seeds fall, in terms of prevailing attitudes to religion and spirituality in society and scholarship. The fruits of RSEs cannot be considered in isolation from the worldviews which influence the experiencers. An account of the predominant, materialist culture, which frequently seems inimical towards religion and RSEs, is given, followed by an exposition of atheism, which also deters acceptance of RSEs. Various refutations of those views are given, with an indication of a changing paradigm, more open to spirituality.

Attitudes to the self and others are explored. The assumption that humans are by nature selfish, which tends to dominate contemporary culture is followed by an appraisal of the opposite view, that of selflessness, with a consideration of the terms, altruism, empathy, compassion and love in the religious and scholarly literature. The chapter concludes with a particular focus on Pitirim Sorokin, Matthieu Ricard, C. Daniel Batson and Stephen Post as scholars particularly concerned with those attributes.

The predominant culture

Materialism, the assumption that reality is purely physical, even the mind, dominates not only scientific research, but also popular culture (Hardy, 1965, pp. 16-17; Hardy, 1966/1978, pp. 18-19; Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 9; Hay, 1990, pp. 59-60; Sorokin, 1954/2002, p. 98; Taylor, 2018, p. 2). The consequences are that it is assumed that science has answered, or will ultimately answer, the big questions of life and death. A related assumption is that consciousness is produced by the brain, which will die, and we will certainly not survive death (Russell, 1957/1996,

pp. 70-71; Sheldrake, 2012, p. 6-8). Evolution is considered purposeless and God merely an idea in the human mind; the spiritual is dismissed as non-existent. This is not an environment conducive to the acceptance of RSEs by those who experience them or those who study them. This attitude also encourages a focus on the self, material acquisition and worldly success.

The view that “there are no constituents of reality apart from those studied by the physical sciences” (Cottingham, 2014, p. 2) can be traced back to Kant (1934/1960), who maintained that anything lying outside the purview of our five senses will forever remain unknown. Kant declared the humans can only know the phenomenal world around us, but that did not entail his considering such phenomena to be the whole of reality. “Whatever lies behind the world we inhabit, the noumenon, of that, nothing can be known” (Kant, 1934/1960, p. xxxix). Yet that did not stop him from writing at length about religion, God and our innate moral sense.

Materialism is often accepted without further thought, the assumption being that religion is a throwback to earlier, naïve civilisations, an explanation for the existence and workings of the world (Ward, 2004, p. 1). As science became more dominant, it was assumed that religion would simply die out (Hardy, 1966/1978, pp. 12-14; Newberg, d’Aquili, & Rause, 2001/2002, p. 128; McGrath, 2007, p. vii; Sheldrake, 2012, p. 20). Secularization was assumed but not unchallenged (Berger, 1999) and polls in the late 1970s defied such predictions, as percentages of people admitting to RSEs were found to be significant (Hardy 1979/2006; Batson, & Ventis, 1982, p. 3; Hay, 1990; Newberg, d’Aquili, & Rause, 2001/2002, p. 107).

David Hay interviewed a hundred postgraduate students at Nottingham University and was surprised to find that 65% answered the Hardy Question in the affirmative (Hay, 1990, pp. 54-55). This was the beginning of Hay's research, which eventually led to his becoming a Director of the RERC. He noted people's reticence in sharing their RSEs unless convinced of the genuine nature of the enquiry, due to reluctance to speak of such intimate matters, and fears of being thought stupid or even insane (Hay, 1990, p. 58).

Religion is too often seen as plugging the gaps of understanding how the world works, a charge of which John V. Taylor absolved Hardy, when considering his Gifford Lectures (Taylor, 1972/2004, p. 66). Many people simply dismiss religion as irrelevant and outdated. As religion itself cannot be considered completely beneficial, people have no difficulty in citing its adverse effects and even the parable of the Good Samaritan indicates a lack of compassion in the pious (Batson, & Ventis, 1982, pp. 254-255). Instances showing the negative side of religion reinforce atheist convictions and also pose problems for believers. Even Hardy admitted, "In dealing with the spiritual nature of man ... his religious rituals and practices ... I feel I should not fail to remind the reader that at times these activities have led man to commit the most appalling atrocities" (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 130).

Atheism and RSEs

Refutation of the validity of RSEs is often based on an atheist view, much of which is due to a scientific rebuttal of creation as recounted in the Bible in favour of the theory of evolution; Hardy posed the question, "Is atheism justified by the findings of evolutionary science?" (Hardy, 1965, p. 16). His research

indicated the reality of human spiritual awareness in opposition to the dominant materialist worldview and his aim was to show that it is possible to integrate evolution theory and human spirituality.

Illustrating the hostile attitude to religion is the fact that atheism used to be declared while maintaining respect for the views of believers, but in recent times certain atheists have gone on the attack, describing themselves as “Brights” and thus presumably disparaging believers as “Dims” (Ward, 2011, p. 6). This attitude seems to have prevailed, and today, it is frequently assumed that intelligent people will be atheists. The New Atheists: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, whose recorded conversation in 2007 saw them dubbed the Four Horsemen (Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, & Hitchens, 2019) in that work they do admit to the value of the sacred, as long as it is not linked to what they consider to be irrational religious beliefs. They offer their views on religion (Dawkins, 2006/2007; Dennett, 2006; Harris, 2014; Hitchens, 2007, 2013) and stress that they value religious art, music and poetry, accepting them all but not the underlying beliefs. It might be argued that this is hardly rational, as without the underlying beliefs, few of those beautiful artefacts would have been created in the first place. As Hardy wrote of the interior of an English country church:

here is something fashioned with real love and reverence; elements of superstition there may well be, but in spite of this, surely here is something created not just by an ignorant craving for magic, but by something of profound depth. (Hardy, 1965, p. 274)

Despite their dogmatic stance, the new atheists do admit to valuing the numinous (Dawkins et al, 2019) and what I would designate as spirituality, and it

would be interesting to hear their views on Hardy's findings. Dennett touches on the fruits of a spiritual experience as introducing selflessness, saying, "It's the best moment in your life, and it's the moment when you forget yourself and become better than you ever thought you could be" (Dawkins et al., 2019, p. 51). That this is an approach which is not infrequently found in the Archive, and thus no doubt also in the population as a whole, is a fact of which the New Atheists may perhaps be unaware.

The need for a sense of community and for what is good in religion, has been addressed by the well-known atheist, Alain de Botton (2012) as he attempts to take the benefits of religion – community spirit, kindness and the wisdom inherent in religious traditions – and to appropriate those attributes for atheists. Non-religious gatherings such as the Sunday Assembly are for people, who feel the need to get together in the tradition of religions, but without signing up for the supernatural beliefs (Strhan, 2017, p. 143; Sheldrake, 2017, p. 19).

Although religion and atheism have been assumed to be at odds, in 2009 a conference brought together participants from a wide range of religions and atheist Humanists, with the contributions published as *Religion and atheism: Beyond the divide* (Carroll, & Norman, 2017). In a dialogue between atheist, philosopher, physician, neuroscientist and prolific author, Raymond Tallis and Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, Tallis admits the importance of religious experience. He suggests that he himself may be an atheist because he simply hasn't had any such experience, rather than that he has very good arguments against the existence of God (Carroll, & Norman, 2017, p. 18). As a philosopher, Tallis might be challenged by Swinburne's Principle of Testimony

(Swinburne, 1979/2004, p. 322) or perhaps he would agree with William James, who did not consider first-hand reports of religious experience to be necessarily convincing for others (Alston, 1991/1993, pp. 281-284).

Marx, Durkheim and Freud

Throughout the ages, religious beliefs and practices have been contrasted to the views of atheists and agnostics and various arguments have been put forward to support the atheist point of view. The three classic scholars usually cited in this regard are Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud. The views of all three are still influential in studies of religion and to some extent within society and can be tested (Hay, 1994). Here a very brief indication of research contradicting their views is given.

Marx considered religion to be the “opium of the people”, their comfort in the face of class oppression (Hay, 1994, pp. 3-5) but when social class was tested in relation to RSEs, the opposite was found to be the case, with increased positive responses to the Hardy Question from people further up the social scale (Hay, 1994, p. 8). Marx did not discuss spirituality or religious experience, presumably having taken an atheist view for granted (p. 4).

Durkheim explored the origins and principal features of religion and recognised that religious experiences are to be valued for their consequences “a tree is known by its fruits” (Durkheim, 1915/2012, p. 417). Hay refers to Durkheim considering religious experience to be “effervescence” generated in gatherings of the faithful, which was tested, but between 61% and 76% of those surveyed recorded that the experience took place in solitude (Hay, 1994, pp. 8-9). Hardy disagreed with Durkheim’s view of religious experience being generated

by communal activity, quoting A.N. Whitehead, who maintained that religion is beyond collective enthusiasms, and is found in solitariness (Hardy, 1975/1977, p. 79). Hardy also quoted Durkheim's view that, "The believer who has communicated with his god ... is *stronger*. He feels within him more force, either to endure the trials of existence or to conquer them." (Durkheim, 1915/2012, p. 416; Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 6). This is an aspect I shall consider as among the fruits of experience in terms of how people feel supported in doing what they perceive to be in accordance with the guidance they have received.

Freud considered religion illusory as opposed to the evident advances of science (Freud, 1927/1964). Understanding the need for religious beliefs to offer comfort in the face of life's difficulties and from the fear of death, Freud drew a parallel with a child's need for protection by the father, and theorised that the father figure was later translated into God the Father, and on maturity internalised as the super-ego. Although Freud admitted that religious people seemed less neurotic, he maintained that this was nonetheless merely due to a comforting illusion. Freud's focus on religion and mental health has led to much research in this connection (Batson, & Ventis, 1982, pp. 211-251; Schmidt, & Leonardi, 2020). Several surveys have indicated that religion has a positive effect, and that religious experience was linked to psychological well-being (Hay, 1982; Hay, 1990, p. 57; Hay, 1994, pp. 9-10; Newberg, d'Aquili, & Rause, 2001/2002, p. 108, pp. 129-131; Francis, & Kaldor, 2002). The positive effects of RSEs and IEs on the experiencers and then on those around them, is what I will attempt to show from the Archive data.

A new paradigm

Although accepted by many as proven, the materialist view that science will answer all existential questions is itself not a fact, but a belief. Rupert Sheldrake challenges ten core beliefs he maintains are taken for granted by most scientists and demonstrates that the assumptions on which contemporary science is based, namely that there is no non-material reality, that evolution is purposeless and God merely a human construct are just that – assumptions (Sheldrake, 2012, pp. 6-8).

Challenging the views of materialism, atheism and Dawkins in particular, is Alister McGrath, a former atheist scientist, now a Christian theologian. He has linked the rise of atheism to modernity and its decline to postmodern views, as confident certainties have given way to a turn away from metanarratives (McGrath, 2004). As a historian of science, McGrath denies that science and religion are inevitably at war and suggests that since the scientific certainties of the twentieth century have been superseded and the limits of the scientific method understood, there are moves for the two approaches to work in harmony in exploring reality. McGrath exposes Dawkins as ignorant of theology (McGrath, 2005, p. 99) and denies that science has disproved God, maintaining that nature can be interpreted in a theistic or atheistic way (McGrath, 2007, p. 13), a view also held by Hick (1999, pp. 15-17).

Keith Ward has also debated and disagreed with Dawkins (Ward, 2011). While appreciating his scientific work, Ward maintains that this has no bearing on Dawkins' religious claims and that his views on philosophy ignore its history and diversity, suggesting that Dawkins selects naïve religious caricatures to ridicule

rather than engaging in serious discussion (Ward, 1996/1998c, pp. 11-12). Ward maintains that for science to succeed, the universe must be intelligible, and that evolution operates by divine providence rather than blind chance. Philosophers of religion have explored how science and religion can be reconciled (Polkinghorne, 1988/1989, 1998; Ward, 1996/1998, 1998/1999; Peacocke, 2001).

Whereas Dawkins dismisses religious experiences as illusions, or delusions (Dawkins, 2006/2007, pp. 112-117), Ward alludes to the “experience of a being of transcendent power which is life-enhancing and value-transforming” and he is minded to trust “the testimony of at least some of those who claim such experience” (Ward, 1996/1998c, p. 204).

Although materialism remains the dominant paradigm, in recent years, there have been moves towards a post-materialist view of life, which would be significant for the acceptance of RSEs and IEs:

Post-materialism holds that matter is not the primary reality of the universe ... Post-materialism holds that there is something more fundamental than matter, which might be variously termed mind, consciousness or spirit. (Taylor, 2018, pp. 2-3)

It may be said that Hardy and his research pointed to this change, “The spiritual nature of man is, I believe, being shown to be a reality. We now need a new biological philosophy which will recognize both this and the need to study consciousness as a fundamental attribute of life” (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 142). A rapprochement between science and spirituality has in fact been brought about by quantum physics. Polkinghorne, who rejects reductionism, stressing the importance of both mind and matter, asserts that “Newtonian physics is not as

robust as two and a half centuries of its exploitation had suggested” (Polkinghorne, 1998, p. 51), citing quantum theory as challenging such an understanding of the world. That change was afoot at the time was also maintained by David Lorimer (1998) and in the same publication Fritjof Capra links physics and ecology to mystical experience:

Twentieth century physics has shown the limitations of the Newtonian world view in the most dramatic way. It has transcended the mechanistic and reductionist conception of the Universe to adopt the holistic and ecological view, similar to the views of the mystics of all ages and traditions. (Capra, 1998, p. 51)

Research into death and dying also challenges materialist assumptions (Badham, & Ballard, 1996; Badham, 2013). NDEs and OBEs, where conscious awareness seems to detach from the body, lend support to the existence of consciousness beyond the brain and to religious beliefs in an after-life (Moody, 1976; Kübler-Ross, 1991; Fenwick, & Fenwick, 1995; Badham, 1997, 2005, 2013; van Lommel et al., 2001; van Lommel, 2010; Fox, 2003; Alexander, 2012/2013; Parti, 2016; Shushan, 2018; Firth, & Wilson, 2019). Studies of the afterlife compile evidence from primitives to neurologists (Lorimer, 1984) and from parapsychology (Fontana, 2006).

Since he wrote an account of his extraordinary NDE, Eben Alexander has received correspondence from many people sharing their own experiences with him. Alexander refers to the similarity with Hardy’s research into RSEs and he quotes a number of accounts collected by Hardy (Alexander, 2014, pp. 67-87). After-death communication is also being explored as an indication of survival and

of a new understanding of consciousness (Moody, 1993/1996; Heathcote-James, 2003; Dolley, & Burton, 2020). In my research I found frequent references to end-of-life experiences (ELEs), NDEs and ADCs, and therefore added “Sense of assurance of survival of death” to the fruits of experiences recorded on my spreadsheets.

Hardy, who taught Dawkins zoology at Oxford, while applauding the main thrust of *The selfish gene* (Dawkins, 1976/2016), and the admission that the evolution of subjective consciousness remains a profound mystery, enquires whether, “what we call God may be as real, and as mysterious, as is the nature of consciousness?” (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 14). As regards the nature of reality, dipolar monism is another theory under consideration, “there is one kind of stuff and it involves both mental and material aspects” (Wildman, 2011, p. 36). Using similar terminology, Polkinghorne considers dual-aspect monism, with “the mental and the material poles of being, conceived as complementary phases of a single reality” (Polkinghorne, 1998, p.125) and Kripal also writes of dual-aspect monism, which traces both mental and material aspects back to a shared substratum or shared superreality (Kripal, 2019, p. 118).

RSEs, and mystical experiences in particular, have always contradicted materialist claims to the limits of reality, and experiencers have ignored such views, although the climate of scepticism has often prevented them from sharing what happened to them. I will consider whether these changing worldviews have affected how people understand and share their RSEs and whether the fruits of experience now find a more sympathetic environment in which seeds may be

spread as I explore the effect of religious and spiritual beliefs, practice and community on the RSEs in Chapter 8.

Self-centredness

The assumption that self-centredness is innate can to some extent be traced back to the atheist views explored above, which have taken root more generally in today's individualist society (Grant, 2001, p. 3; King, 2008/2009, p. 19). The interpretation of evolution as indicating survival of the fittest is applied to humans (Dawkins, 1976/2016), leading to materialism and a focus on this life, with self-interest and worldly prosperity as the goal (Hay, 1998/2006, p. 239). Although he does not focus on humans, Dawkins explains evolution in terms of genetics, showing that successful genes are selfish, in terms of replication, which entails that, "Much as we might wish to believe otherwise, universal love and the welfare of the species as a whole are concepts that simply do not make evolutionary sense" (Dawkins, 1976/2016, p. 3). According to Dawkins, in the struggle for survival amid limited resources, selfishness pays. He does, however, stress that unlike any other species, humans can outwit their selfish genes and suggests, "Let us try to *teach* generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish" (Dawkins, 1976/2016, p. 4, his italics).

That "Selfishness is at the heart of most of the problems we face today: the growing gap between rich and poor, the attitude of 'everybody out for himself', which is only increasing" (Ricard, 2013/2018, p. 9) is the attitude which seems to have pervaded life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It has been taken as a given, for example by Batson (2019, p. 14) before he set out to discover whether this is in fact the case.

An early proponent of selfishness was Friedrich Nietzsche, who proclaimed the death of God and the rise of the *Übermensch*, translated as the overman or superman, stating that “egoism belongs to the essence of a noble soul” (Nietzsche, 1886/1967, p. 240). Individualism and even selfishness are also advocated by Ayn Rand, who defines selfishness as “*concern with one’s own interests*” (Rand, 1961/1964, p. vii, her italics). In her philosophy of objectivism, she explains that this involves no moral evaluation but is rational, simply a matter of survival. Although no longer in vogue, her legacy is evident in contemporary life, where individualism and consumerism are the norm, particularly in the USA, where former President Trump admitted to his admiration of Rand’s heroes. In Rand’s view, altruism shows moral weakness and service to others is seen as self-sacrifice. Mysticism is dismissed as dealing with the supernatural, concerned with the next life and therefore death, and of no use to man (she uses “man” throughout her writings), whose purpose is life. For Rand, human relationships should be conducted on the basis of trade, giving value for value. Helping those one loves is not altruism but is a form of selfishness, as it is conducive to one’s own happiness. Everything is viewed from the point of view of value to the individual self and according to C. Daniel Batson, “the majority view among post-Renaissance philosophers ... is that we humans are purely egoistic. Everything we do, no matter how good or noble, is motivated by self-interest.” (Batson, 2019, p. 14).

Stephen Post sums up the two approaches, explaining that ethical theories begin from a position of “*psychological altruism or psychological egoism*” (Post, 2014, p. 179, his italics). The “altruism paradox” is the assumption is that humans

act in self-interest, seeing selfish motives or subtle self-benefits behind apparent acts of altruism, in contrast to “the empathy-altruism hypothesis” of prosocial behaviour (Fultz, & Schafer, 2019). I formulated my third research question in accordance with the current assumption that a change from a natural state of self-interest was necessary for altruism (Grant, 2001, pp. 225-226).

Selflessness

Selflessness will be considered in more depth as the concepts of altruism, empathy, love and compassion are explored below. It is interesting to note that despite the theory of evolution being assumed to support selfishness and survival of the fittest, when conceiving his theory, instances of altruism posed a problem for Charles Darwin, constituting, “one special difficulty, which at first appeared to me insuperable, and actually fatal to the whole theory” (Darwin, 1859/1906, p. 217). It is said that this was one of the reasons he delayed publication. His problem concerned sterile worker bees and ants reappearing throughout the generations, being replaced from within the community. Although their behaviour could be termed altruistic, as benefitting the community, this could be ascribed to kin or group altruism, differing from the motivational altruism under consideration here.

As to the religious side of humanity, Darwin writes of religious devotion, “love, complete submission to an exalted and mysterious superior, a strong sense of dependence, fear, reverence, gratitude, hope for the future and perhaps other elements” (Darwin, 1874/1990, p. 80), which is reminiscent of Schleiermacher and Otto. According to Darwin, it is the moral sense which distinguishes humans from other animals, leading to universal recognition of the Golden Rule. Darwin

refers to sympathy in humans rather than altruism and concludes by referring to human “sympathy which feels for the most debased, ... benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature” (Darwin, 1874/1990, p. 542). Although it is often assumed that Darwin simply stated that evolution was motivated by survival of the fittest, a closer reading reveals a more complex response, an awareness in humans of the suffering of others. This nuanced reading is more helpful to my exploration of RSEs and of course, can be considered to be species-wide, which constitutes a link to Wildman’s category of IEs.

The deleterious effect of a selfish attitude is highlighted by Immanuel Kant, who declares that although humans have the predisposition toward good, they have free will, and are thus morally responsible for their choice of good or evil behaviour. He uses the metaphor of fruit, declaring that although no bad tree can bring forth good fruit, yet an originally good tree did bring forth evil fruit, as illustrated in the biblical tale of the fall. According to Kant, we continue to be aware of what we ought to be, “a seed of goodness still remains in its entire purity, incapable of being extirpated or corrupted; and this seed cannot be self-love, which, when taken as the principle of all our maxims, is the very source of evil” (Kant, 1934/1960, p. 41). However, for a person to become more than merely legally good, simply following the law, but “*morally* a good man, (pleasing to God) ... this must be affected through a *revolution* in the man’s disposition ... He can become a new man only by a kind of rebirth, as it were a new creation (John III, 5 ...) and a change of heart” (Kant, 1934/1960, p. 43). This is the inner transformation which I sought in RSEs.

The agnostic philosopher, Bertrand Russell, wrote with penetrating clarity about the essence of religion. He advocated rejection of religious dogma while retaining the deeper spiritual response to life and links this to selflessness:

It is the quality of infinity that makes religion, the selfless, untrammelled life in the whole which frees men from the prison house of eager wishes and little thoughts. This liberation from the prison is given by religion, but only by a religion without fettering dogmas. (Russell, 1961/2009, p. 545)

Russell saw humans as a mix of God and brute, of infinite and finite, with the universal, infinite side opposed by the finite, self-centred outlook. For Russell, the essence of religion entails the subordination of our finite nature to the infinite. The life of wisdom is one which seeks “to know all, to love all, to serve all” (Russell, 1961/2009, p. 555). He defined altruism as benevolence, “the desire for another person’s welfare” (Russell, 1957/1996, p. 49).

RSEs in childhood, before concepts are learned or analysis possible, remain with people throughout life and encourage a focus on the well-being of others. Lorelei Farmer concludes her qualitative study on religious experience in childhood, where she addresses the research of Hardy and Robinson, by reporting that:

One of the most remarkable aspects of the results of this study is the fact that all of these people describe slowly coming to understand, in later life, that the end of this process is the increased understanding and compassion for others that it brings about for themselves. This understanding was revealed to them as a result of their own willingness to be faithful to the

truths that they perceived in early transcendent experiences. (Farmer, 1992, p. 268)

Altruism, empathy, compassion and love

The terms altruism, empathy, compassion and love are not easy to differentiate; myriad definitions exist for them all and as concepts they are interrelated and are found within and outside of religious contexts. The definitions and approaches of various scholars considered below will be helpful for gaining a deeper understanding.

The term altruism was coined by Auguste Comte, the founder of positivism, as *altruisme* in French in about 1850 from the Latin *alter* meaning other and suggested by a French legal expression *le bien d'autrui*, meaning the good of others (Post, 2014, p. 179). His definition was “the elimination of selfish desire and of egocentrism, as well as leading to a life devoted to the well-being of others” (Ricard, 2013/2018, p. 15).

In his work first published in translation into English in 1865, Comte explains his system of positivism, concerned with “the three kinds of phenomena of which our life consists: Thoughts, Feelings, and Actions” (Comte, 1865, p. 4). His is a comprehensive worldview and guide to living, “Love, then, is our principle; Order our basis; and Progress our end” (Comte, 1865, p. 107). Writing in the wake of the French Revolution of 1789, Comte assumes that Catholicism has had its day and that a new religion such as positivism will replace it, “Placing our highest happiness in universal Love, we live, as far as it is possible, for others” (Comte, 1865, p. 134, his upper case). Comte stressed the distance between altruism and religious concepts such as mercy and charity although

ultimately unable to exclude love despite its link to religion. Although this utopia is yet to emerge, my research seeks this aspiration as a fruit of RSEs. However, the resilience of institutional religion is also evident, as despite accusations of corruption then and now, the Catholic Church survives.

A succinct definition of altruism is given by Stephen Post as “motivationally other-regarding action” (Post, 2014, p. 179). From an evolutionary perspective, altruism has been analysed as action which benefits kin primarily, then non-kin and social bonds of friendship then further afield as groups and people dying for the sake of a cause, for example in battle. Critics have suggested that altruism is in fact motivated by indirect gain to the altruist, rather than being an action motivated solely by love, that the approval of others is a motivating factor. However, studies have shown that altruism is a motivation even when there is no prospect of the action being witnessed by the person in need or other observers (Fultz, Batson, Fortenbach, McCarthy, & Varney, 1986).

Altruism is a response to fellow humans. During World War II, people risked their lives to rescue Jews, because they felt for them as fellow human beings, whereas Nazis in charge of extermination camps were instructed to consider Jews as animals or vermin to enable them to deal with them without human empathy. This seems to substantiate Nelson Mandela’s claim, reported by Ricard, that humans are predisposed to love and have to be taught to hate (Ricard, 2013/2018, p. 147). Ricard also quotes Martin Luther King, “Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness” (p. 146).

In an article reporting a multiple case study of consciousness transformation in compassion and altruism, compassion was defined as, “a recognition of another’s suffering, a feeling of sorrow or concern for that suffering, and a desire and intention to end that suffering” whereas altruism includes a behavioural emphasis, “action intended to benefit or to ease the suffering of another, even when that action causes no benefit to, and may require sacrifice from, the one acting” (Vieten, Amorok, & Schlitz, 2006, p. 920). Definitions of altruism vary as to whether or not action is required or whether intention is sufficient. Perhaps an underlying predisposition to altruism, which when called upon would result in action would cover all eventualities.

Compassion is an attitude of love towards others, especially if they are in distress and Tenzin Gyatso, H. H. Dalai Lama says that “the whole purpose of religion is to facilitate love and compassion” (Gyatso, 2008, p. 84). He has published a handbook on how to be compassionate, with practical exercises for creating inner peace and a happier world, offering teachings on spiritual experience to his readers, as he recognises the need in today’s society (Dalai Lama, 2011).

Empathy is a translation of the German *Einfühlung*, meaning entering into an affective perception of the feelings of another person or a cognitive imagination of their situation (Ricard, 2013/2018, pp. 39-40). This may involve joy or suffering and in the latter case, may lead to altruism as we feel the need to help. Sympathy is similar but refers to sorrow and situations where we feel compassion for the suffering of another (pp. 41-42).

An interesting comparison between empathy and compassion was found in neuroscientific experiments, where studies using fMRI scans were undertaken by Tania Singer in 2007. One of the subjects of experiments focusing on meditation on empathy was Matthieu Ricard. He in fact meditated on unconditional compassion towards all sentient beings and his results were different from those of people meditating on the suffering of another. Instead of showing negative emotions and distress linked to an empathic response to suffering, Ricard's brain showed activity in areas associated with positive emotions and maternal love.

Love is defined in the Bible by Saint Paul, "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful" (NRSV, 1995, Corinthians 13:4 -5). He offers guidance for Christians, "Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts" (Corinthians 14:1).

Love has been defined by Post as "when the happiness, security, and well-being of another feels as meaningful and real to us as our own, or perhaps more so, we love that person" (Post, 2019, p. 168). Inspired by the vision of John Templeton, Post sees Unlimited Love as ultimate reality, as God's love for us all (Post, 2003, pp. 2, 11), thus the more open we are to the working of the divine in us, the more that love can shine through, which is reminiscent of the surrender referred to above. Ricard quotes Post as combining love and altruism in his definition of altruistic love as "unselfish delight in the well-being of others, and engagement in acts of care and service on their behalf." (Post in Ricard, 2013/2018, p. 15). This encapsulates what I am investigating, altruism as attitude

and action, the inner feeling and when required the outward expression of love and care for others.

Love, although often considered beyond words, has been analysed by the psychologist Barbara Fredrickson as positive resonance between two or several people; she explains that love is manifest “when three events occur simultaneously: the *sharing* of one or several positive emotions, a *synchrony* between behaviour and physiological reactions of two people, and the *intention* to contribute to the other’s well-being, an intention that engenders mutual care” (Ricard, 2013/2018, p.66). She states that this love inevitably vanishes but is ever renewable. This view may seem an over-analytical definition of an almost ineffable connection and Fredrickson’s definition does not sit well with maternal love, which is hardly one of mutual care.

In fact, love would seem beyond such analysis and may be beyond definition altogether, as indicated by Tillich, also quoted by Sorokin, “I have given no definition of love. This is impossible, because there is no higher principle by which it can be defined. It is life itself in its actual unity” (Tillich, 1963/1966, pp. 94-95; Sorokin, 1954/2002, p. 3). Tillich considers the principle of love, *agape*, as the basis of Christian ethics, explaining that love is eternal, reinterpreted in each changing historical age (Tillich, 1963/1966, pp. 88-95). The concepts of altruism, empathy, compassion and love are intertwined, but together offer an insight into what I am searching for in my hypothesis.

Altruism and religion

This section focuses on religion and altruism with a consideration of various scholars and inspirational religious figures in Christianity and other

religious traditions. It is followed by a deeper exploration of four significant thinkers. The connection between religion and altruism may seem to be self-evident, as love and compassion are central to most religious traditions and evidence of altruism is reflected in the writings and lives of inspirational figures – saints, mystics and the devout. In religious contexts, the term love is more frequently used than altruism, but the two are inextricably linked.

The point is sometimes made that theologians may be reluctant to engage with the concept of altruism as it is a secular term, coined by Comte within the scientific positivist assumption that science would eventually replace religion (Grant, 2001, p. 54; Post, 2014, p. 182). Colin Grant maintains that altruism only makes sense in a society where it is no longer taken for granted that we are all part of one community, but are in competition (Grant, 2001, p. 88). A new paradigm of interconnectedness might obviate the need for altruism, as the distinction between self and other is blurred (Grant, 2001, p. 226). However, Grant maintains that ultimately true altruism needs religious underpinning in an understanding of God as love, *agape*, “God reaches out to humanity in love, and seeks to elicit an emulating caring from us for one another” (Grant, 2001, p. 167). He sums up his analysis of altruism, “It is problematic for a self-interested vision, mandatory or diversionary for a moral vision, and assumed for a religious vision” (p. 249).

The belief that God is love is central to Christianity, and a concern for others lies at the heart of the Christian message. Jesus told his followers to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34). The teachings of Jesus can be summed up as “the selfless and costly love shown by the Samaritan even to traditional enemies of his people” (Ward, 2017, p. 75). A number of scholars of

religions have noted that “Religion and altruism are often connected. Views emphasizing altruism are not only typical for Christianity; there is a strong obligation to give and also to help, for instance in the Jewish tradition, in Islam and various Asian religions” (Pessi, 2011, p. 2). Today we are surrounded by faiths other than our own, and awareness of differences in belief means that we need to appreciate our shared ethic. After an appraisal of the major religious traditions of the world, Huston Smith explained that the various faiths require mutual understanding and respect to co-exist, but that ultimately love is deeper, “respect prepares the way for a higher power, love ... the compassion that the wisdom traditions all enjoin” (Smith, 1958/1991, p. 390).

This is echoed by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who concludes his study bringing together Christianity and Buddhism, “Understanding and love are values that transcend all dogma” (Hanh, 1995, p. 198). According to H. H. Dalai Lama, “To increase our altruism, we must motivate ourselves to take into consideration the effects of our actions on both the present and the future. Morality, compassion, decency, and wisdom are the building blocks of all civilizations” (Dalai Lama, 2011, p. 81).

Spiritual experience has been side-lined as being a source of altruism, but Post quotes W. H. Auden’s mystical experience as evidence of “a metaphysics of Divine Love that, for the mystics, constitutes a form of Ultimate Reality or Ground of Being” (Post, 2014, p. 182, his upper case). Post’s article refers to Sorokin and his views on the supraconscious dimension of love, which enables some people to absorb divine love and to exhibit true altruism. Such altruism may be considered a natural result from an understanding of our essential oneness as

experienced in mysticism (Post, 2014, p. 182). This awakes a sense of gratitude, leading to “a spontaneous altruism and compassion for others that is felt as the only possible alignment with the unstinting generosity of Being as a gift” (Hunt, 2006, p. 33).

There is a sense of unity found among mystics of a wide range of religions which leads to altruism; in a work devoted to Christian mystics, Ursula King points out that “Traditional wisdom speaks to us not only across the ages, but also across different religions” (King, 1998/2001, p. 250). While mystics tend to transcend specific religious traditions, members of particular religious groups may tend to prioritise their own, leading to an “us and them” situation as regards helping others of different groups (Hoffmann, Basedau, Gobien, & Prediger, 2019). However, the values at the heart of the religions may take precedence over group identity. A survey of attitudes among Finns found that, “the more important a person considers Christian values to be, the more likely s/he will consider helping others to be very important” (Pessi, 2011, p. 6). A similar link between deep religious feeling and altruism was illustrated in a 2009 national telephone survey in USA which revealed that, “the 9% who feel God’s love more than once per day are the highest givers of time, energy, and money in the service of the neighbour” (Post, 2014, p. 186).

Just how their own altruism is evaluated by correspondents in the Archive might be a problem in my research. Bennett and Einolf draw attention to the dangers of self-evaluation of altruistic behaviour, particularly with regard to religious people:

this link is more evident in survey research that uses self-reported behavior measures than in experimental research that uses observations of actual behavior. Both religious and nonreligious people tend to overreport socially desirable behaviours such as helping others, but religious people disproportionately overreport their helping behaviors because their religious values make them feel like they should be helpful. (Bennett, & Einolf, 2017, p.325)

I am conscious that the accounts in the Archive often contain self-assessments given by the correspondents. However, rather than over-estimating their altruism, I have found the opposite. People minimise their own virtue, often giving credit to God, or to “a widely reported sense of a power not our own which works within to strengthen and empower” (Ward, 2014, p. 100). Many accounts describe altruistic acts which correspondents admit they could not have done unaided.

There is no shortage of instances of love and compassion related to religion, with a wide range of vastly different inspirational figures whose lives demonstrate their faith through the love of others. Actions often speak louder than words as attested by the life stories of well-known mystics and saints, such as Julian of Norwich (Janzen, 2000), Teresa of Avila (du Boulay, 1993) and Simone Weil (Plant, 1996). Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christian beliefs held fast in the face of opposition, resonating love for others even in the concentration camps, and his courageous opposition to the Nazis ultimately cost him his life (Bethge, 1967/1977). Cicely Saunders felt guided by God to establish a home for the dying, St Christopher’s in Sydenham, thereby founding the modern hospice movement

(du Boulay, & Rankin, 2007). Saunders stressed that “her entire life work was guided by God and by her experience of divine love, however much the standard professional textbooks manage to leave this out” (Post, 2019, p. 162).

In the next section, four scholars of altruism will be discussed in detail, offering a deeper understanding of love and altruism.

Pitirim Sorokin

Imprisoned by the Czarists and later tortured and threatened with execution by the Bolsheviks, Pitirim Sorokin survived, emigrated to USA and became founding professor of the Harvard Research Centre in Creative Altruism in 1949. His “amazing, magisterial study of *The ways and power of love*” (King, 2008/2009, p. 191) is a wide-ranging exploration of love, which Sorokin considers the highest value in the major religions, however named.

The aim of Sorokin’s research is to find ways of making people more creative and altruistic in the face of the prevalent academic focus of sociologists and psychologists on the negative, on the subjects of crime, war and mental disorders rather than on the positive phenomena of love and altruism (Sorokin, 1954/2002, p. xxvi).

For Sorokin, “love appears to be a universe inexhaustible qualitatively and quantitatively. Of its many forms of being, the following can be differentiated: religious, ethical, ontological, physical, biological, psychological, and social” (p. 3). He contrasts low grade amity and superficial friendships, which may be motivated by convention, pleasure or profit, with supreme forms of creative love, asserting that “*supreme love can hardly be achieved without a direct participation of the supraconscious* and without the ego-transcending techniques of its

awakening” (p. 125, his italics). Sorokin reflects my third research question as he declares that if love remains ego-centred, it is not supreme altruistic love. He cites the great spiritual teachers such as the Buddha, Jesus, Gandhi and Schweitzer as examples of supreme love, contrasting them with those who merely embrace altruistic ethics, such as Jeremy Bentham or John Stuart Mill. He stresses that these inspirational figures:

in doing their acts of love they act as a mere instrument of the supraconscious, called by different names: God, Heaven, Heavenly Father, Tao, the Great Reason, the Oversoul, Brahma, Jen, Chit, the Supra-Essence, the Divine Nothing, the Divine Madness, the Logos, the Sophia, the Supreme Wisdom, the Inner Light. ... they state that in their acts of love a complete humility and transcendence of the egos and the ego-centred conscious mind ... is necessary in order to soar to the supreme forms of love.” (Sorokin, 1954/2002, p. 127)

In Sorokin’s view, the guidance and control of the supraconscious is necessary for the moral progress of humanity and the ideological self-identification with the supraconscious is the first step, although that in itself is insufficient for a transformation (pp. 480-481). This is reminiscent of Hick’s view that a turn toward the Real is necessary for selflessness. The focus of Sorokin’s work is on an inner transformation leading to ego-less altruism, which my research is exploring.

Matthieu Ricard

Matthieu Ricard is a prolific speaker and writer, who moved from the study of cellular genetics to India, to become a Buddhist monk, thus finding

himself “at the confluence of two major influences: Eastern Buddhist wisdom and Western sciences” (Ricard, 2013/2018, p. 4). On his return to France from India, he became aware of the different assumptions underlying the disparate cultures. Western psychology seemed based on the assumption that humans were by nature selfish and this individualism was generally admired, whereas in the East, Ricard had found a society where, “altruistic love and compassion comprised the cardinal virtues of all human life” (p. 4). This led Ricard to explore the differences between “other-oriented” and “self-oriented” societies, a difference which is at the heart of my research, as I too begin from the generally assumed position in the West.

At the heart of altruism is concern for others, which is called into action when they are in need. According to Ricard, who continues to study the effects of meditation on the brain, altruism can be cultivated. He explains that neuroscience has now established that training causes functional and structural changes in the brain. Meditation on love and compassion leads to an increase in activity in areas linked to empathy and a positive attitude to life. The effects of RSEs may well be to develop a more compassionate understanding of others and thence altruistic behaviour.

Co-operation and altruism are considered by Ricard as necessary for, “prosperity, quality of life, and environmental protection, in the short, medium, and long term” (p. 657), with love allied with wisdom essential for the future of humanity. His concluding chapter is entitled “Daring Altruism” and he urges us to “cultivate altruism on an individual level, for that is where everything begins” (p. 691). I explore whether RSEs trigger the necessary transformation from self-

centredness to altruism and whether this can be, or is, reinforced by religious belief or practice in Chapter 8.

C. Daniel Batson

A number of nuanced definitions of altruism are considered by C. Daniel Batson, who favours, “*a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another’s welfare*” as opposed to egoism which “*a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing our own welfare.*” (Batson, 2019, p. 22, his italics). He links these definitions to the original usage by Auguste Comte. It is significant that Batson moves from the popular definition of altruism as “high-cost helping” to focus on motivation rather than on the consequences to the helper. When exploring the existence of altruism, the question of whether the altruist is in fact motivated by empathy is more important than whether or not this comes at a personal cost.

Batson sets out to explore altruism by means of scientific experiments. He creates fictitious situations and characters and monitors the responses, to explore whether empathic concern leads to altruism. He establishes his empathy-altruism theory in the face of dissenting opinions (Batson, 2019) and concludes that despite contemporary assumptions, altruism does exist. He shows that even if there was a gain to the self, through lessening of empathetic suffering, or a lessening of shame or guilt at not helping, or increased feelings of empathic joy, these were not the primary motivations for empathy-induced altruism. He explores hindrances to altruism, which were found to include preoccupation with something else and a perception of “us and them” leading to a corresponding lack of empathy. Whether

or not RSEs contribute to overcoming such hindrances and lead to a turn from a self-centred attitude is explored in Chapter 9.

Batson also describes negative sides of altruism, the danger of paternalism and of acting unfairly in favour of the recipient of altruism. However, he concludes that when coupled with sensitivity and wisdom, altruism may offer the possibility of making the world a better place.

Stephen Post

Stephen Post, author of the bestselling *Why good things happen to good people*, has written widely on altruism. He explores altruism as expounded by Sorokin, with a focus on five dimensions of altruism: intensity, extensivity, duration, purity and adequacy and then offers his own typology of the six sources of altruism: theocentric love, human love, empathy, rationality, role expectation and cultural formation (Post, 2014).

Post gives a brief description of a scientific survey of randomly selected Americans, which he undertook in 2010 with two sociological colleagues to record the frequency and extensiveness of RSEs (Post, 2014, pp. 185-186). The most important findings for my own research were that 81% of those questioned “experience God’s love as the greatest power in the universe” and that 83% indicate that they “feel God’s love increasing their compassion for others” (Post, 2014, p. 186).

Regarding terminology, in his autobiographical account of setting up a research institute to study spiritual love in 2001, funded by Sir John Templeton, Post tackles the use of the word “altruism” as opposed to “love”. Templeton wanted The Institute for Research on Unlimited Love, whereas Post felt that The

Institute for Research on Creative Altruism would be more acceptable in academia (Post, 2019, pp. 165-166). Templeton refused to back down and Post later admitted that Templeton was right and the name in fact attracted a great deal of attention in the media, and eventually expanded to include many more research universities in the USA and worldwide. Post had been tempted to conform to the secular language around him but was ultimately persuaded that “*Altruism* is a dry, secular term that does not come close to expressing the radiance and warmth of *Pure Unlimited Love*” (Post, 2019, p. 166). It is interesting that elsewhere Post writes of altruistic love, joining both concepts, perhaps appealing to academia while also acknowledging the deeper nature and power of love. I have sometimes wondered whether I formulated my third research question using the term altruism because this is a PhD thesis.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the intellectual climate surrounding people experiencing, reporting and studying RSEs, that of materialism with its focus on self-centredness and a turn away from religion. The assumptions that atheism is for the clever, implying that faith is for the dim; that atheism is for the strong implying that faith is for the weak; have led to a culture where RSEs do not find a ready ear. This predominantly sceptical environment explains why so many accounts in the RERC Archive mention that the experiences had not been shared until reassurance of their being taken seriously was evident.

However, we have also seen that there is a change which is developing gradually, the emergence of a post-materialist paradigm. Quantum physics has ushered in a new interconnected worldview, which reflects that of the mystics

throughout the ages and which is also frequently found in the Archive. While often offering a challenge to religious dogma, these views of oneness retain much of the love and wisdom lying at the heart of a spiritual attitude to life. The attitudes of selfishness, selflessness, compassion, altruism, empathy and love have been explored with a consideration of scholars both religious and secular as offering a more sympathetic environment for RSEs.

This chapter has given an overview of the ground onto which the seeds of RSEs fall in terms of attitudes to religion, the self and others. This sets the scene for the empirical research into the accounts of the RERC Archive with a focus on the fruits of experience, which is recounted in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX
EMPIRICAL RESEARCH INTO THE FRUITS OF RSES
IN THE RERC ARCHIVE

Summary

Hardy's categorisation of the consequences of RSEs in the RERC Archive

Pilot studies

Initial coding

Pilot study 1: Fruits from "Subjects" box

Pilot study 2: The first 50 RSEs in the RERC Archive

Pilot study 3: Accounts 51 to 100

Pilot study 4: Accounts 101 to 150

Modifications to coding

Formulation of hypothesis

Final coding

Numerical analysis of the first thousand accounts

Numerical analysis of the final thousand accounts

Male and female respondents

Frequencies of fruits of RSEs and illustrations from the Archive

Religious and spiritual attitudes

Sense of purpose or new meaning in life

Love

Comfort

Guidance

Sense of assurance of survival of death

Awareness of unity and interconnectedness

The hypothesis

Negative consequences

Positive outcomes of negative experiences

Intense experiences

Conclusion

Summary

This chapter sets out my empirical research into the Archive. It begins with Hardy's classification, in order to consider his categories, particularly those he refers to as the consequences of experience, which I explore as the fruits of RSEs. Previous familiarity with the different categories of fruits in the Archive led to my composing four Microsoft Excel spreadsheet pilot studies, with a variety of coding. I then explain my assessment of the results, leading to the selection of coding for the final two spreadsheets. These cover the first and final thousand accounts of RSEs from the RERC Archive, the data from which are then explored.

The results obtained from analysis of the spreadsheets are recorded as percentages, showing the frequency of occurrence of the various fruits of experience in answer to the first research question. These figures are followed by explanations of the categories selected, illustrated by examples from the RERC Archive. Results pertaining to IEs and to the hypothesis are also recorded and discussed.

Hardy's categorisation of the consequences of RSEs in the RERC Archive

In 1979 Hardy published the findings of the first eight years of research: his methodology of quantitative and qualitative analysis, his classification of the data and the results obtained (Hardy, 1979/2006). Categorisation was an immediate problem for him, as he had expected to be able to classify the accounts rather like the zoological specimens he had been familiar with hitherto. However, here he was faced with a completely different set of data. The accounts Hardy received included the awareness of a higher power; a constant sense of presence; a sense of comfort and guidance; receiving answers to prayer and experiencing a

meaningful pattern in life (synchronicity). These were what he expected. However, he also received more dramatic accounts of people hearing voices, having visions of light or ecstatic mystical experiences. Some told of coping with depression, feelings of hopelessness and thoughts of suicide. There were also reports of extraordinary occurrences now known as near-death experiences (NDEs) but not named as such, as it was not until 1975 that the term NDE was coined by Raymond Moody (1975/1976). Overall, the accounts were hugely varied and resisted neat categories. Some accounts were lengthy and full of philosophical analysis, while others simply consisted of a few sentences.

For further qualitative research, Hardy and his colleagues used questionnaires or interviews, which I am unable to do. I am, however, able to choose particularly interesting accounts to quote and analyse in depth for illustrative purposes, as did other scholars: Hardy (1979/2006); Maxwell and Tschudin (2005); Hay (1990) and Fox (2003, 2008, 2014).

The early questionnaires and interviews are not included in the Archive, but an article containing an appeal for accounts has survived. It is entitled *Research into religious experience, how you can take part: An appeal for accounts of personal experience to help in the work of the Religious Experience Research Unit, Manchester College, Oxford. By Sir Alister Hardy, F.R.S. (Director)* (Hardy, 1971). The article includes a range of accounts to indicate what is required. Hardy stresses that in addition to the more dramatic, isolated experiences, which people associate with the term religious experience, “We do indeed want accounts of ... seemingly more ordinary but deeply felt experiences ... [We welcome] accounts of that continuing sense of spiritual awareness which

many people feel makes a difference in their lives” (Hardy, 1971, p. 121). It is this difference which is the focus of my research, how lives are changed by the experiences, whether they are sudden or longer-term.

As Hardy noted, the wide range of experiences made any quantitative analysis virtually impossible but permitted numerical analysis to indicate “possible trends”. As for qualitative studies, Hardy felt that the enormous variety of correspondents, writing in such different styles and occasionally bordering on the incoherent, left much to the subjective judgement or sympathetic imagination of the researcher (Hardy, 1979/2006, pp. 24-25).

Hardy’s provisional classification resulted in 12 categories with subdivisions, a total of 92 which included sensory or quasi-sensory experiences: visual; auditory; touch; smell and “supposed extra-sensory perception”; behavioural changes; cognitive and affective elements; development of experience; dynamic patterns in experience; dream experiences; triggers; consequences (pp. 25-29).

My focus is on Hardy’s final category, which he coded as the consequences of experience with three aspects, giving the frequency per thousand in brackets: a sense of purpose or new meaning to life (184.7); changes in religious belief (38.7); changes in attitude to others (77) (p. 29). I bore these categories in mind when setting up my pilot studies.

My choice to use the metaphor of fruits rather than simply exploring consequences is to consider the outcomes in terms of their ongoing development over time and affecting not only the experiencers, but also those around them. Fruits include the notion of seeds spreading far and wide, as well as the soil onto

which they fall; growth and ripening of fruit for the individual and the sharing of those fruits with others, all of which enrich the scope and depth of my study. Some of those aspects are included in Hardy's category of "Development of experience" within the individual and in relation to others.

RSEs and fruits meld, and some categories which Hardy considers to be aspects of the experiences, I prefer to categorize as "fruits" because the effects go beyond the experience itself and are lasting personal transformations. These include: a sense of security, protection, peace; guidance, vocation, inspiration; a feeling of love; a sense of prayer answered and a sense of presence (not human) (pp. 26-27). Although I did not include all those categories in my spreadsheets, as they were rarely found, I widened the scope of fruits considerably from Hardy's categories of consequences, as I explore the Archive.

Hardy notes the development of experience "*Within the individual*" and "*In relation to others*" (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 27, his italics) which is at the heart of my analysis. I assess whether there was any growth of awareness, either sudden or over time within the experiencers and if this affected their religious and spiritual attitudes, expanding Hardy's changes of religious belief into six different categories of changes from the religious background of the correspondent. I retained Hardy's sense of purpose or new meaning in life, and Hardy's third category of consequences, changes in attitude to others, led to the formulation of my hypothesis.

Although Hardy does not mention transformation of the self out of intrinsic self-centredness, this could be considered an underlying characteristic of

some of his other categories. It is an important aspect of the fruits of RSEs and will be empirically explored through my hypothesis.

Pilot studies

After reading widely in the religious and scholarly literature on RSEs, concerning their history and philosophical interpretations, plus consideration of a number of surveys, I began my own exploration of the accounts in the RERC Archive. I was mindful that the data comprised personal accounts of experiences (not the experiences themselves) which the correspondents had found difficult to express. Robinson details the difficulties facing him and Hardy as they set out to explore and classify the responses to the newspaper appeal, “in an undertaking of this scope, there are no right answers, only the right kind of questions. And no two people will bring the same questions” (Robinson, 1997, p.7). RSEs may often be assumed to be transformative in terms of attitude, understanding and action, but the RERC accounts are a motley collection of personal stories, which often express bewilderment and tell of failures as well as of fruitful responses to RSEs. I am aware of the difficulty of assessing “claims of radical transformation in personality, relatedness, and insight” (Hunt, 2000, pp. 372-373).

I started with four pilot studies to explore the content of the Archive related to the fruits of RSEs and to try out variations of coding. These Microsoft Excel spreadsheets enabled me to record different aspects of the fruits of RSEs with an indication of their frequency. The first pilot study recorded those accounts with “fruits” in the “Subjects” box in the Archive, as recorded by the transcriber. Subsequently I composed three further pilot studies covering the first 150

accounts in the Archive, varying the coding slightly each time, to help me to decide on the categories for the final spreadsheets.

The percentages obtained in the pilot studies are given in brackets after the various categories cited in separate sections below. I took these as an indication of the contents of the Archive, and the frequency of certain RSEs and attitudes to them, in relation to my first research question, although I did not feel bound by the numerical values obtained. This is because many accounts are unclear, not only as to the nature of the experience itself, but because attitudes to the experiences change over time. My focus on the fruits of RSEs in relation to religious and spiritual attitudes, self-centredness and altruism and intense experiences led me to make my final selection.

Initial coding

I began with extensive coding, based on previous familiarity with the Archive (Rankin, 2005, 2008) and guidance from the literature (Hardy, 1979/2006; Maxwell, & Tschudin, 1990/2005). The intention in the pilot studies was to gauge the contents of the Archive and to find out which categories were most widespread, offering me the possibility of reducing the number in subsequent spreadsheets, when a larger number of accounts was to be explored.

The four pilot studies differed slightly in their coding, which I explain in the sections below. In the pilot studies, the Archive number of the account was noted, in some pilots, followed by the numbers of experiences. Whether the correspondent was male or female was answered by almost all correspondents, enabling a good overview of the contributors. Most people noted their religious background as requested on the form, and I recorded that with an explanatory

coding key, noting the percentages of Christians, as this was by far the largest group.

Hardy's categories of consequences were included in the early pilot studies: a sense of purpose or new meaning in life; change in religious belief; change in attitude to others (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 29). I expanded those consequences in my research as indicated above. Hardy's numerical data recorded the number out of 1000, taken as an average of the first 3000 accounts. In my final spreadsheets I have the data from the first and last 1000 accounts in the Archive, which I have also calculated as percentages. This will make for an easy comparison.

In the first and second pilot studies, I explored a wide range of categories, 45 in all. This was to give an indication of the scope of the Archive and proved helpful in further research, as it became evident which categories were frequently mentioned, and therefore important for my research. As a result of the initial coding, I was able to reduce the number in the following two pilot studies, where I limited the categories and eventually settled on twenty for the final spreadsheets.

Although in my first and second pilot studies I counted the individual experiences within the accounts, ultimately, I found this to be unsatisfactory. This was because it was not clear how many RSEs people had in fact experienced. Some correspondents mentioned that there were many more which were not included. Others did not make it clear whether or not the experiences were linked or separate. In the third and fourth pilot studies, rather than recording the experiences separately, I noted whether or not there were multiple experiences. However, eventually I decided that this factor was unimportant relative to the

fruits of experience, which arose whether or not there was more than one experience. Thus, in my final coding, I simply record the fruits of the first and last thousand accounts of RSEs in the Archive.

Initially I recorded the intensity of the fruits on a scale of 1 to 10, but eventually I found that this was too difficult to judge. Given not only the self-selected nature of the correspondents, but also their own assessment of the fruits, the grading of such outcomes on a numerical scale seemed an imposition of my own point of view which I could not justify. Later spreadsheets simply recorded the various types of fruits, rather than evaluating them according to their intensity. Instead, intense experiences (as defined by Wildman) were noted separately, in answer to my second research question on Wildman's categorisation.

The full list of categories is given under the separate pilot study sections below with percentages indicating frequency. In each spreadsheet, I added information in a "Notes" column, for future reference and to enable me to select accounts illustrating specific aspects of the RSEs, some of which I also recorded on an electronic list.

Pilot study 1: Fruits from "Subjects" box

In the form for submission of accounts to the RERC, there is a section for people to record the "Fruits" of their experience(s). Despite this, the total number of accounts with "fruits" noted in the "Subjects" box of the accounts in the Archive was merely 35, with 36 for "fruit". The lists overlapped apart from a single account. In fact, there were only 35, as numbers [100009] and [200023] contained the same account. This minuscule amount, out of a total of about 6,600 accounts, indicated that a search for fruits in the "Subjects" box would in fact be

fruitless. Although this indicated that such a search criterion would be insufficient for my research, I decided to explore those accounts nonetheless. As there were so few, I recorded the various experiences contained within those accounts separately, making a total of 49 RSEs.

Searching within the texts of the accounts, I found 48 uses of “fruits” and 182 of “fruit”, with the first accounts included in the latter list, but this total did not seem to me a true indication of the actual fruits of RSEs, which precluded a word search approach to the Archive. However, in order to be certain that this was the case, I did explore several such accounts, only to find that the use of the word fruits did not in fact reflect the usage I was seeking. Often the reference was to actual fruit in the narrative, so I did not undertake any selection based on fruit/s in the text in my pilot studies.

All the religious backgrounds given in this section were recorded as Christian. In order to explore religious affect, I recorded religious affiliation before, after and whether there had been a change. Explicit religious reference and belief in a named higher power before and after, as well as belief in an unnamed higher power before and after and whether the RSE was considered spiritual or religious were all noted, as was experience of a constant spiritual awareness. I decided to explore Happold’s additions to James’ four marks of mysticism (ineffability; noetic quality; transiency; passivity) by recording: consciousness of oneness; sense of timelessness; vision of non-ego self in this pilot study (Happold, 1963/1990, pp. 45-50).

The categories were: account number; sex (male 47%; female 53%); fruits (no percentage, graded); intense experience (80%); constant spiritual awareness

(18%); (Christian) religious affiliation before (45%) and after (37%); change (16%); explicit religious reference (29%); belief in named higher power before (29%) and after (39%); belief in unnamed higher power before (2%) and after (4%); spiritual or religious interpretation (71% / 29%); fruits in Hardy: sense of purpose or new meaning in life (24%), change in religious belief (14%), change in attitude to others (18%); joy (10%); comfort (22%); answer to prayer (6%); sense of presence (6%); sense of guidance (14%); assurance of survival (29%); transformation of fear (2%); transformation of depression (16%); change of motivation or action (14%); sense of oneness (20%); sense of timelessness (6%); sense of understanding everything (22%); sense of non-ego self (6%); experience of light (39%); sense of being loved (20%); motivation to love (10%); transcendence through nature (8%).

Pilot study 2: The first 50 RSEs in the RERC Archive

The second pilot study started at the beginning of the Archive, recording each experience in the first 50 accounts, making a total of 93 RSEs. Hunt suggests a life history methodology, as he draws attention to the difference the timing of an experience would have on the outcome in someone's life (Hunt, 2000, p. 373).

Bearing that in mind in the composition of this pilot study, I recorded the age at writing, the age at the experience and noted whether this was during pre-adulthood, early adulthood, mid adulthood or late adulthood. I later discarded these categories as I decided that linking the life stages to the fruits was almost impossible from a study of the accounts. I wanted to focus on the fruits, which I concluded were not illuminated by recording the life stages. This time I included

James' criteria of mystical experience as well as Happold's additions, a total of seven.

The categories for this study were: account number; experience number; sex (male 27%; female 73%); age at writing in; age at experience; pre-adulthood (13%); early adulthood (20%); mid adulthood (30%); late adulthood (17%); religious affiliation (varied); explicit religious reference (43%); belief in higher power (59%); fruits in Hardy: sense of purpose or new meaning in life (33%), change in religious belief (17%), change in attitude to others (11%); experience of evil (1%); synchronicity (2%); comfort (34%); answer to prayer (12%); sense of guidance and presence (33%); assurance of survival (15%); transformation of fear (10%); transformation of depression (7%); change of motivation or action (13%); ineffability (1%); noetic quality (11%); transiency (3%); passivity (3%); vision of oneness (6%); vision of timelessness (2%); vision of non-ego self (0%); vision of love (6%); giving love (6%); transcendence through nature (7%); intensity (49%).

Pilot study 3: Accounts 51 to 100

In order to explore the Archive further, I continued from account number 51 for another 50 accounts, with different coding. The amendments were made after calculations based on the first two pilot studies. I coded male and female in separate columns, and multiple experiences were recorded at this stage. I retained the categories of experiences of a constant spiritual awareness and intense experiences. I wished to explore whether it was possible to link the RSE to the fruits on a numerical scale and added that code. This offered interesting data for further exploration, but ultimately I felt that this was too much of a personal interpretation, so I decided not to include that category in my final spreadsheets.

I retained Hardy's category of change in attitude to others as this related to what I was considering might be my third research question. But I no longer included Hardy's other two categories of consequences as he had formulated them. I expanded Hardy's change in religious belief to include an exploration as to whether the experience was given a spiritual or religious interpretation and also whether the experience led to belief. This was to explore differences in spiritual and religious approaches. I decided to record NDEs as a separate category. For Hardy's sense of purpose or new meaning in life, I selected the codes of "attitude to life", "attitude to death" and "attitude to others" with 1 indicating change and 2 indicating a confirmation of previously held attitudes. I included codes to record experiences of light, love and guidance.

I decided that the category of answer to prayer was too vague, as there are many different types of prayer, including colloquial, meditative and petitionary (Beit-Hallahmi, & Argyle, 1997, pp. 82-83) leading to a variety of outcomes. I felt that such answers were better explored in the results of feeling loved or receiving help, comfort or guidance when needed. As for mystical experiences, there were so few instances of James' and Happold's criteria that I simply noted mystical experiences instead, which included the sense of unity, timelessness and loss of ego-self.

The categories for this pilot study were: account number; multiple experiences (36%); male (20%); female (80%); intense experience (66%); links to fruits (various grades); constant spiritual awareness (58%); religious affiliation (Christian, 56%); spiritual interpretation (20%); religious interpretation (54%); NDE (0.5%); belief – change/confirmed (20% /12%); attitude to life –

change/confirmed (20%/18%); attitude to death – change/confirmed (4%/4%); attitude to others – change/confirmed (10%/8%); light (2%); love (6%); guidance (42%); mystical (6%).

Pilot study 4: Accounts 101 to 150

This study continued the same coding as the previous pilot study and gave me a total of 100 accounts to peruse in order to make my final decision on coding.

The results for this pilot study were account number; multiple experiences (50%); male (20%); female (72%) missing data (8%); intense experience (74%); links to fruits (72% various grades); constant spiritual awareness (60%); religious affiliation (Christian, 52%); spiritual interpretation (20%); religious interpretation (52%); NDE (0%); belief – change/confirmed (18% /22%); attitude to life – change/confirmed (18%/23%); attitude to death – change/confirmed (10%/4%); attitude to others – change/confirmed (14%/12%); light (4%); love (2%); guidance (40%); mystical (8%).

Modifications to coding

The pilot studies offered results which were not only of interest in themselves but gave me a basis for selecting categories for exploration of the first and final 1000 accounts in the Archive. I planned initially to focus on the first thousand accounts, numbered 1-1,000 and the final thousand, numbered 4,500-5,500, but as some accounts had been withdrawn from access to researchers, those account numbers were later amended to ensure that a total of a thousand early accounts and a more recent thousand were considered. My choice to focus on the beginning and end of the period recorded by the RERC was to ascertain whether there are noticeable differences between the early period of the late 1960s and the

twenty-first century, particularly in terms of religious background, and to find out whether that has any effect on how people respond to their RSEs.

As a result of the exploratory pilot studies, I began the final spreadsheets by recording the number of the account, no longer attempting to separate individual experiences, as that had proved unclear in the accounts; nor to grade them as to intensity on a scale, as that was too much of a personal interpretation. As my focus was on the fruits, I did not record whether there were single or multiple experiences, as that was often unclear in the account and it did not seem possible to link the individual experiences to the fruits. I return to one column for sex, recording male as 1 and female as 2.

In order to explore religious affect, after the religious background, I note changes into a number of categories: spiritual but not religious; religious; religious and spiritual; neither religious nor spiritual; no change; strengthened convictions. The last category emerged after a number of accounts had been analysed where this response was clearly evident, so I returned to the beginning and added it. The definitions of religious and spiritual have been considered in Chapter 3 and Wildman's typology in Chapter 4.

I decided against recording belief in a named or unnamed higher power for several reasons. As Hardy's question requested accounts from people who had felt a presence or power beyond the self, it seemed something of a tautology to record that category. I also found that correspondents were vague, some calling the power God, some ambivalent, some unsure as to whether this was in fact beyond the everyday self as stated in the Hardy Question, or in fact part of the self.

I retain Hardy's "sense of purpose or new meaning in life", as it seems more informative than my trial category of "attitude to life" and needs neither an explanatory key nor separate calculations. Clarification of "attitude to death" was necessary and so a "sense of assurance of survival of death" is substituted.

As a result of analysis of the pilot studies, the categories: feeling loved; loving attitude; comfort and guidance are included in the final spreadsheets. In order to balance this optimistic outlook, negative consequences of RSEs are also recorded. Mystical experiences are captured under awareness of unity and interconnectedness, which links the research to the field of mysticism and consciousness studies. The second research question is explored in the category of intense experience and the notes column records RSEs of particular interest for further illustration of specific aspects of the RSEs.

Formulation of hypothesis

In the pilot studies some of the highest percentages of fruits were for a constant spiritual awareness and for comfort. Although important for the individual, those aspects did not seem to me to offer as valuable an avenue for further research into how people's lives were affected as guidance, which also received high scores. In order to delve deeper, rather than simply recording guidance as being a fruit of experience, I was keen to discern the direction of this guidance. Hardy's category of a sense of purpose or new meaning in life also scored highly and I found that attitudes to others frequently changed. I decided to explore whether a constant spiritual awareness, recorded as changes in religious and spiritual attitudes, might also have an effect beyond the individual, that the seeds might fall further afield, involving others.

As a result of these explorations, together with my background reading, where one of the main consequences of RSEs was found to be a change to a less selfish and more caring attitude, I decided to explore that transformation in my third research question. This became “Can the hypothesis that a turn from self-centredness to altruism is the dominant category underlying the variety of fruits of experience, be supported through analysis of the RERC Archive?” and in the final spreadsheets, the categories of “supports hypothesis” and “opposes hypothesis” are included.

Final coding

My final choice of codes, while recording a variety of fruits of RSEs, in answer to the first research question, also focused on changes in religious attitudes, and the category of IEs as defined by Wildman (2011, pp. 268-269) in answer to the second research question. Accounts describing attitudes of self-centredness and altruism were recorded and any subsequent changes noted, as required by the third research question.

The final selection of codes was: account number; sex; religious background; change to spiritual but not religious; change to religious; change to religious and spiritual; change to neither religious nor spiritual; no change; strengthened convictions; sense of purpose or new meaning in life; feeling loved; loving attitude; comfort; guidance; sense of assurance of survival of death; awareness of unity and interconnectedness; supports hypothesis; opposes hypothesis; negative consequences; intense experience; notes.

In the spreadsheets, sex is recorded as 1 = Male; 2 = Female. In the sections where different religious traditions were recorded, I use codes, which are noted in the spreadsheets (in the order in which they occurred in the accounts): 0 = None or Atheist; 1 = Christian (including, C of E, RC, Baptist, Methodist and Salvation Army); 2 = Quaker; 3 = Unitarian; 4 = Christian Science; 5 = Spiritualist; 6 = Scientology; 7 = Jehovah's Witnesses; 8 = Jewish; 9 = Muslim; 10 = Buddhist; 11 = Subud; 12 = Agnostic; 13 = TM; 14 = Brahma Kumaris; 15 = Bahai; 16 = Pantheist; 17 = Theosophist; 18 = Russian Orthodox; 19 = Hindu.

Numerical analysis of the first thousand accounts

The percentages obtained from analysis of the first thousand accounts in the Archive were: account number; sex (male 31%; female 68% missing data (1%)); religious background (Christian, 87%); change to spiritual but not religious (36%); change to religious (2%); change to religious and spiritual (12%); change to neither religious nor spiritual (0.7%); no change (10%); strengthened convictions (30%); sense of purpose or new meaning in life (25%); feeling loved (22%); loving attitude (20%); comfort (44%); guidance (43%); sense of assurance of survival of death (14%); awareness of unity and interconnectedness (21%); supports hypothesis (34%); opposes hypothesis (0.5%); negative consequences (0.8%); intense experience (61%); notes.

Numerical analysis of the final thousand accounts

I retained the codes as in the first thousand accounts, apart from one amendment. Although I had found a motivation to altruism in the first thousand, I had not always found the turn from selfishness I had expected from my reading of the literature. Therefore, I added instances of "no turn" to the coding.

The final percentages obtained from analysis of the final thousand accounts in the Archive were: account number; sex (male 28%; female 67%); religious background (Christian, 57%); change to spiritual but not religious (34%); change to religious (1%); change to religious and spiritual (6%); change to neither religious nor spiritual (0.8%); no change (4%); strengthened convictions (16%); sense of purpose or new meaning in life 24%); feeling loved (19%); loving attitude (12%); comfort (40%); guidance (30%); sense of assurance of survival of death (19%); awareness of unity and interconnectedness (15%); supports hypothesis (23%); opposes hypothesis (0.1%); no turn (7%); negative consequences (4%); intense experience (68%); notes.

Male and female respondents

In my analyses it is evident that more than twice as many women as men respond to the appeals for RSEs. In the first thousand the ratio is male 31% to female 68% and in the final thousand, male 28% to female 67% missing data 1% and 5%. Hardy records 895 males and 2080 females in the first three thousand responses to his appeal. He rationalises this lower response rate among men, suggesting that men might be too busy to write of their experiences, rather than indicating that men were less religious. He mentions that the results of a National Opinion Poll for Hay and Morisy in 1976 showing positive responses to the Hardy Question given by 41% females and 31% males as evidence of this (Hardy, 2006, p. 30). I have not explored this aspect nor the reasons for the differences, but have focused on the fruits of the experiences whether from men, women or as is so often the case, children. Such research may be of interest to other scholars in the

future, particularly feminist theologians, who may challenge Hardy's interpretation of his findings.

Frequencies of fruits of RSEs and illustrations from the Archive

This section reports on the results of the spreadsheet analysis of the first and final thousand accounts in the RERC Archive, with numerical analysis to enable comparison between early and late accounts. Where applicable, comparisons are drawn with the results from the Archive obtained by Hardy (1979/2006), and from the population at large by Hay, who with Gordon Heald, conducted a national survey in 1987 (Hay, 1990, p. 83; 1994, p. 7).

Religious and spiritual attitudes

Table 1 records the findings relating to religious attitudes found among the first and last thousand contributors to the RERC Archive. The religious background is given in almost all accounts and is almost always Christian.

Changes to the various categories are indicated as percentages.

In the first thousand 87% recorded a Christian background. However, in the final thousand, as expected, the percentage was significantly lower at 57%. This reflects a decrease in the number of people who would describe themselves as having a Christian grounding in life.

Table 6.1
Changes in religious attitude from Christian background

	Religious Background (Christian)	Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR)	Religious Xn/Other	Religious and Spiritual	Neither Religious nor Spiritual	No Change	Strengthened Convictions
First Thousand	87%	36%	2%/5%	12%	0.7%	10%	30%
Final Thousand	57%	34%	1%/3%	6%	0.8%	4%	16%

Although the percentages of Christian background are given in the spreadsheets, other religious backgrounds were also recorded by means of codes and are given below in percentages: First Thousand/Final Thousand. None or Atheist (0.13/0.11%); Quaker (0.9/0.2%); Unitarian (0.4/0%); Christian Scientist (0.1/0%); Spiritualist (0.2/0.2%); Jew (0.11/0.8%); Muslim (0.2/0%); Buddhist (0.3/0.7%); Subud (0.1/0%); Agnostic (0.3/0%); Transcendental Meditator (0.1/0%); Brahma Kumaris (0.1/0%); Bahai (0/0.1%); Pantheist (0.1/0%); Hindu (0/0.4%).

The data on change to religious – meaning adopting a religion from an atheist or agnostic position or converting to a different religion, are recorded, again in percentages: First Thousand/Final Thousand. None or Atheist (0.1/0%); Christian (including, C of E, RC, Baptist, Methodist and Salvation Army) (2.1/1.0%); Quaker (1.6/1.1%); Unitarian (0.3/0%); Christian Scientist (0.3/0%); Spiritualist (0.1/0.5%); Scientology (0.1/0%); Jehovah’s Witness (0.1/0%); Jew (0/0.2%); Muslim (0/0.1%); Buddhist (0/0.1%); Agnostic (0.1/0%); Theosophist (0.1/0%); Russian Orthodox (0.1/0%).

Hardy recorded 38.7 per thousand (3.87%) reporting “Changes in religious belief” taken as an average of the first three thousand accounts in the Archive (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 29). The figures above offer an overview of the findings in the spreadsheets. A more detailed exploration of religious attitudes is given in relation to the fruits in Chapter 8.

Sense of purpose or new meaning in life

25% in the first thousand and 24% in the final thousand expressed a sense of purpose or new meaning in life. Hardy’s findings were 18.5% (Hardy,

1979/2006, p. 29). These often involved a change from depression or unexplained lack of direction and enabled a new vision, and it is significant that Hardy recorded 18.4% of RSEs being triggered by “depression, despair” (p. 28). In some cases, this category included a turn from self-centredness to altruism.

Many experiences tell of profound positive changes triggered by RSEs, and conversion experiences in particular feature strongly. Starbuck’s research, as reported by James, showed that religious conversion often leads to a transformed sense of purpose or new meaning in life (James, 1902/2002, p. 219). Here a correspondent describes the effect of her conversion experience on her life, illustrating the powerful fruits of such an experience:

I hardly ever attended church ... and came to consider myself if not an atheist, certainly agnostic. After passing through a series of deep personal crises ... I did at an evangelistic meeting ... receive The Lord Jesus Christ as my Personal Saviour. Since then in spite of many setbacks, my life has been entirely changed. I have peace in my heart and find my greatest joy in reading the Bible and in prayer and serving The Lord and having fellowship with other Christians. I just long to be more like Jesus.

[000102]

Other RSEs are triggered by negative situations - despair, depression and even suicidal thoughts (Tolle, 2001, pp. 1-2), or by illness, accidents, bereavement or terminal diagnoses. Yet it often the case that the experiences offer a sense of comfort and strength, which eventually lead to beneficial changes and a reappraisal of values.

Love

Love was recorded in two ways, feeling loved and having a loving attitude. Almost always one led to the other and the percentages are similar, although feeling loved did not always lead to loving attitude. In the first thousand 22% felt loved and 20% developed a loving attitude, in the final thousand the percentages were 19% and 12%, again with frequent overlaps. The spreadsheets revealed a correlation between feeling loved and having a loving attitude, with almost all who showed the latter, also feeling the former. Hardy recorded 5.7% as “Feeling of love (in oneself)” (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 27).

Loneliness was sometimes alleviated through connection with a spiritual or religious community, which led to feeling loved as well as generating love for others. There were cases where family relationships were mended as a result of the RSE, leading to a cessation of hostilities, due to increased understanding and love. Once people felt valued, whether from an internal or external source, they seemed able to appreciate others. It seems that if we feel loved, we are more able to give love, as in this account, which tells of the experiencer’s faith in the love of God which led her to undertake social work, a practical outcome in which she was sustained throughout:

Through his presence today in my life I am able to love and care and be concerned for people whom I do not like or am remotely interested in, given only selfish motives. The more receptive I am to him and the more I receive him into myself the more helpful and useful things I am able to do.

[000075]

Comfort

The highest percentages relating to the fruits of RSEs were for a feeling of comfort, with 44% of the first thousand and 40% of the final thousand. Hardy did not record a sense of comfort, although recording 2.9% as having an experience of a comforting touch, but he did find 2.7% of respondents manifesting “comforting, guiding” behaviour; 25.3% recording a “sense of security, protection, peace” and 21.2% a “sense of joy, happiness, well-being” (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 26).

This most welcome fruit of spiritual experience was triggered by a range of RSEs. Often the correspondent asked for help in prayer, or “handed over” a problem to God or to whatever their conception was of a higher power. Further questions as to the source were sometimes posed, and in many cases remained unanswered, but gratitude was ubiquitous. Just the action of admitting the need for help – often as a result of physical illness or mental distress – seemed to generate a response, offering a sense of comfort. The following account tells of a life-long sense of comforting Presence:

My own experience is, that since very early childhood, four or five, I had the feeling of a Presence. This presence was of great comfort always, especially in view of the fact that I suffered from asthma very badly, and the feeling of this Presence always had a very good effect on me. ...

Although I do not always live up to this guidance and comfort, it is nevertheless there, urging me on and guiding my course of action. ... You need not suppress my name, my only desire is to help by sharing my life's experience. [000085]

This account links a sense of comfort to one of guidance, which happens often, as trust in the source of comfort leads to an openness to being guided by it. Hardy linked the two concepts in his research (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 26). It is interesting that this correspondent does not want her name suppressed. Some people are keen to share their experiences and indeed, one person asked me to recount the story of her lifetime's awareness of the comfort and guidance of God and to name her (Rankin, 2008, pp. 134-136). Such long-term experiences of spiritual awareness were what Hardy was originally expecting in answer to his appeal, rather than the more dramatic accounts of which he received so many.

Guidance

This is frequently reported as a fruit of experience. In the first thousand, 43% experienced feelings of being guided, in the final thousand 30%. However, Hardy found only 15.8% reporting a "sense of guidance, vocation, inspiration" although he links this with a "sense of purpose behind events" at 11.4% (Hardy 1979/2006, p. 27). Hay and Heald found 22% reporting "awareness of a guiding presence not called God" (Hay, 1990, p. 83; 1994, p. 7). A sense of guidance may be triggered by need, a spiritual search, despair or desperation. What seems to be necessary is an admission of the need for guidance and a willingness to accept it.

Hardy notes that:

examples abound in literature from the Old Testament onwards and among our records there are 473 in the first 3000 received. I suspect that there are many who feel that their lives are being guided towards a particular goal and yet shrink from admitting it, entirely for reasons of modesty. (Hardy 1979/2006, p. 54)

He then quotes the following example:

Among the most vivid experiences I have had occurred when I was 63 and on the retiring list. I received a call to go out and teach in Nigeria. Nothing was further from my mind. However, in accordance with my commitment, I submitted the proposal to God and waited for an answer. But like Moses I spent the time thinking of other teachers who would do better. They all had good reasons for not going! I continued listening for an answer and God said clearly to me, "I want you to go." I eventually said I would go if that was what He wanted. As soon as I had said it, back came the answer, "I will give you all you need." At that moment all fear left me and never came back throughout two glorious years teaching in Lagos. God fulfilled that promise more abundantly than I could have asked or thought and I love Him for it. [000016]

Initially I considered further exploring the sense of guidance in my thesis, but I became more interested in the direction of guidance, whether it led to increased religious belief and worship or whether it was more general and led to a change in attitude to others.

Sense of assurance of survival of death

One of the most profound fruits of the RSEs in the Archive is a change in attitude to death, and in my spreadsheets, 14% in the first thousand and 19% in the final thousand reported a sense of assurance of survival of death. In many cases this was unexpected as the experiencer had previously assumed that death marked the end of consciousness.

Hardy found 3.6% feeling a “sense of release from fear of death” (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 27). A slightly different experience of “supposed contact with the dead” was recorded by Hardy at 8% and “awareness of the presence of someone who has died” was included in the survey undertaken by Hay and Heald, with 18% answering in the affirmative (Hay, 1990, p. 83; 1994, p. 7). I did not come across any accounts expressing the opposite, changes to disbelief in life after death.

A reduced fear of death after an NDE was frequently found by Paul Badham and his doctoral researcher Penny Sartori (Badham, 1997, 2013; Sartori, 2014). Another frequent outcome of NDEs, also revealed by Sartori’s work, is an increase in positive attitudes to life and to others (Sartori, 2014; Sartori, & Walsh, 2017). In many cases people are convinced that they need a complete transformation of the values they have espoused hitherto and a change of lifestyle in the future (Parti, 2016).

I found that it is not only NDEs which led to a change in attitude to death but also many different kinds of experience, including after death communication (ADCs) and end of life experiences (ELEs). Dreams also featured in the RSEs, at times offering pertinent messages, some foretelling death or offering comforting dreams of the deceased.

The following extracts are taken from a comprehensive account in which the correspondent tells of the consequences of an NDE, beginning with how her experience differed from the usual NDE pattern:

I did not experience a tunnel, nor did anyone come to meet me. I did not see God or any recognisable person/spirit. Instead I was immediately and

rapidly transported to a place of Great Light. ... I felt very welcome and safe and I “knew” I was in the presence of the Divine. [005474]

I chose this example as the correspondent wishes to focus on the fruits of the NDE, which include a reappraisal of what really matters in this life:

The “fruits of the experience” ... I became a new person and changed my whole life. I became much kinder, more compassionate and “good”. I felt as though I had been handed a new set of values and beliefs on a plate. So I had to set about finding the lifestyle which would “fit” these beliefs and values. [005474]

This she did by becoming a Quaker and retraining as a spiritual healer and autogenics therapist – a very clear turn to altruism.

Awareness of unity and interconnectedness

Many mystical experiences give an awareness of unity and interconnectedness, whether or not triggered by religious practice and this was recorded by 21% in the early accounts and in the later accounts by 15% of correspondents. Few correspondents mentioned special training, apart from yoga. It was evident that these were spontaneous experiences which often took place in natural surroundings and almost always in solitude. Hardy and Hay also investigated such experiences; Hardy found 5.9% “feeling of unity with surroundings and/or with other people” and Hay and Heald found 5% “experiencing that all things are ‘One’” (Hay, 1994, p. 7).

I chose to record the sense of unity and interconnectedness to reflect one of the main features of mystical experience as found throughout the ages (Happold, 1963/1990, pp. 46-47; Franks Davis, 1989/1999, pp. 58-63). This

linked to my hypothesis, as according to Hick, this merging of the individual into a unitive consciousness of the divine, whether within an Eastern Vedantic or Western Neoplatonic worldview, leads to turn from a focus on the self as “the mystic path is one of purification of the ego and its self-centred desires and concerns in order to find our true nature in unity with the Ultimate” (Hick 1999, p. 142). He refers to “the transforming awareness of the interconnectedness of all things in a living universe, with freedom from the angst of the ever-grasping ego” (p. 114). Lawrence LeShan links the worldviews of mystics and theoretical physicists, showing their similarities by juxtaposing quotations relating to their perceptions of reality, as both indicate that sensory data offer only a limited picture of reality (LeShan, pp. 265-291). This links mysticism to the view of the physical world as interconnected on a subatomic level, which is evident in quantum physics (Polkinghorne, 1994/2005, p. 53) and the “butterfly effect” where “a butterfly stirring the air with its wings in the African jungle today could have consequences for the storms over London in three or four weeks’ time” (p. 55). Polkinghorne, a former professor of mathematical physics, who was later ordained and became Canon Theologian of Liverpool, considers our scientific explorations to be insights into the rational order with which God has endowed the universe and he maintains that we need both science and religion in our quest for understanding. Another ordained scientist, Arthur Peacocke, explains that “The individual systems of the world are increasingly demonstrated by the sciences to be interconnected and interdependent in multiple ways” (Peacocke, 2001, p. 54). This quantum understanding of unity and interconnectedness is beginning to confirm scientifically what the mystics have said for millennia, that we and all

phenomena are one. It is a holistic view, which can lead to altruism as we recognise that as human beings, we are all intrinsically interlinked.

The correspondent whose NDE was explored above, describes this sense of oneness as a lasting fruit of her experience. She mentions what is found in so many NDEs, that the experience brings a sense of knowing everything (details of which experiencers cannot recall afterwards). The gist of this noesis is an understanding of oneness:

And I was realising that in my true-essence I am this Whole, Clarity, Love, Abundance, Compassion and all that was being conveyed to me. I am One with it all. So although I have now forgotten most of the details of this “knowledge”, a sort of précis has remained ever since. All is One, All is Whole, and I need to just “be”. [005474]

The hypothesis

Whether or not the hypothesis was affirmed was explored. In the first thousand 34% support the hypothesis and 0.5% oppose it, and in the final thousand 23% support the hypothesis and only 0.1% oppose it. In the final thousand, I added the category of no turn, to find out whether there were many who were not self-centred but motivated by selflessness before their experience and this applied to just 7% of the correspondents. An all-embracing “Changes in attitude to others” was recorded as one of his consequences of experience by Hardy at 7.7%.

This aspect of my research will be more fully explored in Chapter 9, but the extract below gives a taste of the category and the link to selflessness:

So I gradually came to realize that there is a Power available to help us humans who try to condition ourselves to receive it. A Divine Power, it seems to me, which "works in mysterious ways" and, provided we are tuned aright, makes contact with the nervous system of the heart and brain and induces us to act thereby. If this unproved theory were the case there are likely to be as many shades of "tuning in" as there are religious minded people, but all with this condition in common, I believe, - that the motive must be unselfish. [001019]

Negative consequences

Exploration of a darker side of RSEs is necessary, as not all are pleasant, and the fruits may be negative. Experiences of an evil impulse, such as when people describe voices telling them to kill would presumably not find their way into the Archive, even though they would be examples of experiences of a power beyond the everyday self. References to negative experiences are important for balance in my research into the fruits of experience and altruism, which might be considered an over-optimistic angle. It is possible that people whose experiences were negative ignored Hardy's appeals as they felt their experiences to be of a different kind from what was sought, or were the kind of experience which they wanted to forget – or even had forgotten.

In order to explore this aspect of RSEs, as my focus is on fruits rather than the experiences themselves, I recorded negative consequences of experience in my final spreadsheets. In all 0.8% led to negative consequences in the first thousand but in the second a higher percentage of 4% was recorded. Previous research has focused experiences of evil rather than on negative consequences.

Hardy found 4.5% reporting “negative or destructive’ accounts of a “sense of external evil force as having initiative” (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 28) in the first three thousand accounts. Hay and Heald recorded 12% of the national survey reporting an “awareness of an evil presence” (Hay, 1990, p. 83). Only a small number of experiences of evil were found by Maxwell and Tschudin (2005, pp. 27-28) and 4.25% by Jakobsen (1999). At the end of his book which focused on positive experiences, Donovan briefly refers to suffering and to the grim realities of life as seeming “to stand out against a background of what could have been or what ought to be” (Donovan, 1979/1998, p. 145) thereby turning thoughts toward God.

The negative experiences I found included premonitions of death of loved ones, feeling cold in haunted places and a sense of evil or oppressive forces. Some were countered by clinging to a Bible or through prayer, but the following account left a lingering sense of the presence of evil spirits, which persisted after the experience of fear on waking:

I awoke from a sound sleep and had overwhelming feeling of a presence in the room. The atmosphere felt very oppressive. I felt a strong sense of fear and forced myself to get up and put on the lights. I went from room to room and there was no living person there but this feeling persisted strongly. Again I resorted to prayer and gradually fell off to sleep with a rosary in my hand. I believe there are spirits or forces among us not always good that make themselves felt to the sensitive mind. [000038]

Positive outcomes of negative experiences

Although it would be unrealistic to imagine that all spiritual experiences are positive, it does seem to be the case that many negative experiences, especially those

where we face our own shortcomings, do eventually lead to a positive outcome and spiritual fruits (Franks Davis, 1986, p. 17). This seems to happen when the forces of good are set against those of evil and the good are prioritised. It is notable that after writing his best-selling books on positive spirituality, M. Scott Peck (1978/2006, 1997/1999) felt the need to pen *People of the lie: The hope for healing human evil* (1983/1990) to address the unpleasant side of humanity, which he admitted to finding difficult to write, but necessary. However, he concludes that “Evil can be conquered by love” (Scott Peck, 1990, p. 306).

Bouts of depression may be alleviated by an RSE or by a feeling of comfort or new meaning in life. The extract below follows a description of several periods of “utter despair anxiety and hopelessness - with no known reason”:

Fruits (from form): [Did it cause you to change the way you lived your life? etc.] Absolutely. I moved to [place name] last year which was a final move away from many aspects of my life oreviously [previously]. I changed my job (... ...), I left my home town and “lost” some previous long standing friendships. I now work as a therapist and writer and have become very interested in matters spiritual. [005501]

Here the negative experiences eventually led to a positive outcome once the causes of the despair were addressed. But this was presumably not without a period of disruption, before equanimity was acquired. In the Archive it is often evident that positive outcomes need to be worked for. NDEs also often lead to fundamental changes, usually for the better, but again, not without challenges to the experiencer and those around them (Parti, 2016).

Intense experiences

By far the highest percentage recorded in the spreadsheet categories did not actually refer to the fruits of RSEs but recorded the nature of the experience. The percentages of intense experiences as defined by Wildman (2011, pp. 268-269) were 61% in the first and 68% in the final thousand. Many correspondents treasured their experiences but did not link them to religion, as was illustrated at the beginning of Chapter 4. As IEs are a new category, there are no comparable results in Hardy or Hay.

It is significant that a large number of accounts were analysed as fitting the criteria of IEs, particularly in view of the predominantly secular attitudes prevalent in society, where there is often no religious underpinning to people's worldviews. It is possible that if RSEs are reconsidered and renamed IEs and accepted as part of human nature, people without religious views, as well as those of a religious or spiritual persuasion would all recognise such experiences as meaningful and ultimately be able to find them helpful.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the great variety of fruits of RSEs found in the RERC Archive in answer to the first research question. Much research into the RERC Archive has been undertaken in search of various types of experience (Robinson, 1977/1996; Beardsworth, 2009; Fox, 2003, 2008, 2014) with some mention of the consequences, but none has focused specifically on the fruits of experience. The empirical research reported above offers a detailed record of the extent of the major fruits of experience as found in the early and late accounts of RSEs in the Archive.

Pilot studies, with coding influenced by scholarship including that of Hardy, formed the basis for the final coding used to explore two thousand accounts, with a focus on the fruits of RSEs and IEs. The rationale for the choices made in the final spreadsheets was explained. The percentages obtained highlight the frequency of certain fruits and numerical comparisons were made between the data revealed in the early and later accounts, as well as with the findings of Hardy and Hay. This offered a comprehensive overview of the fruits of experience in the Archive over an extended period of time.

The different categories of fruits were further explored and illustrated by accounts from the Archive. The next chapter offers an in-depth engagement with a single, comprehensive account from a particularly articulate correspondent, reflecting a range of fruits of RSEs. This is followed by an appraisal of what such an approach offers.

CHAPTER SEVEN
DETAILED ANALYSIS OF THE FRUITS OF RSES
IN THE RERC ARCHIVE

Summary

The range of fruits and responses

Interpretations of RSEs and their fruits

A detailed analysis of an example from the Archive

Reluctance to share the experience

Loss of sense of ego

Evaluation of RSEs over time and religious affect

Guidance

Feeling loved

RSEs and religious beliefs

Awareness of unity and interconnectedness

Negative consequences

OBE and sense of assurance of survival of death

Negative experiences with positive outcome

Further reflections

Conclusion

Summary

After the preceding overview of the range of fruits of RSEs, this chapter features an in-depth case study of one of the accounts in the Archive, in which a correspondent describes a variety of experiences and the fruits as recorded over the course of many years. A qualitative analysis, inspired by an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) is used, as the inner transformations and outward behavioural manifestations of fruits are considered from the perspective of both experiencer and researcher.

In this chapter a range of fruits recorded in the spreadsheets will be explored through an in-depth study of the life of a single correspondent: reluctance to share the experience; loss of sense of ego; evaluation of RSEs over time and religious affect; guidance; feeling loved; RSEs and religious beliefs; awareness of unity and interconnectedness; negative consequences; OBE and sense of assurance of survival of death; negative experiences with positive outcome.

This detailed study of how the experiencer describes her RSEs, coupled with the perspective of the researcher, illustrates how other Archive accounts might be approached for deeper understanding. The second part of the chapter comprises an evaluation of what has been learned from this example.

The range of fruits and responses

Some RSEs extend over time, while others occur in isolated incidents, yet both types can produce short or long-term fruits. Sometimes the experience is completely forgotten and not recalled until years later, when in time of need it offers comfort, whereas other people never forget their experience and base their

daily lives upon it. As far as possible, fruits need to be considered within the context of the whole lifetime of the experiencer, as is illustrated in the case study below.

Even when fruits are not mentioned, any experience which merits sending an account to the RERC must surely have made an impact on the correspondent, which presumably is somehow manifest in their lives and attitudes. People tell of receiving help in times of trouble or depression, and instances of guidance. Such accounts often describe a pattern from trigger, to experience to consequences.

Other accounts contain experiences, with no further reflection or analysis, leaving the researcher to guess at any fruits. Some correspondents recount the experience and then draw out their own philosophical and religious views from it. Whereas some accounts include lengthy description and analysis and look back over years of transformed behaviour, in many cases any changes are merely implicit.

However, the experiencer may not always be the best judge. It is hard to know just how they have changed and whether their inner change of perspective is lasting or temporary. Some correspondents might have an inflated idea of themselves while others might be over-modest. Reading through the archive with a view to considering fruits involves evaluation of how the person has been affected by their experience and what impact it has had on them and on others around them, even if this is not explicitly stated.

The very nature of many RSEs may lead people to minimise their own part in events. They acknowledge a higher power as the enabler, a typical example of this being, "It was not my personal merit but a metaphysical influence which

forced me to do this act of life-saving” [000009]. This reluctance to take the credit is one way in which an inner transformation from self-centredness is manifest.

Some correspondents withdraw the account of their experience from the Archive, barring it from researchers. Others merely allow the fruits to remain, as in this case where all that is available is, “My experiences have had a profound influence on my life. I now live with a refined purpose to uplift myself and in doing so to help uplift others where I can” [005505].

Interpretations of RSEs and their fruits

Any qualitative analysis of the RSEs in the Archive demands in-depth engagement with the experiencer, an understanding of their views of their RSE, while acknowledging the involvement of the researcher. I have taken an approach based on interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), which proved helpful in considering the fruits of experience as, the aim of IPA is:

to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world, ... the meanings particular experiences, events, states hold for the participants ... it attempts to explore personal experience and is concerned with an individual’s personal perception or account of an object or event, as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself. (Smith, & Osborne, 2007, p. 53)

This encapsulates my approach to the individual accounts in the Archive, as I attempt an insider’s view, an empathic response to the narrative offered, rather than attempting to stand back and aim for objectivity. As “there is no single definitive way to do IPA” (Smith, & Osborn, 2007, p. 54), in this section, I have chosen to focus on one specific account, as a case study, which offers the

description and interpretation of the experiences by a correspondent, and I will offer the researcher's view in parallel. I decided that an in-depth exploration of one account which included various types of RSE would offer a clear understanding of how the experiencer made sense of her RSEs and how the researcher might respond.

In the following section I will juxtapose those two perspectives. Some accounts, as will be seen particularly in the example below, offer a rich assessment of the fruits of RSEs by the experiencer. Such correspondents describe the changes they have made to their lives as a result of their experiences and detailed analysis of a single account can be valuable in highlighting the way in which RSEs and their effects are explored by the experiencers themselves. Although each RSE is unique, as is its interpretation, one account, especially when it ranges over a lifetime, can offer an insight into how the various fruits of experience arise and are interpreted.

The perspective of the researcher, informed by scholarship, offers a view of the fruits of RSEs which may differ from that of the experiencer. The accounts in the Archive tell of significant events in the lives of the correspondents, whose narratives are viewed from a different perspective when studied. The events may be linked in a way of which the experiencers are unaware and at times the fruits may be more clearly discerned by the researcher, who brings an understanding of the field as well as wide-ranging experience of reading and hearing about accounts of RSEs.

A detailed analysis of an example from the Archive

In this section I have chosen to focus on one particular account which illustrates the interpretation of a range of experiences recounted by a correspondent, juxtaposed with comments from the researcher. Some of the types of RSEs recorded in the previous chapter will be drawn out of the account. This will afford an insight into how the experiences feel as well as how they are interpreted, giving an in-depth understanding of the RSEs and their effects. The intense nature of so many of the accounts in the Archive is better appreciated by immersion in one person's experiences, rather than in a series of short unrelated examples or extracts, as there is a depth of engagement with the correspondent through the course of her life. As there is no opportunity for in-depth interviews in my research, close involvement with an individual account offers an alternative.

I have chosen a particularly eloquent and lengthy account [004422] from which extracts are selected to illustrate a range of fruits of experience. I work through the account and extrapolate various categories of experience, which are then explored in more detail. The account was sent to Edward Robinson by a Welsh woman, then 46 years old, whose parents were "agnostic and anti-church" although coming from a family tradition of missionaries, so she recorded her religious background as Christian. She recounts a wide variety of RSEs from her teenage years onwards, including mystical experiences as well as an experience of evil. However, her initial experiences were uplifting.

Reluctance to share the experience

She begins her account, as so many correspondents do, by explaining that she has hardly ever shared the experiences. In this instance, she was initially

invited to contribute to the Archive by Edward Robinson and then encouraged by a well-known spiritual teacher, who gave her the confidence to write to the research centre. She also explains that her profession enables her to feel competent in describing “mental phenomena”, one of the reasons for selecting this particular account for detailed analysis. After an apology for not sending her account before, the correspondent explains the reason:

I found it a very difficult area to write about, having told nobody at all about them in my younger years & very few people now. Martin Israel, who is kind enough to see me from time to time, encouraged me to go ahead and put something down for you, partly because as a psychiatrist I am used to thinking of & describing mental phenomena. Perhaps the most useful thing I can say is that these “experiences” (not all are clear cut & obvious, some are uncertain and shade into everyday life) cannot be “evaluated” in the same way as other mental states of experience because they have the quality of being not only self authenticating but being the ground or standard by which everything else in my subjective experience can be & is judged. This phenomenon itself is not unknown in abnormal states of delusion & hallucination but is not as common in them as might be supposed & in my experience invariably leads to progressive mental deterioration, pain, and eventually psychological & social disintegration, whereas the only objective test of spiritual experiences is that they show fruit in enhanced sensitivity & maturity, and lead to growth in all areas of the personality.

The ineffable nature of RSEs, one of James' marks of mystical experience (James, 1902/2002, p. 295), is evident in the reference to her difficulty in expressing what happened during her experiences, something frequently found in the accounts in the Archive. She describes the elusiveness of the experiences, as they meld with each other. The dichotomy often referred to by scholars (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 27; Astley, 2020, p. 7) between sudden, dramatic RSEs and longer-term spiritual awareness seems to fade in the context of her life as the experiences "shade into everyday life".

The correspondent's reluctance to share the experiences, is a widely recognised feature of RSEs (Hay, 1990, p. 84; Astley, 2020, pp. 23-24). Here it is overcome by trust in the recipients of the communication. Hardy's standing as a respected scientist with an interest in the spiritual was pivotal in gathering accounts for his research. The academic respectability of the RERC and its Archive remain of fundamental importance in continuing the work. Yet researchers must never forget the intensely personal nature of the revelations granted by the correspondents. It is incumbent upon us to honour their sharing of RSEs by careful, sensitive engagement with the accounts.

The correspondent suggests that the experiences cannot easily be evaluated, as they are of more fundamental importance, in that they comprise "the ground or standard by which everything else in my subjective experience can be and is judged." This highlights the significance of such experiences, as they affect the whole perspective of the experiencer, how they view life, themselves and others, often leading to a re-evaluation of what matters. It is that transformation which my hypothesis seeks to explore in Chapter 9.

In the extract above, the correspondent refers to fruits as the test of a genuine spiritual experience in contrast to harmful delusions, which the researcher recognises as reminiscent of the assessment of James (1902/2002, p. 186). Her comprehensive assessment of the fruits of RSEs as leading to “enhanced sensitivity & maturity” and “growth in all areas of the personality” highlights her own sensitivity and maturity, evident throughout her account.

Loss of sense of ego

At this point in her account, the correspondent explains her loss of the sense of ego:

In writing any personal account the necessity to use 'I' a lot makes me feel uncomfortable, as the most remarkable feature of spiritual experiences whether of heaven or hell is their outer-directedness even occasionally to the total loss of a sense of self.

Her analysis of this loss of ego is reminiscent of mystical experiences and as described in James and Ward (James, 1902/2002, p. 187, 213; Ward, 1998b, p. 31) and of Happold’s seventh criteria of mystical experience, the sense that the familiar, phenomenological ego is not the real self (Happold, 1963/1990, pp. 48-50). Happold goes on to link this with the Hindu doctrine of the *Atman* as the true Self and the Christian *ground of the spirit*. I did not select loss of sense of ego as a category to be explored in my final spreadsheets, guided by the low 6% finding in pilot study 1 for “sense of non-ego self”, and no instances of a “vision of non-ego self” in pilot study 2. However, this aspect is included in the hypothesis that RSEs lead to a turn from self-centredness to altruism, which is explained further in Chapter 9.

Evaluation of RSEs over time and religious affect

As is the case with many contributors to the Archive, she explains how the RSEs remain clear in her mind despite the passage of time. She then moves on to consider the experiences in relation to religion, where, despite the Christian context, she finds that the fruits are of more significance than the RSE itself:

There is also the paradox that although on the one hand these are the most significant things in my life and probably the most enduring in that they do not seem to fade like memories of ordinary experiences – yet I know that in my christian life, they are somehow the least important – one of the means by which the Spirit calls my attention & then works on me, one contribution I make to the corporate body of the church, but certainly not more valuable than my simple presence at worship on Sunday or the least christian service I give to others.

Her experiences remain clear in her memory and inform her decisions as she follows their guidance. She recognises that despite the powerful, long-lasting nature of the experiences, what is important is that they are interpreted as calls to worship and service. The way in which she lives out their guidance is more important than the experiences themselves. There is a modesty here, which highlights the genuine nature of her RSEs, and the fruits are evident in her work in the community. My choice to focus on the fruits rather than on the experiences themselves is mirrored in her views.

At this point in the account, the correspondent breaks off and explains that revisiting these experiences brought back many memories and again she refers to the difficulty of putting the experiences into words. She explains that there were

then several years without any particular RSEs, just normal, everyday life. When she resumes her account, she mentions that RSEs have come to her at various times throughout her life and again refers to her reluctance to share them.

Guidance

As has been evident above, the correspondent follows the guidance of her RSEs. She explains how over time, her inability to speak of her experiences changed, and it is notable that when she did share her experiences, the outcome was positive:

Linked with the experiences of my first thirty years & an inseparable part of them was what I can only describe as an embargo on speaking of them, stronger than an inhibition. I think I could not have told anyone about them at the time though I was a very chatty, open ordinary girl. This has now been lifted and occasionally, I have felt a definite push to tell someone in a specific context - always with beneficial result.

The “definite push” she refers to would be considered an example of guidance in my categories. It is significant that this goes against her own natural inclination to secrecy, but she follows the inner guidance nonetheless and the positive response to sharing the experience seems to justify her faith. I found a high percentage of instances of guidance in my exploration of the Archive, although interpretations of its provenance vary from a definite conviction that this came from God, to much more general views. But it is usually found that following the guidance leads to good results. Often the trigger is prayer for help in making a decision, and the subsequent success of the guidance frequently reinforces the conviction that the RSE is genuine.

Feeling loved

The lifelong perspective of the narrative is evident when she mentions that her spiritual awareness stems from childhood, although she says, “I don't remember religion ever being a topic of conversation at home”. Immediately the separation between formal religion and her own innate spiritual awareness is evident. Even as a child, she is conscious of the difference between what she experiences and only later calls God, and her parents, although she is aware of some similarity and recognises that her understanding of love owes much to her parents' attitude to her:

I do not remember any particular spiritual experiences in childhood but as far back as I can remember I “knew” of the existence of God; whatever gradually developing sense I had of myself as an entity was accompanied by a sense of someone other, invisible and infinitely greater than any other “person” and different to them, a kind of powerful, pervasive force within the world but far from being impersonal was loving & beneficent with a real interest in me. No doubt the good loving attributes owed something to my knowledge of my loving parents, but God was someone quite definitely other & greater than them.

Here a sense of being loved is evident and an awareness of a caring presence or power, which she experienced before being able to analyse it as God. This seems to indicate an innate spirituality, not related to religious ideas, but reminiscent of views expounded by Schleiermacher (1799/1996) and of an awareness of a presence or power beyond the everyday self, researched by Hardy (1979/2006). Robinson's and Hay's explorations of childhood spiritual awareness

delve deeper into early development of religion and spirituality (Robinson, 1977/1996; Hay, 1998/2006). The correspondent's experiences are in line with Robinson's finding "in quite young children capacities for insight and understanding that had been underrated by the development psychologists" (Robinson, 1977/1996, p. 11). The account is an example of this innate spiritual understanding, typical of many accounts of childhood experiences sent to the RERC.

RSEs and religious beliefs

As she matures, she starts to reflect on her understanding of God, to her a certainty. But as she begins to consider the attitudes of those around her, she gradually realises that this is not the same for others. However, she is not swayed in her own convictions:

I did not attend church until at 13 years old I went to boarding school for the daughters of missionaries, as part of the family tradition. Services and discussion were obligatory but sensitively conducted and I think it must have been about then that it began to dawn on me with considerable astonishment that this "knowledge" was not universal, & that other people were either uninterested in God, like my parents, or believed in him as a matter of faith, not knowledge. Religious doubts in the usual sense have never been a problem for me - I could more easily doubt my own existence than that of what I know as God.

Although her own parents showed no interest in religion, the researcher notices that the correspondent comes from a family with a missionary tradition, so would assume that religion was nonetheless part of her environment, even if not

evident in her parents' attitudes. She also attended a boarding school for the daughters of missionaries, a religious environment. Perhaps the parents might have been SBNR, avoiding formal religion but not hostile to spiritual principles. The correspondent found it hard to reconcile her innate sense of the divine with the doubts expressed by others and had difficulty relating her inner understanding with Christian doctrine and beliefs about Jesus:

For many years this gave me an uncomfortable mixture of feeling "special" but lonely, occasionally feeling I must be some kind of saint but more often realising I must be a failed one! The lines about those to whom much is given also made me distinctly uneasy as I heard others wrestling with religious doubt. My doubts were about the church and the christian religion, particularly where Jesus "fitted in".

This perspective is one frequently found when reading accounts in the Archive. Many people who have RSEs write of a difference between what their religion (usually Christianity) tells them to believe and what they have experienced for themselves. That is what led me to explore the various changes wrought by RSEs on beliefs. The correspondent worries about her family in view of the church's teachings:

Other problems causing me great anguish at that time were those relating to salvation. The fact that my parents and brother & many others I loved were not Christians made me fear to lose them; in the rather rigid doctrinal framework of that time, it seemed that they would not be saved.

This "us and them" view is found in various religious traditions, particularly among those of a more fundamentalist persuasion, and raises

questions for those whose RSE seems to indicate a greater perspective of love for all, regardless of religious adherence. This is an aspect considered by Sorokin, who stresses that “in-group altruism tends to generate an out-group antagonism” (Sorokin, 1954/2002, p. 459). He strongly advocates universal love, but lists its martyrs, including Socrates, Jesus and Gandhi. Interreligious discrimination resulting from the idea of one true religion, needs to be countered by teachings of universal love and tolerance (Hoffmann et al., 2019) and RSEs seem to point towards altruistic love towards the whole of humanity, as opposed to supporting tribal solidarity.

Awareness of unity and interconnectedness

It is not until this point in her account that she describes her frequent mystical experiences of ecstasy, which took place over several years after being baptised:

All had a profound and lasting effect on me. In these experiences time ceased to exist but I suspect they took up very little earth time. There would be a sensation of being drawn up through and out of myself, often in response to an instant of joy at a picture of beauty, - a tree, a sunset cloud, a great cathedral. This went on to a total submerging in the person of God himself in which all that could be felt was total worshipful joy, lasting for all eternity and yet no time at all. Coming back felt intolerable & yet somehow beautiful in itself - one could feel the experience of the unimaginable being clothed in images of light and beauty as the only way the memory could cope with the experience - these expressed it only in a

very inadequate and partial; way & yet even these memories are of beauty infinitely greater than anything else seen on earth.

James' "ineffability" (James, 1902/2002, p. 295) and Happold's "sense of timelessness" (Happold, 1963/1990, pp. 47-48) are evident in her mystical experiences, which she describes as best she can. The fruits of these experiences were, "Always afterwards I would be filled with peace and fulfilment, a sense of deep gratitude and awe, and a great yearning for God." She does not relate those experiences to an awareness of unity and interconnectedness, which I explored in my spreadsheets as reflecting mystical experience, but to a submerging of her separate self into God, which would nonetheless be included in my category. Again she stresses, "I could never have spoken of or even hinted at these experiences to anyone else at this time." So far, her experiences were uplifting and there were no intimations of anything different, but as will be seen, the path of the spiritual life is not always smooth.

Negative consequences

In the categories I explore in the Archive, I have chosen to consider "negative consequences" rather than experiences of evil as in Jakobsen (1999). This was due to my focus on fruits rather than on the RSEs themselves. I wanted to find out whether RSEs always had positive consequences and in fact I found very few accounts of evil. However, this correspondent, despite all the firm and innate understanding of the divine, then described:

The single other experience at this time was quite different and horrifically unpleasant; it was a vision of Hell. It took place when I was 23 and a final year medical student. It blasted my priggish nice-girl good-christian image

of myself into smithereens from which no plaster saint image could ever be put together again. I suppressed most thoughts about it for years before I was mature enough, or recovered enough, to take it out and meditate on it fearlessly. It was, I am sure, the most formative experience of my life.

Here the reaction of not wanting to revisit a negative experience is explicit, which is quite possibly a reason for the very low percentage of negative accounts in the Archive. This was not an encounter with evil forces, but rather an experience where she was faced with a penetrating insight into her inner self, triggered by a gentle rebuke from a friend for a thoughtless remark she had made. She recognised that although not a great sinner, what made things worse was her apparent social virtue, which was suddenly revealed to her as a hypocritical cover:

It was the small sordid nastiness of me that was opening up pit after pit of blackness ... I began to see how all my assumed kindness & decency was a desperate attempt to get away from this evil in myself, how every one of my virtues had a flip side of unspeakable nastiness. This was not shown me as an abstract or intellectual idea. I was walking through a desolate swamp of stinking, stagnant water that I knew to be my own interior country.

Her experience was profound, devastating and prolonged, and she wandered through the night, weeping, until she eventually vomited. She was left physically and emotionally drained and it was several days before she recovered. Franks Davis admits that an experience of the recognition of one's own failings can be very painful (Franks Davis, 1986, p. 17). The consequence for the correspondent was:

Again, I could not talk about it and though time dimmed the horror I had to file the whole thing away for many years without thinking too much about it. It made me much more tolerant. but I think to some extent drove me away from the church at that time, as I seemed to have so little in common with what I saw of other Christians. ... Also I felt a hypocrite in the company of “good” people after this.

She felt that every one of her virtues had a flip side of “unspeakable nastiness”. This kind of parallel, where a range of positive experiences such as confirming, responsive, ecstatic and revelational were shown to have negative parallels, has been explored by Stark (1965, p. 115). The correspondent paints a vivid picture of evil, active and passive:

I saw that all evil can be reduced to two forms, the active and the passive. There is the evil that hates outwardly, that longs to crush & destroy everything in the universe & cannot rest while anything remains whole. There is the passive evil which longs to suck in all that is, until its vast swollen stomach contains the whole universe.

These days there is little talk of the Devil, but mystics such as Teresa of Avila were aware of the danger of their visions coming from Satan (Astley, 2020, p. 80). The view of good and evil in opposition in the world was found by Jakobsen in her research among the Inuit (Jakobsen, 1999, p. iii) and she was unsurprised by Maxwell and Tschudin recording that such negative experiences were frequently found among religious people, as she felt that this was due to the numerous references to the devil and evil spirits in the Bible (Jakobsen, 1999, p.

3). The recognition of the dark side of the self is reminiscent of the mystic's dark night of the soul, a sense of separation from God.

Again, the chasm between such an experience and the church is evident in the account of the experience. Instead of seeking and perhaps finding solace in religion, she avoided contact with Christians. The correspondent then lived with less spiritual intensity for seven years, working as a doctor and raising a family, with only spasmodic church attendance. Although not losing her love and reverence for God, as she looked back, she wondered if her experiences were linked with adolescence (particularly a period when she seemed to see Jesus as a rival, related to her own family sibling rivalry).

OBE and sense of assurance of survival of death

Her life then took a truly tragic turn, with the death of both her parents shortly after her son was born, her husband's mental breakdown and the death of her son, not yet two years old, in a road accident. As is often the case, it was at this lowest point that her next experience came:

this catastrophe finished the work of undoing my psyche that the vision of Hell had begun. Although I did not apparently break down - I "coped" in worldly terms - I was desolated. I had nothing and no-one, except God. I was nothing and no-one but God had me. While we were still in a state of shock, just before the funeral the Protestant Rector called and read the 23rd Psalm, in French. As the familiar yet slightly strange words swept over me, I was outside myself. I walked in a narrow valley - the valley of the shadow of death- on sharp uneven stones. It was absolutely dark but I was not afraid; ... I saw a simple countryside of hedges and meadows &

my son playing by a stream too shallow to hurt even the smallest child. He was playing with the total absorption & content I knew so well, and the main thing was that I knew he was absolutely safe for ever & ever. More - I knew that nearby though I could not see it was a beautiful “mansion” and when evening came, One would come out & gently lead him home to be cared for. This vision sustained me through the funeral and the return home and the difficult weeks after. I also had a number of brief experiences which I would classify among the so-called hallucinations of the bereaved, known to be very common. There would be a sense of Andrew's presence, hearing his chuckle or feeling his hand in mine or on my cheek.

Here, the OBE brought her comfort, and the sense that she was held by God got her through the funeral and the weeks afterwards, despite the searing pain. Although aware of the normal process of grief after the loss of a loved-one, her OBE seemed to give her a deeper sense of the continued presence of her child. It seems evident to the researcher that her previous RSEs enabled her to cope with such a devastating loss, a fruit of experience which nourished her in extremis.

Negative experience with positive outcome

After such a tragic bereavement and other difficulties in her life, she might have been tempted to turn from God in despair, but she was not. Her previous spiritual awareness carried her through the pain of the time after her son's death in an unexpected sense of divine support:

Very often during these weeks I would feel I was living in the presence of God. This was glorious and uplifting but at the same time frightening; I

was out of my depth & had a sense of being in a world whose atmosphere I could not breathe. I feel that the death of someone so intimately a part of me as my little son had drawn me into a spiritual realm beyond what my undisciplined and immature spiritual life had prepared me for, but oh, how ardently I longed to stay there! It was far more painful to return to everyday life and know I had to make an effort to live it for many more years. The transition was like using a limb that has been comfortably paralysed by cold until it thaws out. I came gradually through the process of mourning to live again an ordinary life & return to work, social life and so on, with no spiritual or other-worldly experiences for some years.

Here an experience of a different dimension seems to be indicated, a deep state of mystical awareness which is too intense to be maintained. Yet it seems that even in the depths of despair, in the midst of suffering, help does seem to be available. The OBE and subsequent spiritual experiences of support mitigate the pain, offering solace and ultimately a positive outcome. In my research I found that not infrequently, negative experiences eventually led to positive fruits, often of spiritual growth, although this may take time.

After writing this, the correspondent returned to everyday life. Her account ends with “to be continued” and a reply from Edward Robinson, but I have no knowledge as to whether or not anything further from her was added to the Archive. This highlights a disadvantage of research into an anonymised database, as there is no scope for further enquiry or follow-up. The correspondent was 46 years old in 1984, and if still alive would be in her eighties now.

This account with its overview of a lifetime of experiences, positive and negative, shows the intensely personal nature of such events, always linked to the situation of the experient, whether in childhood, later exploring the meaning of life, in uplifting mystical experiences or coping with deep trauma. There is an openness in her own response to the experiences and a lucidity in sharing them, which make it a good example to explore in detail.

Further reflections

Detailed analysis, as in the above account, offers the researcher the opportunity of immersion in an individual, autobiographical account of spiritual experience. The reader is absorbed in the life-story of the correspondent, sharing her experiences and her reflections on them. This is similar to our involvement in the parables, which trigger a response like that found by Robinson ending his lectures with a folk-tale (Robinson, 1978, p. 16) referred to in Chapter 2. A deeper level of engagement is felt as the experiences of the correspondent are shared.

This approach could be applied to any of the more articulate accounts in the Archive, offering the opportunity of an appraisal of how the experiences relate to the fruits. The above correspondent recorded a carefully written description of experiences from childhood to adulthood including positive and negative experiences, all of which were subsequently carefully considered by both experiencer and researcher.

It is evident that there is no smooth progression despite increasing maturity. The correspondent is at the mercy of events and it is how she reacts that matters. Attitudes to religious ideas and practice vary over her lifetime, and there are periods of withdrawal from the more intense RSEs. She is a person of faith,

and although her experiences could be evaluated as IEs as they fulfil Wildman's criteria, she might prefer the terms religious or spiritual experiences.

A comparison with other research into RSEs in the RERC Archive offers the opportunity to evaluate the similarities and differences between my approach and those of my predecessors. Timothy Beardsworth introduces the phenomena of his study as comprising some of the fruits (his term) of Hardy's investigations into RSEs – the first thousand accounts received by the then RERU. He focuses on the accounts of sudden, mystical experiences, rather than including long-term spiritual awareness, as do Hardy and I. Beardsworth's approach is phenomenological, offering quotations and comparisons, but refraining from statistical measurement (Beardsworth, 1977/2009 , pp. vii-viii), whereas later researchers included numerical data. His study considers visual, auditory and tactile experiences and moves to inward sensations and the sense of presence. He records the sex, marital status and age at writing and if given, the age at the time of the experience. In my pilot studies I investigated those two categories of age, but they were not always given, and I found the fruits to vary between an immediate transformation and gradual change over the years, but not related to the age of the experient, so I did not include age in my final research study. I also omitted marital status as it did not seem significant, and in today's society, categories of relationship are less clear-cut than Beardsworth's single, married, widow, widower. Beardsworth quotes numerous accounts to illustrate his categories and some are explored in detail, but he does not trace any individual correspondent through life.

Edward Robinson's study of the RSEs of childhood considers four thousand accounts from the Archive, of which he found 15% to refer to childhood experiences. In his study he includes many examples but focuses on the actual experiences rather than on the fruits (Robinson, 1977/1996). He is concerned to establish that the limitations assumed for children are unfounded (Robinson, 1977/1996, pp. 108-110) and alludes to their natural capacity for spirituality. He acknowledges the ongoing effects of early experiences in later life, at times recognised but sometimes forgotten until something triggers the memory; seeds which fell on unreceptive ground may later germinate. This was something which I also found and exploring the fruits of RSEs highlighted that aspect.

In his later study Robinson focuses on growth and the significance of RSEs, asserting at the outset that for an experience to be regarded as religious, it must make some difference to the person (Robinson, 1978, p. 3). This is my own approach, but I base my research on the accounts in the Archive, whereas Robinson interviews the participants in his study. Unlike Beardsworth, Robinson does include less spectacular experiences in his study, and he critiques James for his dramatic examples as leading to the thought of RSEs as being different from everyday experience (Robinson, 1978, pp. 21-22). For another volume, Robinson interviewed ten well-known people about their spiritual experiences and attitudes (Robinson, 1977). My study encompasses the RSEs of early and late contributions to the Archive, whether dramatic or not, with a focus on the fruits of experience immediate or long-term.

Maxwell and Tschudin's work, reported in Chapter 1, although in some ways similar to my own in giving a numerical appraisal, did not include in-depth

exploration of any accounts. In terms of fruits, they consider the purpose of religious experience (their terminology) “to reveal something that ordinary consciousness and this dimension are not able to reveal. ... This generally seems to be for the sake of others or for the common good” (Maxwell, & Tschudin, 2005, p. 39). This points toward my hypothesis. Their summation is that on the whole, the RSEs in the Archive are affirming “enhancing and enriching life; ... they are positive and benign” (p. 40) as I too have found. My study is similar to those of Fox (2003, 2008, 2014), in that I focus on a specific angle of experience in the RERC Archive, that of the fruits of RSEs. However, that focus involves finding out where the experiences lead and their effect on people’s lives, which has not been done before.

The IPA inspired methodology offers the opportunity to juxtapose the perspectives of experiencer and researcher, enabling a fuller understanding of the correspondents and learning from their personal experiences and analyses. Broader conclusions can be drawn from this approach, whether through a deeper understanding of the correspondent; a wider theoretical analysis of RSEs and IEs; or in terms of morality and lessons for life, the fruits of experience.

Conclusion

An IPA approach to a single account offers the opportunity to follow the progression of a series of RSEs in one correspondent’s life, gaining an insight into her feelings and her responses over time and learning from the insights she gathers. The variety of experiences and the various fruits of experience are explored in the context of a person’s life, enabling an appreciation of the range of RSEs and a deep understanding of their effects on the experient.

The deeply personal nature of the data contained in the Archive is highlighted this way, enabling an empathic engagement with the correspondent. Such an approach may help those who have not themselves had RSEs to understand the powerful effects of such experiences, and this method could be applied to other accounts. Such an approach may be borne in mind as the next chapter considers how religious, spiritual and secular responses to RSEs nurture the fruits of experience.

CHAPTER EIGHT
NURTURING THE FRUITS

Summary

Background

Changes in religious and spiritual attitude

Spiritual but not religious

Religious

Religious and spiritual

Neither religious nor spiritual

No change

Strengthened convictions

Intense experiences in the RERC Archive

Nurturing the fruits of IEs

The effect of the soil

Conclusion

Summary

Good fruit is produced naturally by a good tree or plant, but the harvest can be enhanced through care and attention and even sparse fruit may multiply over time if the plant is nurtured. In this chapter I explore whether this is the case when the fruits are metaphorical, whether the fruits of experience might be enhanced through religious or spiritual beliefs, practice and communities and I also consider the effects of a non-religious response.

Religious background is noted on the form for submission of accounts to the Archive and even those who do not use the form frequently mention their religious upbringing. RSEs are often interpreted in the light of background beliefs, which are sometimes helpful, sometimes not. I record changes in religious belief from the given background to the categories of spiritual but not religious; religious; religious and spiritual; neither religious nor spiritual; no change; strengthened convictions. Numerical data from the spreadsheets leads on to an exploration of accounts from the Archive. Through analysis of examples, I show how these changes were triggered by the RSEs and how this affected the fruits of experience.

Whether or not correspondents received understanding or support from their religion, like the soil on which the sower's seeds fell, was reflected within the accounts. I evaluate whether or not the fruits received religious or spiritual nourishment. To balance the religious and spiritual perspective, I then consider IEs and how the fruits of those experiences were or were not nurtured.

Background

The categories relating to religion and spiritual attitudes explored in the spreadsheets as recorded in Chapter 6 and Table 6.1 are not hard and fast but offer an indication of the background and mind-set of the experiencer and an assessment of the subsequent changes triggered by the RSEs. Many accounts describe a lifetime of change and development following both sudden and long-term RSEs. These are “experiences where the individual is prompted to contemplate, take stock, worry, and try to make sense of what is happening” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012, p. 188) and which are then analysed by the researcher.

Childhood influences and upbringing stay with people throughout their lives. They may be accepted with gratitude or kicked against temporarily or permanently, but they rarely quite disappear. This background plays an important role in how RSEs are interpreted and I have chosen to record changes in relation to that initial worldview. At the same time, I consider whether religious and spiritual interpretation and subsequent involvement – or not – with religious or spiritual organisations or individuals offered support for the experiencers in terms of nurturing the fruits of experience.

In the first thousand accounts 87% recorded a Christian background, in the final thousand, as expected, fewer people, just 57%, had been brought up in this way. Of the other religions, all apart from Buddhism and Hinduism, also recorded falls in numbers between the first and final thousand. There was a small increase in those giving Buddhist background from 0.3% to 0.7% and Hindu from 0% to 0.4%, possibly due to today’s multicultural society. If specific communities were

targeted for research, these figures would no doubt change significantly.

Interestingly, however, where I might have expected an increase – in a non-religious or atheist background – the numbers there also fell, from 1.3% to 1.1%. The numbers from an agnostic background also fell from 0.3% to 0%. Although very small, these figures perhaps indicate that religion is simply not considered as important these days as it was in the past.

The researcher may consider that as some experiences are the result of specific practices, possibly undertaken in an attempt to induce an RSE, it would appear that an inner transformation had in a sense already taken place. A sense of dissatisfaction, triggering a search for meaning in life, is almost transformational in itself (Tillich, 1968, p. 237) and the soil is then receptive for RSE seeds. Such experiences may not be sudden events but might occur over an extended period of spiritual exploration. The researcher considers the whole process, possibly taking a different perspective from the experiencer, who may not make such connections.

Many correspondents describe their religious or spiritual state before their experience as well as afterwards, enabling evaluation as to whether or not there is a deeper engagement by people with a spiritual or religious focus than is shown by those without. The parable of the sower illustrates how the seeds of spiritual understanding gained through RSEs may be responded to in different ways, some not taking root at all, some swiftly springing up but not lasting long, some being smothered by the cares of daily living, while others may germinate, grow and eventually bring forth fruit.

Donovan (1979/1998) explains that the beliefs of the experiencer are integral to the interpretation of the experience and to the value given to it. He

suggests that loss of underlying beliefs can lead to dismissal of the value of the experience, as a more reductionist explanation is accepted. However, he also admits that natural explanations cannot entirely displace religious ones, as it can be argued that God is inherent in all things, including natural processes. Interpretation is influenced by prior beliefs, but it is also the case that beliefs can be changed through RSEs, which was an aspect of my investigation of the Archive.

Changes in religious and spiritual attitude

It seems strange that Hardy recorded only 38.7 per thousand reporting “changes in religious belief” in the first three thousand accounts in the Archive (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 29), 3.87%, for as he said:

It is only natural that a profound spiritual experience is likely to lead the recipient either to question former beliefs and perhaps replace them by others, or to see old beliefs in a new light or suddenly to become confronted with what appears to them to be an entirely new way of looking at the world and its relation to what they had previously only dimly thought of as something unreal and remote – something which they had hitherto conventionally called God. (Hardy, 1979/2006, pp. 99-100)

I have recorded more detail, with six different categories to explore the range of changes in more depth and my results are considerably higher than Hardy’s. I also consider whether or not the fruits of RSEs were nurtured by those responses. Numbers for the various changes of religious and spiritual attitude are given in the categories below, illustrated with accounts from the Archive.

As for Hardy himself, in his youth he had experiences of nature mysticism, mentioned by him (Hardy, 1997/2004, p. 2) and quoted at length by Hay (2011, p. 43), which he did not reveal until he was in his eighties, but which influenced his whole life. He explained his own religious position as being in his mind a Unitarian, but in his heart belonging to the Church of England, although he did not resonate with C of E church services and hoped that more liberal attitudes would eventually be reflected in worship (Hardy, 1966/1978, p. 246).

The categories investigated below give an overview of religious and spiritual development, allowing the effects on the fruits of experience to be explored. In order to illustrate how attitudes can change over time, the following account [000344] from a Quaker is analysed in detail in an IPA approach. Beginning with a description of her religious background attending Baptist chapel, then Quaker (Religious Society of Friends) meetings and Quaker boarding school, she describes growing up:

I continued to feel a happy allegiance to the Society throughout my student years and after my very happy marriage - to a Quaker. At the same time I continued to feel puzzled as to the real meaning of religions.

Despite her involvement with the Baptists and Quakers, she is still searching for more understanding. Here the seeds of her eventual change are already evident, as religious involvement, pleasant and helpful though it is, does not satisfy her longing for more meaning. She then tells of a deepening of her religious practice, although she does not describe the trigger for this, continuing from the above passage:

It was not until my early thirties that Christianity suddenly became a living thing to me. The excitement was immense and stayed with me day and night. ... the main result was that I now felt that I could understand the Bible, hymns, religious writings and the utterances of my fellow Quakers. I felt I was sharing in vocal prayers instead of being a respectful spectator. She then tells of how her life settled into a pattern before being completely disrupted, leading to a new phase:

There followed a good many years of happy and confident activity of various sorts, both within and beyond the Society of Friends. Then my life was suddenly jolted into another groove by the grave illness of my mother, which began some exhausting years. For months at a time I could not attend meeting and I found that I did not feel deprived.

The change from a state of religious and spiritual uplift and regular attendance at meetings came when her mother was taken ill, not through any choice of her own. This led to long periods when she was unable to attend the Quaker meetings as she was involved in care for her mother. After the feelings of contentment and support which she received from her religion, it was with some surprise that she found that she did not miss the gatherings. This led her to another stage, an evaluation of inner spirituality and formal religion:

I now think of public worship as of little importance in itself, except as it enables people to know and trust and love their fellow worshippers on a deeper level than would otherwise be possible, and hence to work confidently with them where corporate action is required. The heart

of religion is for me something deeply personal and independent of any formulations of it. [000344, her bold font]

In this example, the experiencer, while admitting the sustaining strength of her own private faith, highlights the deep connection between people who share a spiritual or religious practice. Although this correspondent found she did not need it, such connections are nonetheless important for many who value the companionship of like-minded believers found through church membership or spiritual gatherings. The spiritual development of this correspondent may have been more influenced by her underlying beliefs and experience of the Quakers than she realised, sustaining her as she manifested the fruits of her own spirituality by subsuming her own life in care for her mother, an example of altruism. If I were to classify the experience as a whole, it would be under SBNR, as that encapsulates her final position and one which seemed latent throughout her story.

This account shows the difficulty of classification of the fruits of RSEs, as in so many cases development is ongoing as the correspondents tell their life-story. Change may be triggered by a sudden RSE or an awakening over time. Often the response comes later, when the experience is recalled and the experient realises that the message has been ignored and that change is called for. The categories below give an indication of the different religious and spiritual transformations recorded in the Archive, highlighting the way the fruits were affected by the changes.

Spiritual but not religious

The highest percentage of change from a Christian background was to spiritual but not religious (SBNR) with 36% in the first thousand and 34% in the final thousand. This was expected, as I am aware of a growing turn from organized religion to a spiritual approach to life in society as a whole (Hay, 1990, p. 61; Heelas, & Woodhead, 2005; Tacey, 2004). A comprehensive, qualitative study of SBNRs in America by Linda Mercadante revealed their reluctance to commit to any religious community, considering any religious authority as restrictive, “Many people spoke about not finding “the” truth, but finding “your” truth, indicating that truth is something relative and personal” (Mercadante, 2004, p. 183). She summarized the SBNR ethos as including “a prioritizing of personal growth over group identity, a relocation of authority from external to internal ... an abhorrence of the triple religious ‘sins’ of judgementalism, dogmatism, and exclusivism” (p. 192). Although no such analysis was undertaken by most of those who professed being SBNR, and many were in fact labelled as such by the researcher, that analysis was a helpful guide. Mercadante could have mentioned the teachings of Jiddu Krishnamurti, which similarly culminated in an SBNR attitude, as he denounced all formal religious traditions, advocating that each individual should find his or her own path to inner realisation. He maintained that:

Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect. ... Truth ... cannot be organized; nor should any organization be formed to lead or coerce people along a particular path. ... Truth cannot be brought down, rather the individual

must make the effort to ascend to it. You cannot bring the mountain-top to the valley.” (Lutyens, 1975/1983, p.293)

He discouraged followers and forbade any movement to be created in his name. His teachings, while simple, are not easy, aiming to bring the individual to an honest and self-reliant path of spiritual progress through freeing the mind. This view seems to be becoming more prevalent, as contemporary society seems to be moving towards a view which accepts RSEs while separating them from religious traditions. This is not a new trend, it was evident as early as Schleiermacher and James and is concisely articulated by Ninian Smart, “religious experience is part of the heritage of mankind, whatever one may think of the theologies erected around it. The rejection of the theologies need not necessarily imply the rejection of the experiences” (Smart, 1969/1984, p. 593).

At present, church attendance is falling. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in the 2011 census 59% in England and 58% in Wales were recorded as Christian, but data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study showed that in 2016 to 2018, only 29% of Christians in England and Wales actually attended services once a month or more (ONS, 2020). There have been strident attacks on the Church of England (Brown, & Woodhead, 2016) but possibly, like the expectation in the early twentieth century that religion had had its day and that the future would be secular, this may prove to be a premature announcement of its demise.

In the Archive there are many instances of people living in tune with the understanding they have received from their experiences but who have no involvement with formal religion. These are people who find that church services

do not resonate with them and who evolve their own private way to communicate with God. The fruits of these experiences seem to be a deeper awareness of the transcendent, but not expressed in religious observance. Such people do not form any kind of community, and in the example below, the point is made that they might not be counted when RSEs are analysed:

I am venturing with very great diffidence to write to you to say that I believe a greater number of people have had similar religious experiences than is often realized. ... we are rather a voiceless community, as we usually belong to ... [no] specific creed or religious sect ... It is not possible to put our belief into adequate words, ... but to put it as clearly as possible we believe in an Infinite Mind which enclosed & cares for everything both material & spiritual, & is the source of all Love, Truth, Wisdom & Beauty ... The great teachers who founded the enduring religions of the world have all tried to express this Infinite Spirit, with greater or less success, but never, I think, to their satisfaction, as it is beyond finite expression; ... I sometimes feel that the various churches are losing some of their appeal because they seem to lose sight of the Infinite in the finite doctrines & rituals of their particular persuasion. [000557]

Although the correspondent makes her critique of religion clear, she does not mention any fruits of her experience of the love to which she refers, other than in her own understanding. She is typical of those who after an RSE, feel that they have somehow bypassed formal religion and instead have gained a deeper awareness of God, or however they name ultimate reality, than they had before, thereby becoming spiritual but not religious. The inner fruits of experience are

reflected in this increased understanding, but whether this is conducive to nurturing any outward fruits of experience is not clear.

Some correspondents exhibit thoughtful engagement with Hardy and his work, which often includes an interest in the spirituality at the heart of other religions. In this case, there is a recognition of the importance of altruism as a spiritual outreach beyond formal religion, possibly a glimpse of the future:

A basic feeling of an all important meaning of life, a message of “love” and a need for every individual to find his own “level”. This fact being lost because of all the clutter of organised religion. ... A need to look into the religion of other great teachers Buddha {sic} & Mohammed to find “a truth” which is relevant to every section of culture. ... The fact that this “thing” religious experience is going to be lost if it is not changed and yet being changed, still recognised as all important eg. Shelter and other organisations are we felt the "church" moving out into the 20th century.

[000831]

Religious

This category includes changes from no faith to a religious tradition or conversion from one religion to another, which I recorded at 5% in the first thousand and 3% in the final thousand. Correspondents changing from their religious background and moving to other Christian traditions, including Anglicans and non-conformists, reflected falling numbers over time, scoring 21 in the first thousand but only 10 in the final thousand. Of the other Christian-based traditions adopted, Quakers gained the most with 16 in the first thousand and 11 in the final thousand, again an overall fall. That Quakers were found to be

numerous in the RERC Archive is perhaps not surprising, as when Chair of the Alister Hardy Society I found many members to be Quakers, as their focus on experience rather than doctrine and the silence in their meetings resonate with the RSEs at the heart of the organisation. The low percentages perhaps reflect the general trend away from formal religious adherence mentioned above.

Yet the Archive also contains accounts of Christian conversion, which frequently lead to a fruitful religious life. Here is a story of early religious affiliation being abandoned for some time until a crisis triggered a return to faith with a profound conversion experience, after which the correspondent found inner peace, was supported by fellow Christians and able to express her faith through service. Thus, the fruits of her experience were well nurtured:

I was sent to Sunday School and joined The Church when I was about 16 years of age. At the time my emotions were stirred and I did realise that I was a sinner and The Lord Jesus Christ had died for me. However I was rather scoffed at in the family circle and this passed completely. I hardly ever attended church for years after this and came to consider myself if not an atheist, certainly agnostic. After passing through a series of deep personal crises ... I did at an evangelistic meeting ... receive The Lord Jesus Christ as my Personal Saviour. Since then in spite of many setbacks, my life has been entirely changed. I have peace in my heart and find my greatest joy in reading the Bible and in prayer and serving The Lord and having fellowship with other Christians. I just long to be more like Jesus.

[000102]

However, if regular attendance at church services is sought as evidence of nurturing an RSE, then study of the Archive reveals few instances of people obtaining such help through formal worship or of the experience being enhanced thereby, “It affected my life by making my religious practices ‘easy’ for a few weeks. ... Again instead of religion being a hard slog, for a few weeks it was easy” [000065]. As is evident, this improvement was merely a temporary state ... and the way the religious practices are described, indicates that they were a chore, rather than helpful in nurturing the experience. This is an illustration of the seed springing up in rocky ground and withering without spiritual nourishment.

Indeed, many people explain that they did not receive help from within the church when seeking to understand their experience and accounts of rejection of RSEs by clergy are found in accounts in the Archive. Many correspondents feel that their profound experiences are dismissed, and as a result they often leave religious institutions, often becoming SBNR. Their experience seems to them a gift, freely given and often not connected to religious doctrine or ritual. Yet some experiences tell of a turn from scepticism to belief within a religious context:

In my early teens I drifted away from nominal church attendance. This was not a loss of faith as there was none to lose. ... In retrospect it appears that I had to leave God far behind before I could turn and begin searching for Him. Thompson's poem “The Hound of Heaven” captures the essence of the situation with real insight. My own flight from God had been strenuous and my subsequent spiritual growth seems to have gone through a long gestation period.

Further reflection and a slightly reluctant involvement on the side-lines of the church followed, but there was no real conviction until an experience during the Prayer of Humble Access at Communion on Easter Sunday:

In the words of John 3:3 I had been “born again”. From that moment my world view included a spiritual element which has a specifically Christian focus, as opposed to a vague searching for something complementary to empirical knowledge. ... it seems that Christianity is somehow “caught, not taught”. Together with my wife I am an active member of our congregation, as a house group leader and with an involvement in overseas mission, Christian education and apologetics. It is now very satisfying to use my teaching background in the service of the Gospel which I once denied. This particular “poacher” really has turned “gamekeeper”.

[005366]

Here the experience took place within a religious service, although exploration of faith took place over a lifetime. A sudden RSE turned the correspondent into a sincere Christian, enabling the fruits to be instantly and permanently nurtured by like-minded people in a formal religious context.

Religious and spiritual

This category was found in 12% of the first thousand and 6% in the final thousand, perhaps indicating that the spiritual is found more frequently outside religion these days. However, I found that correspondents in this category experienced their faith in depth and felt supported in manifesting the fruits of their RSEs.

In the following example, a person explains her religious background and her struggles and explains that, “I have many times passed through periods of mild religious doubt, and from time to time have honestly tried to think myself into atheism but at the end I have always come back with relief to my belief in God.” She attends her local Methodist church but explains that she does “not subscribe to many of my fellow-worshippers' conventional ideas.” She says, “I cannot point to any one particular experience where I felt a power from beyond helping me, but over and over again I have found the answer to pressing problems by opening myself to God.” She explains how she has evolved her own profound practice over time:

I try to fix my mind on the present, actual moment, the “eternal now” i.e. banish everything past (which includes even my thoughts as soon as I have thought them and everything to do with what is to come) from my mind. ... Then suddenly, I am aware that I am in the presence of my God. ... After a time I pray in words, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done", which seems to me to be the height of all prayer. ... I suppose the knowledge has been confirmed in me once again that He is there all the time, the Alpha and the Omega ... who indeed loves me, as a unique personality, with a love too great for me to understand. The sense of peace when one "knows that He is God", is quite inexpressible. One has glimpsed "it", the ultimate reality, if you like, for which mankind is in its heart always secretly longing. [000022]

The fruits of this person’s experiences are an enrichment of her spiritual life and she nurtures them herself. Although not drawn towards formal worship

but using the words of the Lord's Prayer with which she is familiar, she has evolved a flexible practice which she can use in solitude and as often as she wishes. This enables her to connect with God and to receive help and support in daily life, blending spiritual and religious.

In the following example, [005513] a journey through life with different phases is described:

During my teenage years I would have described myself as religious but there were many aspects of my life that I knew didn't square with my faith and I was conscious of keep [keeping] God at arm's length. However, I did read my bible daily & prayed in the mornings. ... I came in my systematic reading through of the NT to the account of Paul's conversion in Acts 9 ... "It is hard for you to kick against the pricks". As I read those words in the context of Paul's conversion my own conscience was pricked in a very significant way but at the same time the room where I was praying was filled with a sense of the presence of the risen Christ and I was assured that he had died for me and I could be forgiven the things in my life that I was ashamed of and that if I allowed him to come and share my life I could find an inner strength to become a different person. ... Christ became very real to me; rather than someone I knew about but was distant he became a friend. ... I had a strong sense that my life was in very safe hands because I had had an overwhelming sense of God's unconditional all-embracing love through the cross of Christ and so could be trusted.

It is at this point that the attitude of the vicar is disappointing, unfortunately something not infrequently mentioned in accounts, which can lead to distancing from the church. However, in this case, that dismissal was ignored:

I shared it with my local vicar expecting him to be supportive but sadly he was very dismissive and his response was to suggest I needed to see a psychiatrist. ...I knew that I had to test a vocation to ordination and was duly accepted even though my Vicar evidently wrote an extremely negative report about me for the CACTM (Central Advisory Council for the Ministry).

The correspondent, undeterred, proceeded to gain an MA (Cantab) in Theology. The fruits of love and compassion were evidently nourished on many levels:

Fruits: There was one very immediate significant change; my father married late in life and was 30 years older than my mother; within a few weeks of my birth he had a major heart attack & was a serious heart invalid all of my growing up years and I cam [came] to resent him and then I would actually use as strong a word as hate; I hated myself for hating him but felt powerless to change my feelings. Immediately following on that conversion experience Christ took away the feelings of hatred and replaced them with feelings of compassion and love; I had found it impossible to touch him, but from then on I found no difficulty in doing so. [005513]

Neither religious nor spiritual

Anti-religionists or people who are not religious or spiritual, who deny any value in religion or spirituality and dismiss RSEs as illusions, will presumably not have sent many accounts to the RERC and I recorded just 0.7% in the first thousand and 0.8% in the final selection, but their objections may be borne in mind when analysing accounts in the Archive. Of course, even if the spiritual dimension is denied, religious people might suggest that the Transcendent is nonetheless working through RSEs. However, if humans are spiritual creatures, whether or not affiliated to any religious tradition, as Hardy (1979/2006) and Wildman (2011) maintain, such experiences may be accepted as natural. RSEs will continue to occur and to “bear fruit” even in a secular culture and whether or not any kind of religious or spiritual origin is acknowledged. The experiences without religious or spiritual significance for the experiencer may be denied or ignored, and if acknowledged, do not seem to require anything other than a purely analytical response, and do not seem to lead to fruits.

Here is an example recalling experiences of precognition, which are not given a religious or spiritual interpretation, and which involve no fruits:

I am not sure that my experiences - forewarnings of future events, though vaguely and always via dreams - are likely to interest you. ... The number runs into scores, commencing at least twenty-five years ago. They generally presage disasters. The last but one concerned a violent explosion/earthquake, & a train disaster. Seven days later came the Brighton Hotel bombing & a train disaster. Like many such warnings, mine was imprecise. The themes can be major & minor, personal to

myself or concerning others. But they never give me the slightest impression of spiritual or religious concern, though I dream of persons who were closely related (& sometimes very much still alive) and I classify them as evidence of some sort of clairvoyant power. I gain no impression of any supreme force, though I am convinced of the inevitability of fate - which can amount to the same thing. [004594]

In my research I found only one person in two thousand who expressed having permanently renounced a position of faith. Although many correspondents described periods of unbelief or disaffection, they usually then told of a return to religion or even a progression of deepening spiritual understanding. This particular correspondent sent a letter to Hardy, challenging Hardy's views and discussing his own ideas relating to Polanyi, J.B. Priestley and consciousness. It was only Hardy's polite response which eventually induced him to send his own experience:

Dear Sir Alister, 23 Mar 70 The very considerable courtesy of your letter, date 13th March, obliges me to make a response which will be of use to you in your work. I therefore enclose a note of the most important of my experiences in this field. Being free from interpretative elements, it has raised, for me, some quite interesting problems. ... Home: Presbyterian, with strong Calvinist background; lay-preacher from University days, (St.Andrews, 1919-23) until the middle Thirties; thereafter moved to completely irreligious Weltanschauung. The "experience": sometime between 1935 and 1945 (sorry but did not take a note of this point). I was standing idly at a point on the road, looking westwards. In view was a

large plane tree, its bare branches outlined against a luminous, but colourless evening sky. Quite suddenly, it seemed that I was being looked at, very intently, and the look seemed to be coming from the tree, though whether it was the tree or the sky beyond which was acting I cannot say. I was so struck by the feeling of being inspected. The feeling was vivid enough for me to be able to recall the sensation, even at this date. I noted that it differed from my usual feeling, when looking at such an outline against this type of sky ... one of being myself looked at, and of astonishment. [000790]

The experience does not seem to have had any particular effect on him and no fruits at all are mentioned, nor is the cause for the change from lay preacher to an irreligious attitude to life given. The letter is full of his theories and comments on Hardy's research, but he gives no clue as to his own spiritual attitudes and certainly no consideration of other people or intimations of altruism.

The experiences in this section do not seem to resonate with a spiritual or religious aspect, unless it is an acceptance that one cannot know the nature of ultimate reality. There does not seem to be further enquiry or any kind of vision. Thus, the fruits are scarce or non-existent – the equivalent of seeds falling on the path.

No change

In the first thousand accounts I found 10% recording no religious or spiritual change and 4% in the final thousand. Gauging such a category was difficult as correspondents were not always clear about how they had been affected by their RSEs in terms of belief or spiritual attitude. Some in this

category did not give their religious background or refer to their beliefs at all – some had written to the RERC for advice. Others told of their experiences, but it became evident that their religious or spiritual attitudes had not been affected by their experiences.

Here is an account [000017] from someone who says, “Since my early 'teens' I have been an 'atheist/agnostic' - a leftist humanist. My attitude to religion has been sceptical with the idea that a belief in a superior being or an after-life was self-delusion, wishful thinking.” Yet he admits to two mystical experiences. He then describes his search for meaning in life:

We were on this earth for such a short time and I could not imagine any action I might take which would give me a feeling of doing something significant - making money, playing games - all normal actions seemed to be irrelevant and without significance.

He was deeply perturbed by existential questions and then had an experience which he found difficult to describe:

I used to wake up regularly in the night, always searching for an answer to my own and the world's problems. Always questioning the reason for existence - a typical example of anxiety neurosis. And then on this particular night I awoke. It is here I find the difficulty. How can I explain in words that which is inexplicable in words? The best I can do is to say that I awoke and felt a growing excitement, that something was happening to me. And this thing grew and took over my thoughts and my whole consciousness (I realise the danger of over-dramatising; I am trying to be factual). I felt that I was experiencing eternity. I didn't see anything or hear

anything. No visions, no voices. It was just a sense of being taken over by something outside myself, filling me with a joy and ecstasy beyond anything I had ever imagined possible. I felt I was part of this ecstasy and yet at the same time that all my doubts and questions were being answered. Not answered in a way that I can explain; it was just that the questions became meaningless in the face of this overwhelming something that had taken me over. ... The main difference I suppose is that I no longer looked for any intellectual answer to the problems of existence. I didn't become religious. I am still sceptical of most claims of extrasensory experience.

He had another similar experience twenty years later:

But you see, this happened to me, the logical sceptical me, and for once I can't accept my own rational explanation! After all these years I am still convinced that some "force" outside normal experience came into my consciousness. ... the essence was joy, ecstasy, wonder and awe all rolled into one.

Despite these two experiences, it seemed that there was no noticeable change to his thinking or behaviour, no discernible fruits at all. Yet he concludes:

At the time of the first experience I was desperately unhappy, searching for truth, refusing to be put aside by irrelevancies and wishful thinking.

The second time also I was very unhappy. I cannot imagine these experiences coming in any other way. Is it to do with the nature of people like myself? I am very sensitive to suffering. I understand the significance

of the phrase “all life is one”. ... I “feel” for everything and for the person who is weak or in any way cannot cope with life. [000017]

Although there was no religious or spiritual change, he nonetheless admitted to an awareness of something beyond his comprehension, which led him to a deep empathy for others and which was perhaps enhanced by his experiences. No fruits are mentioned, apart from his understanding of all life as one, so there was nothing to nurture.

Strengthened convictions

I did not include this category in my codes initially, but early exploration of the Archive led me to conclude that it was important and in the first thousand 30% and in the final thousand 16% described a strengthening of previously held convictions as a result of their RSE. Once again, the percentages show that in recent years religious faith is lessening.

Some accounts tell of a Christian background and describe a deepening of faith:

The process involves having a personal revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The result is a life lived with the conscious knowledge that God is in control and a joyful use of the gifts of the Spirit. [000575]

Another person recounts:

At the age of eleven and a half I underwent a religious experience and since that day of decision I have sought to serve God as revealed in Jesus Christ. My life has been enriched by the communion of saints, by the truth and beauty of the scriptures, by hymnology and above all by the saving and keeping power of the Christian faith. [000040]

This correspondent tells of answers to prayer and sums up the fruits, “I have found that without belief I would not have enjoyed the interesting life I have had. There have been times when I have had doubts about it, then after much prayer my faith has been strengthened a hundredfold” [000365].

The fruits of those people’s experiences were richly nurtured through their faith. They remained firmly rooted within the Christian context, exhibiting strengthened convictions over time. These are surely those where seeds fell on good soil and brought forth plentiful fruit.

Intense experiences in the RERC Archive

The category of IEs did not involve changes of belief or religious or spiritual views but was based on Wildman’s categorisation which was considered in detail in Chapter 4. When recording IEs in the Archive, I bore in mind his description of such experiences as, having “existential potency and wide awareness, involving both strength of feeling and interconnectedness of ideas, memories, and emotions in such a way as to engage a person with ultimate existential and spiritual concerns and leverage significant personal or social effects” (Wildman, 2011, pp. 268-269). The accounts often included all of these aspects as correspondents shared experiences which had moved them, which they clearly remembered and upon which they subsequently reflected, endeavouring to make sense of what the IEs were trying to tell them and how they should respond. Fruits were included as “significant personal and social effects”.

Wildman’s classification of IEs is a catch-all category, as attitudes to religion and spirituality, while analysed and differentiated, can all be included, as well as secular interpretations, “intense experiences are probably the principal

experiential driving force behind human spirituality ... whether designated religious or not” (Wildman, 2011, p.106). This makes IEs particularly relevant to today’s attitudes and explains why the category resonates with so many accounts.

The highest percentages in any category recorded on the spreadsheets, are those whose RSEs could be considered IEs, with 61% in the first thousand and 68% in the final thousand, showing a slight increase over the years. The correspondents’ interpretations did not include any mention of IEs, as they are a new concept (Wildman, 2011). As the researcher, I decided whether or not the RSEs described would be assessed as IEs.

Initially I did wonder whether Wildman’s category of ultimacy experiences, also referred to by Tillich (1968, p. 14) might be even more wide-ranging in application, as such experiences engage us with our ultimate concerns, as do RSEs. However, I decided that this designation is inadequate, as it does not include the emotional effect on the experiencer, nor the interconnectedness of ideas and memories, nor engagement with spiritual concerns, all of which are important to correspondents. People describe their experiences in the context of their own lives and share how they felt, how their beliefs were altered and the way they were affected. The category of IEs captures all those aspects.

As was seen in Chapter 4, there are many accounts from people who, while recording the transformative effects of their experience, deny any link with religion or transcendent reality although they may accept that the experience could fit into a broad definition of spirituality. They are convinced of the authenticity of their experience and absorb the message into the depths of their being, allowing their changed perspective to inform their lives, but they maintain

that this has nothing to do with religion. For them religion is institutional, static and involves ceremonies which do not seem to relate to their vivid experience. They would be comfortable with the label IEs for their experiences.

Hardy, too, considers humans to be spiritual by nature, with this expressed in a great variety of different religions and cultures:

On Hardy's thesis, spirituality is not the exclusive property of any one religion, or for that matter of religion in general. Spiritual awareness could be signified ... in secular and even anti-religious language amongst those who for historical reasons are alienated from religious culture. (Hay, 1998/2006, p. 23)

The correspondent below, despite being a self-confessed agnostic, describes this innate spirituality and how it flows out from her:

I have come to the conclusion, after years of mental conflict, that I am an agnostic. (I no longer suffer from any guilt complex on this score.) However I do sincerely feel that there is some inner and outer source which seems to give me comfort and refreshment - and "energy" - whenever I feel the need. ... I feel there is some indescribable force within me and outside of me - ever present and all pervading. I am aware of it when I consciously relax mind and body, the effect being a sense of peacefulness together with rejuvenation - as though I am becoming blended with the universe. [000033]

Here her innate spirituality is expressed and the fruits of experience are accepted and flow out from her in a natural way. The only mention of religion is her relief at having come to terms with being agnostic. She concludes with a

description of what could be considered a good example of the category of IEs and its fruits of altruism:

General Views: I do not worry any more about conforming or not conforming to certain schools of thought. One's religion or philosophy of life, I consider, is particular to each individual and as that individual develops so may his beliefs or aspirations change. As I see it at the moment, my purpose is to try to improve my own personality so that I may be of use to others, ... doing my job as tutor, as wife, as mother and grandmother and friend to the best of my ability as frequently as my humble mind and body will let me - the indescribable force which I "feel" seems to help in this sometimes difficult task! [000033]

The usefulness of IEs as an all-encompassing category is illustrated in these examples and in those at the beginning of Chapter 4. The correspondents come to a view of life which is their own, taking from religion what suits them but feeling no compulsion to conform or to subscribe to beliefs they find impossible to hold. They are able to explore their own spirituality, which sustains them.

Nurturing the fruits of IEs

My research is concerned with the fruits of IEs, and whether they are nurtured without spiritual and religious support. Fruits need to be considered within the context of the whole lifetime of the experiencer, and in this account [001019], the correspondent describes a Unitarian background, service in World War I, including a miraculous escape from death and interfaith experience in the Indian Army. He describes an IE in South America:

I can also recall one instance of, perhaps, "natural" religion which came to me at about this time. My belief in the Unity of the Divine was strongly reinforced by the nature of those wide open spaces because, alone with one's horse on the flat "pampa" with the level horizon all around and the unbroken vault of the sky above, with oneself a small dot in the middle of that immensity, I found it impossible to imagine any sub-division of the magnitude of God.

He concludes by describing the fruits, which in his case led to a wider understanding of ultimate reality, opening new ways of thinking about God with an evaluation of how to live, which echoes the hypothesis:

So I gradually came to realize that there is a Power available to help us humans who try to condition ourselves to receive it. A Divine Power, it seems to me, which "works in mysterious ways" and, provided we are tuned aright, makes contact with the nervous system of the heart and brain and induces us to act thereby. If this unproved theory were the case there are likely to be as many shades of "tuning in" as there are religious minded people, but all with this condition in common, I believe, - that the motive must be unselfish. [001019]

This example illustrates the power of an IE to enhance spiritual development, and the correspondent emphasises that a quality of unselfishness is necessary for nurturing the fruits. This recognition of ultimate reality is spiritual, typical of many IEs, and evidence that a turn toward a greater reality can help to nourish the fruits experience, without any supporting community or belief structure.

Below is another account of an IE, where altruism is sustained by a spiritual awareness:

I am unable to accept the symbolism of any major world religion, and yet I always feel that there is something outside of myself outside of conscious thought. ... 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 a part of it, everything is. It is purely personal, and helps me to live and to love others. ... 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. [000663]

The effect of the soil

As has been seen, there is an enormous variety of RSEs and IEs in the RERC Archive, all of which have some effect on the experiencers. If the parable of the sower is borne in mind, all types of soil are evident in the above examples. Sometimes regret at the lack of fruits is expressed, a recognition that more could have been made of an experience, the seeds falling on the wayside, snatched up by birds. Some people find immediate solace from their experiences, but then do not explore further, they are stony ground, where roots are shallow. Others intend to respond more fully to their experiences, but the duties and cares of life – or life's more enticing distractions take over – the seeds fall among thorns. But it is evident from the accounts explored in this chapter that the fruits are best nurtured where the experiences take place within religious traditions or where a deeper development of spiritual practice is found. This is the good soil, where the seeds produced grain, growing and yielding fruit thirtyfold or even a hundredfold.

Religious or spiritual communities can be helpful and supportive in nurturing the fruits, providing this good soil, especially for people who need the support of others. Some correspondents are content to develop an inner spirituality which sustains them and enables them to express the fruits of their experiences outwardly. There does seem to be a correlation between a spiritual focus, whether or not formally religious, and the successful nurturing of the fruits of RSEs and IEs. As the experiences are considered over a lifetime, it is evident that unlike the seeds of the parable, people can change. A realisation that more should have been done as a result of an RSE can be rectified, perhaps by changing religion or switching to a different profession.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the fruits of experience in terms of changes in religious and spiritual attitudes resulting from RSEs and IEs in a variety of categories, and the effect this has had on the nurturing of the fruits of RSEs and IEs. The parable of the sower led to a consideration of RSEs and IEs as the seeds, and the various responses as the different types of soil. Whether or not the correspondents found support from their religious background has been explored, and the various changes in religious affiliation and attitude have been recorded, with examples from the Archive to illustrate the great variety of responses to the experiences.

Both RSEs and IEs can lead to transformation, and it does not seem that formal religious belonging is necessary, although it is helpful for many. Few people having an RSE seem to turn to religion to nurture it unless the experience took place in a religious context. Although the beliefs that people have grown up

with help them to interpret what has happened, many people then seem to blend the experience into their daily lives, nurturing it in their own way.

Responses take place at various levels of engagement. Some accept the RSE as a one-off and leave it at that. Others explore further, some eventually finding what they seek, others not. The most fruitful are those who ask what the experience means and how they should respond, and this may lead to a lifetime of religious, spiritual or secular engagement. IEs are no different, some leading to religious or spiritual involvement, others not. In all cases, the best nurtured inner fruits are then expressed outwardly. Thus fruits can be seen to grow, develop, ripen and be shared as they are nurtured; but they may also be disregarded. This will be explored in the following chapter as the hypothesis is considered.

CHAPTER NINE
A TURN TO ALTRUISM

Summary

Background

Formulating the hypothesis

Results of the empirical research

Examples of the hypothesis

A turn from self-centredness to altruism

Altruism in a religious context

Altruism without religion

Altruism enhanced by self-transcendence

Altruism with no turn from self-centredness

Altruism as a result of experiences of love

Altruism as a result of experiences of unity and interconnectedness

Opposing views

Avoiding an RSE

Conclusion

Summary

The research question, “Can the hypothesis that a turn from self-centredness to altruism is the dominant category underlying the variety of fruits of experience, be supported through analysis of the RERC Archive?” is explored in this chapter. The background to the hypothesis is given, leading to a consideration of supporting and dissenting views, illustrated by extracts from the Archive.

Many correspondents are searching for meaning and so describe the fruits only in terms of their own attitudes to life, death and spirituality, the inner fruits of experience. Others tell of changes, also inner, in how they value other people and then move on to describe the effect this has on them and on those around them, the external fruits. In many accounts this is not explicitly stated but is deduced from the text.

Whether or not there is in fact a turn from an attitude of self-centredness to one of altruism is also explored. Is there an opposite turn to self-absorption? Do experiences of feeling loved lead to a motivation to give love? Do accounts of mystical experiences of unity trigger transformations from inward looking self-focus to an awareness of our interconnectedness with each other and does that lead to altruism? Is there evidence against the hypothesis? Are there people who turn their backs on RSEs and what are the consequences?

Background

My focus on altruism stems from finding that in biblical sources and in the scholarly literature, it seems to be assumed that the fruits of RSEs should include a transformation from self-focus to self-transcendence (Astley, 2020, pp. 75-77). Hardy and Hay refer to the research of Edwin Starbuck (1899) as showing that conversion experiences lead to increased love of others, thus to altruism (Hardy,

1979/2006, pp. 101-102; Hay, 1998/2006, p. 156). Chapter 5 showed that at the heart of a spiritual approach to life lie love, empathy, compassion and altruism.

In a paper which offers a reflection on the transformed mentality of those who have had RSEs, Kurt Keljo and Tom Christenson explain how the experience informs the lives of experiencers thereafter, notably in terms of relationships. They draw attention to the earthly fruits of religion in terms of relationships, “Religion primarily has an affirming relation to life and the world, and does not only show a relation to some super-natural reality. This relation is characterized in personal-relational terms: love, loyalty, fidelity, trust” (Keljo, & Christenson, 2003, p. 387). It is this aspect of RSEs which is the focus of the hypothesis explored in this chapter.

As I explored the principal fruits RSEs, those of a sense of comfort and guidance, I found that the experiences, interpretation and subsequent beliefs and behaviour of the correspondents often reflected another important fruit, an awareness of a greater purpose or new direction in their lives, which was also found by Hardy (1979/2006, p. 29). Contributors to the Archive told of being lifted out of depression, having their fears calmed, their problems solved or being aided in a spiritual search. They felt comforted and guided through inner promptings. Correspondents seemed to be shown a path in life, and to receive assistance in taking it. People felt changed in unexpected ways, in terms of their own inner attitudes and in how they responded to outer reality. Those changes seemed significant, and I detected an underlying pattern of receiving help to cope with life leading to a change of perspective, from looking inward to outward.

Putting these two changes together, I decided that rather than focus on comfort or on guidance *per se*, I would explore the direction of that guidance, which seemed to be towards universal love and compassion. My empirical research indicated that RSEs of feeling loved seemed to trigger a motivation to give love, thus to altruism. In the Archive I found that many correspondents explained that this love seemed to them to be the basis of life's meaning and once they had experienced it, they were filled to such an extent, that they were moved to love others. I felt an exploration of that particular aspect of human nature and behaviour was of importance for individuals and society.

I also found that many accounts of mystical experiences and NDEs led to a sense of unity and interconnectedness, which brought people into a different relationship to others and to the world as a whole. This new perspective altered their views on life, death and consciousness to such a degree, that they were transformed, feeling empathy with people around them, which was particularly evident after NDEs (Sartori, 2014; Sartori, & Walsh, 2017). This seemed to me to be a remarkable fruit of experience and again worth further exploration.

Formulating the hypothesis

The hypothesis was conceived as a way of bringing together the huge variety of fruits of experience found in the Archive. As has been seen, each RSE is unique, and located within the context of an individual life. I wanted to find out whether there was an overall pattern in the fruits of these experiences and decided to explore whether there is an underlying transformation of perspective. Chapter 5 explored the assumption that humans are by nature selfish and suggested that this may be challenged. Nonetheless, I formulated the hypothesis in the light of

contemporary attitudes which assume that humans are by nature self-centred in order to explore whether RSEs might change people's values and move them towards altruism.

As my research progressed, I realised that there are many ways of conceptualising altruism. Ricard begins his exploration of altruism by asking, "Is altruism a *motivation*, a momentary state of mind that aims at accomplishing the good of others, or a *disposition* to care for others in a benevolent way, pointing to a more lasting character trait?" (Ricard, 2013/2018, p. 15, his italics). He then goes on to explore how a range of scholars have understood altruism, as well as analysing concepts such as goodness, benevolence, solicitude, kindness. Ricard's Buddhist perspective leads to his summing up:

Altruistic love is characterized by unconditional kindness toward *all beings* and is apt to be expressed at any time in favor of *every being in particular*. It permeates the mind and is expressed appropriately, according to the circumstances, to answer the needs of all. (Ricard, 2013/2018, pp. 25-26, his italics).

This definition lies at the heart of how I view altruism in my research and have recorded it in my data. Some theorists include action in their definition of altruism (Post, 2014, p. 179), whereas I do not consider that necessary, although in many cases it happens. I consider that someone with an altruistic disposition would, if called upon, help, as altruism is an attitude of mind, focused on the welfare of others rather than on the self, which may or may not lead to action. In my research I have sought evidence of a new perspective following an RSE, which changes the heart and mind of the experiencer. Altruism does not

necessarily involve self-sacrifice or high cost helping, as is often maintained, neither is it negated if there is a sense of joy or satisfaction in helping another, if the motivation is their benefit (Batson, 2019, p. 24).

At the heart of the hypothesis is the dichotomy of a motivation to care for the welfare of others as opposed to a self-centred attitude (Batson, 2019, p. 22). This contrast is inherent in my recording of support for or opposition to the hypothesis in the accounts. Although some accounts include descriptions of changes in attitude and behaviour, many do not, yet there is often evidence of a new perspective within the text.

Focus on the welfare of others as opposed to being self-centred is at the heart of the hypothesis, expressed concisely as “Self-fulfilment ultimately depends on self-transcendence. ... that the meaning of our lives is to be found beyond ourselves” (Grant, 2001, xix). I analyse whether the correspondent acknowledges a change due to the RSE or whether there was already an altruistic disposition, and whether or not the altruism is related to religion. Some correspondents recognise a religious background as the basis for altruism, such as the Christian understanding of God as love, *agape* (Sorokin, 1954/2002, pp. 3-6) or the Buddhist *karuna* (Ricard, 2013/2018, p. 16), which is selfless compassion that expects nothing in return, not even gratitude. Some correspondents feel and understand this, but not all make any such religious connection.

Results of the empirical research

The percentages relating to the hypothesis are found in Chapter 6, recording 34% in support in the first thousand accounts with 0.5% opposing it, and in the final thousand 23% supporting the hypothesis and only 0.1% opposing

it. Only 7% were found to exhibit no turn from self-centredness, which seemed to indicate that there was indeed often a change in attitude as a result of the RSE.

The higher percentage in the early accounts seems to reflect a greater acknowledgement of the need to help others than is evident today. About a third of correspondents indicated this turn to altruism in the early accounts but just under a quarter in the later sample. This may be linked to the higher percentages of Christian background in the early years, where the commandments to love God and neighbour were taken as the norm, or possibly linked to an increase in social services being available for the vulnerable and elderly today, lessening the need for individual help.

The categories of feeling loved frequently seemed linked to a loving attitude towards others, with 22% feeling loved and 20% loving others in the first thousand and 19% and 12% in the final data set. The figures in the spreadsheets indicate that almost everyone who featured in the “loving attitude” category was also in the “feeling loved” category, although not vice versa. This seemed to point to a link between an awareness of love, however experienced or analysed, and altruism. Once again, a slight fall in these percentages is recorded in the more recent accounts, possibly reflecting a more secular outlook.

One way of changing direction from self-centredness to altruism is through having the humility to recognise that one needs help in order to help others, that one’s own capabilities are limited. People often find that by handing over their problems to a higher power, they receive help, which enables them to cope in ways beyond what they feel they could manage alone. As Hardy said, “On so many occasions men and women have achieved, by what they call divine help

or grace, that which they, and others who knew them, would have regarded as being beyond their normal capabilities.” (Hardy, 1966/1978, p. 26). The Archive is explored with a view to finding that pattern of transformed capabilities as manifest within the vast range of descriptions of RSEs and their consequences.

Examples of the hypothesis

This section offers examples of the hypothesis and variations of it, beginning with an account clearly showing a turn from self-centredness to altruism and another describing release from fear for herself, leading to a focus on others. These are followed by examples from within a religious context and others without religion. Accounts of altruism enhanced by self-transcendence are given, and others with no turn from self-centredness. Experiences resulting from a feeling of being loved are followed by accounts describing of the effects of mystical experiences of oneness.

A turn from self-centredness to altruism

Some examples of the hypothesis exhibit a clear transformation from self-centredness to altruism, as in the following account, the second in the Archive:

I think it may be relevant to say that from 1957 to 1966 I was almost all the time very unhappy indeed. I suffered from acute pain in the back, lived in poverty, in a state of sorrow and a good deal of loneliness. I experienced unhappy relationships with relatives and neighbours and suffered from doubt in God or after life and many other troubles. In 1966, I was one day alone in the house when quite suddenly I became aware of my own attitude to life. I realised that I was wrapped up in deep self pity, that my thought were all for myself and my own sorrows, that I had not thought of others. I thought how others in the world suffered too. I was

rather shocked at my selfish attitude and was filled with compassion for others; then, as if without thinking I knelt down in the room and made a vow to God that from then on for the rest of my life I would love and serve mankind. The following morning when I awoke I had a sudden experience, for into my mind poured knowledge (which knowledge has remained with me ever since). I knew that the love and service of mankind was the will of God for mankind. That we are to love all; that we serve God by serving his purpose and by our service of others, that God is manifest in all living things, that the brotherhood (of brotherly love) of the whole of humanity is a fact which we must intentionally strive to bring about on earth, that mankind must turn away from selfish pursuits and work in obedience to the will of God (with selfless service and love) for the evolutionary progress of mankind, loving all living things, and hating nothing and no one. [000002]

This comprehensive account offers an example of how recognition that the root of misery, both physical and psychological, was self-pity, led to an RSE and to altruism. Acknowledgement of the correspondent's own self-centredness led her to a deep feeling of contrition, which triggered an RSE. She was comforted and received help and guidance for the rest of her life. The fruit of the experience was not only a lifting of her unhappiness but an abrupt and lasting change in perspective. That transformation was expressed in love of everyone and everything. This is a clear example of the hypothesis, that underlying the various fruits of experience is a turn from self-centredness to altruism.

In the following account, the correspondent tells of how her fear for herself was calmed by prayer, which enabled her to accept her fate and to trust in God. She then describes how this immediately led her to help others in a similar situation:

May I tell of an experience I had eighteen years ago. I am a Methodist Minister's wife and I had been speaking at the Women's Fellowship on Psalm 56, verses 3 and 4, "What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee. In God will I put my trust". The same week I had to go into hospital for a major operation. I remembered the last address which I had given, and I was ashamed of my fear. Fear of death, perhaps; nevertheless, I was fearful of the consequences. I was alone in a small ward and the day before my operation a lady came into the ward selling newspapers. I bought a Sheffield Telegraph and in the middle page was a prayer. Immediately I read it I knew that it was for me. I could not believe my eyes; it was so wonderful, surely sent to me just then by God and by Him through a Presbyterian minister. This is the prayer: O Lord, I have no excuse for not trusting Thee; but have every reason to be ashamed of my fear. Why should I fear when Thou art ever near and art faithful to Thy promises? Make me to feel that my distrust of Thee is not only emotional but also a moral fault, a fault that is a sin. Lord if I don't trust Thee, whom can I trust? Lord Jesus, I will trust Thee altogether, for it were better to perish trusting Thee than to live in the grip of fear. Amen. My fear went clean away just like a cloak falling from me. I knew I was entirely in God's hands whatever happened, whether I lived or died. I was compelled

to tell others of this wonderful release from fear and so I ventured into the reception ward where I knew six other women were waiting the same ordeal. I shall never forget seeing those women and realizing that through this prayer they too experienced the same power and release from fear. Because of this rich spiritual experience I have dedicated my life to helping the sick in mind and body, and through healing intercession work have proved the power of God to heal many people, especially the sick in mind, and believe with all my heart "That more things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of." [000123]

The turn from worries about her impending surgery and concern with herself, through the comfort brought by the prayer, led to altruism, which then continued throughout her life.

Altruism in a religious context

The account below clearly locates the experience within a religious context and is an example of the type of experience of a power beyond the everyday self which Hardy was looking for. It was sent in 1969 and is a good example of the hypothesis, as it describes the experiencer being led against her will but nonetheless following the guidance in altruistic service:

I write as a Licensed Church worker doing full time Christian service within the Church of England as a social worker. My experience has included first of all a sense of a greater force, outside the human sphere, at work in the creation of the universe and a sense of wonder and mystery at the heart of life, at the same time accepting all that science is discovering and the theories of evolution as part of that force at work. Secondly, my

experience has known that force at work giving new direction and purpose and enabling power to cope with life, at times of deep distress and hopelessness, illness and difficulty. The important point about this is that this was not merely a question of receiving these things for one's own use, but the very quality and nature of that force ... called forth from me, freely, a response whereby I came to want to use these gifts, in his service. ... In my case my work has not been of a kind that I would have chosen for myself or been remotely interested in without this experience of a call, which I can only describe as a "mental voice" from within me firmly telling me what I should do with my life. I rebelled against it then and do so at times now, many years later, but I was aware then that if I did not follow I would be rejecting He whom I believed in and I did not want to do this, and now I can only find peace of mind and guidance through being willing to follow where he leads and then I find completeness and satisfaction in my life through freely giving myself to his service. ... I suppose many of my points could be argued away, but in the end one can only know from one's own experience and the more one is aware of one's inability to cope, and one's inadequacy, the more real and valuable is that experience. [000075]

The experience of God sustaining the correspondent in times of trouble led her to an acceptance of God's guidance towards altruism, a recognition that receiving was to lead to giving. That this conviction was maintained even against her will is significant, as her own desires are superseded in her understanding of

the necessity of obedience. The account is clearly an example of a turn from self-centredness to altruism.

Another experience recounted by a Christian was of music, seemingly from another dimension, which led to an understanding that this life is not the end. The fruits were those of altruism:

For the next few days I was filled with the most indescribable joy and then my life began to change direction. I felt called in my nursing to hospice work and years later, to the ordained ministry. Both in the care of the dying and in Church work, the experience has never left me and I still look back on that night as a pure gift from God and I hope this account will bring hope to many. [005339]

The following is an example of altruism accepted as a Christian duty, yet the correspondent faced difficulties in giving what was asked of her. There was no doubt as to her motivation and willingness to give, but the circumstances were challenging. A direct appeal for guidance was answered in an extraordinary way and followed:

At the end of last year a friend from abroad wrote to me asking for an urgent loan of what seemed too large a sum for me to cope with at that time. ... It was only the week before that I had said to the Lord, "my finances are running low, please don't let me run out", while I kept a tight rein on further expenditure. To receive that letter almost sent me into depression. ... So I did what I always do when perplexed. I dropped down on my knees and put the issue to the Lord, saying please tell me clearly what to do. If you say I must send it, I will, trusting in You not to let me

run out. A couple of days later, during my morning devotions, I came across a passage mentioning the words 'freely give, freely receive'. I glossed over the thought telling myself the reference was too vague to be an answer to my prayer. ... Just another 2 days later I was doing that day's section of my weekly Bible study ... The last verse in that section (verse 42) read - "Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you, do not turn away" (NKJV). I was stunned, though I should not have been. I asked for a clear answer, and I got it. ... Next day I went to the bank and ordered a cheque. At the end of the following week, I received a letter from Inland Revenue. ... I opened the letter with apprehension, only to find a cheque and a letter of explanation, saying that it was tax owed to me from my 1999 tax return, (4 years previously), accompanied by an apology for delaying it for so long, hence an addition of an extra sum which was interest for the period. In total I received over one hundred and fifteen pounds more than the figure I posted off to my friend one week previously. [005357]

The act of altruism was difficult, although there was never any lack of altruistic intent. The correspondent was given guidance in a way she could hardly believe, but she obeyed, not knowing how she would cope without the money. She gave, not expecting to receive. An attitude of trust was acted upon and she found that her generosity was rewarded in a seemingly miraculous way.

Altruism without religion

In the following account there is a clear turn from a miserable, self-centred life to one of self-transcendence through a powerful RSE, but this does not lead to any form of formal religion:

A particular moment came when, overwhelmed by what seemed the utter futility of things, I utterly broke down and, in blind desperation (sitting alone by the margin of some field) spoke into space something like, "Oh, God! You come and see to my life, I can't run it alone". I did not, of course, expect any kind of response. Following this I sat quietly, feeling exhausted, for some minutes. I was then aware of a curious "light" which seemed to grow up within me, and which became stronger and more defined as the minutes passed. I cannot now say how long it took to develop, but the "ecstasy" lasted over roughly three weeks. The main sensation was of being loved ... I also felt a unification of myself with the external world: I did not lose my own identity, yet all things and I somehow entered into each other ... it is clear that my life is quite different as a result. ... "I" am a different "I", partly again overlaid with selfish desires, yet with "self" still extended in some way to include external things, in whose well-being or otherwise I actually participate. ... I have never, before or since, gone willingly to church; it seems irrelevant.

[000793]

Another correspondent makes the same point about religion, after an overpowering and completely unexpected experience of what she was convinced was God. She goes on to explain how her life was transformed:

I told no one about the experience; it changed my life radically, but apparently in ways that were apparent only to me as no one else appeared to notice any change in my behavior. I did not return to church; nothing seemed more obvious to me at the time than that the churches had no idea what they were playing with. ... Fruits [from questionnaire]: This is now 38 years ago. Nothing in my life has had a comparable significance. This experience was absolutely pivotal. ... confidence based on a sense of utter security, a deep joy, a sense of “kinship”, a shared identity with people, plants, animals, even things - as though there is nothing trivial or unimportant anywhere, nothing that should be despised. An abiding, active and emotional love of God. [004581]

The experience, although of God and life-changing, did not lead to any formal religious observance. Her intensification of love for God would not be expressed through worship but possibly in her attitude to others. Despite her feeling that no-one seemed to notice a change in her outward behaviour, she certainly experienced an inner transformation.

Altruism enhanced by self-transcendence

The example below concisely expresses the feeling of being one with others, the individual merging with those around her which leads to altruism:

This sense of “oneness” is basic to what I understand of religion. Hitherto I think I had only experienced it so irresistibly towards a few individuals, sometimes towards my children or when in love. The Effects of this Experience have been, I think, a permanent increase in my awareness that we are “members one of

another”, a consequent greater openness towards all, and a widening of my concern for others. [000504]

The following account offers an example of handing over to a higher power, which although not a turn from self-centredness, is an example of a turn from self-reliance to self-transcendence. It led to moving experiences where the fruits were remarkable. The experiencer was already involved in working for the good of others as a missionary doctor, and this was an experience of being able to do far more than normal, through divine help. This example is reminiscent of Hardy’s view of the fruits of spiritual experience as enabling people to achieve what would have been considered beyond their normal capabilities (Hardy, 1966/1978, p. 26):

I was working as a woman doctor in a remote mission hospital in West Africa at the time. For a variety of reasons one other M.O. and I were, temporarily, the only doctors in a 160 bed hospital with a large outpatient department. The other doctor suddenly became acutely ill and had to be off duty for ten days. It looked an impossible situation but it had to be faced. I prayed that I might somehow be made adequate. The thought came at once that, as it was manifestly impossible to examine the patients in the wards as one would normally do, at least I could touch each one with an unspoken prayer for healing. This I did, unobtrusively, in the guise of feeling the pulse, made a snap diagnosis of the new patients and ordered treatments. ... In this way we got through those ten days without, as far as I was concerned, undue fatigue but with a real sense of peace. That alone was remarkable but what impressed me most was the extraordinary number of rapid and rather inexplicable recoveries that took place during those ten days. It was so noticeable that the staff remarked upon it though no one knew what was in my

mind at the time. I had not, myself, expected it, rather the reverse, in view of the lack of normal medical procedures. The experience was pin-pointed months later when one of the African nurses at the end of the morning round, asked me to go back to see one of my patients who was crying. When we asked her the matter, she said that she knew she would not get better because I had not “touched” her. She said that people in her town who had recently been in the hospital had returned home “cured” saying that it was because I had “touched” them. This, I know, can be explained away easily, but there remains the fact, that, in normal examinations such as I had already performed on the patient in question, and on others, I had certainly touched a good deal. I think I had always had a basic prayerful longing for each patient's recovery but in the crisis described above there was obviously something else at work. [000024]

Altruism with no turn from self-centredness

As many experiences in the Archive took place in childhood or told of a constant sense of awareness of God during the early years, there was then later in life no turn from self-centredness to altruism, as this seemed to be ingrained. Attitudes are shown to vary throughout life and in some cases particular RSEs are recalled, but without the sense of a fundamental change of perspective. Some correspondents whose lives have been devoted to the service of God then have a powerful experience, resulting in continuation or enhancement of their altruism, but there is no turn as suggested by the hypothesis. This extract from a lengthy account of a lifetime's experience recalls one particular RSE:

I have never experienced the “golden light” experienced by some people but I have heard the voice of which Isaiah speaks. It was quite unexpected.

One afternoon, when I set out for a round of pastoral visiting, I turned right downhill, having visited the uphill section the previous day. It was my custom to plan visiting carefully, systematically and with prayer. As I turned right, a clear voice at my shoulder said TURN LEFT. I looked behind me quickly, it was so sudden. No one else was in my short road which joined the main road. I stood still and it came again: TURN LEFT. Then I knew who it must be. And I said “God, I did that section yesterday & earlier this week.” TURN LEFT was repeated. So I said “Give me a name”. The answer came, “Mrs W.....” I had visited her only the previous day but I set off to her house. She was blind but knew my voice when I asked her at the door if I could help her in any way. She exclaimed that she had been asking God to send someone & I replied the He had told me to come. [004553]

This correspondent maintained her service and care for others right through her life, continuing her account:

Aged now 85 and a half I am confined almost entirely in bed but here I have kindness and good care and am very happy though physically hampered and crippled. I can still exercise a counselling ministry by correspondence, and people write and tell me their troubles and ask for my prayers. [004553]

Altruism as a result of experiences of love

Some of the most moving and powerful RSEs are of a sense of being loved (Fox, 2014). I have found that such experiences almost always lead to a feeling of love for others, thus to altruism. This is apparent in the remarkable

extract below, as the correspondent tells of her state of mind preceding the profound experience and the fruits:

I had been very restless, feeling that my life must surely have some other purpose than was apparent. ... Then just as I was exhausted & despairing ... I had the most wonderful sense of the presence of God. ... it was a feeling of an all-embracing love which called forth every ounce of love I had in me. It was the tenderest love I had ever encountered & my sins were blotted out completely. I imagine this lasted for about two minutes & in that time everything became clear. There was a purpose behind everything & everything fitted into a marvellous pattern - "the secret of the universe" were the words that sprang to my mind afterwards. ... The consequence has been I think an awareness of other people's troubles ... a desire to help which has taken more concrete form than before, a heightening of my ability to worship, a love of holy communion & a very deep thankfulness & wonder that I was allowed such a wonderful experience, who was so rebellious and intractable. [000308]

In the following example, the correspondent felt filled with love, enabling her to offer selfless love:

I walked down the street, and felt such warmth flooding through me - uplifting me and filling me with love. It was definitely an infinitely beautiful source of love, which has stayed with me, enabling me to love more freely, without conditions, and I believe to act as a channel for light to pour into our world from a great source of good. I do believe that man is limitless, that we are all part of one another and that if we can all accept a

more holistic approach to our world, living for all and not ourselves, we can rescue our world from the pain it is now inflicting on itself. [004696]

Another correspondent tells of an experience of being filled with love, leading to her being transformed and left with the following insight:

How tragically we waste our time, and how precious the moments are we are given; how all that matters is to get on and LIVE God's overwhelming love for us all every minute of time left to us on this earth. How nothing, but nothing matters except to pass on His love as I experienced it then.

And at the same time I was also filled with total certainty that, in Mother Julian's words, "all will be well and all indeed shall be well". There was, in those brief seconds, a glimpse for me not of this life or of this earth, but above and beyond it to an encompassing total certainty of love and goodness. ... Fruits: And of course my life is totally changed. I am not a saint now still a sinner. But I have been allowed to glimpse Eternity, and it is up to me how I use the truth of my experience for the rest of my life.

[004982]

Below is an experience of being filled with love, which led to a change of perspective, from one of self to one of love for others. Here it is clear, as is so often the case, that RSEs take place when the experient is at their lowest ebb, which seems to enable an opening to the influence of the transcendent:

At the end of last year I was very low and depressed, I felt so much love for people but seemed locked inside myself and unable to communicate, imprisoned in my own sadness. The feeling was awful, but at the beginning of this year I read a book called "The Gentle Brother" which

seemed to awaken in me a beautiful awareness, and instil in me a peaceful at-oneness – with the world. I began to see colours, great big shoots of blues and purples as I walked down the street, and felt such warmth flooding through me – uplifting me and filling me with love. It was definitely an infinitely beautiful source of love, which has stayed with me, enabling me to love more freely, without conditions, and I believe to act as a channel for light to pour into our world from a great source of good. I do believe that man is limitless, that we are all part of one another and that if we can all accept a more holistic approach to our world, living for all and not ourselves, we can rescue our world from the pain it is now inflicting on itself. [004696]

These experiences of love almost invariably leave the correspondents transformed. In cases of depression stemming from self-absorption, or cases of dissatisfaction with life, such experiences bring a new perspective. A focus on the self is turned to a focus on others.

However, some correspondents describe their experiences and do not draw any further conclusions regarding how they view others. Not every experience of being loved leads to a feeling of love for others:

It was as though I was deliberately being allowed to see and know something private and holy. As the awareness faded I was filled with awe and wonder that all the power and love of God was concerned with me. I could never recapture this experience, try as I would. I cannot say that my life was in any way affected by these things. The great need for God was still there, but I certainly knew without a shadow of doubt that He was

concerned for my ultimate well-being and would work in me toward that end. [000054]

Altruism as a result of experiences of unity and interconnectedness

As scientific progress underpinned atheism and materialism, science itself is now involved in the increased understanding of the need for spiritual values in a move to transcend the materialist view (Taylor, 2018). Experiences of unity, as attested by the mystics, are now supported by quantum physics, bringing science and spirituality together and RSEs of unity and interconnectedness lead to a view of humans as interlinked, entailing an appreciation of our close relationships with others, and thence to empathy and altruism.

The following correspondent describes an experience of nature mysticism which led to her being overwhelmed by compassion. She then wonders whether, as humans evolve physically, we might also evolve spiritually as a result of RSEs. This is an interesting and unusual conjecture, that if humans are innately spiritual, might this deepen over the generations – particularly if RSEs are accepted and valued. Wildman sees IEs developing as humans evolved in the post-axial period, and concludes that such experiences, when extricated from religious embedding, and accepted more generally are an enriching aspect of life. This may be considered a beneficial goal for individuals and society, particularly if altruism is a consequence. This an extract from the account:

Surely history testifies that whilst it is still unhappily true that cruelty and ruthless selfishness still hold powerful sway in mankind, we do not accept as in centuries gone by the horrors done daily in the name of religion or "divine right". I believe man-kind seeks to improve his very "being". Is it

possible that the wisdom of his descendants could be affected by “physical” changes brought about in the genes as a result of spiritual experiences of the individual? [000464]

In the following account, the fruits of a mystical experience are long-lasting and clearly those of altruism:

Fruits: This was experienced almost twenty years ago but I have never forgotten it. It changed my life, giving me a strong feeling of empathy for all the people around me and even all those I have never met. ... [from questionnaire]: it made me much more aware of the feelings and needs of other people. It made me realize that we were all part on [of] one great whole. I felt more responsible for the results of my words and actions. I realized I had a choice as to what I believed, my attitudes, my motivations. [004764]

The particular fruit of experience described in an account of giving birth, is a sense of “self-forgetting” which leads her to altruism:

I had taken part in the universal cycle of birth and death and in the struggle for life. It was a totally self-forgetting experience, as I felt part of the immediate whole. I was caught in an intense timeless moment in which I lost my own sense of self-identity. Fruits (from questionnaire): I think this, and other similar experiences, have helped me to feel empathy for others. [004664]

This is an unusual account, as few experiences of giving birth are found in the Archive, nor are such experiences much studied (King, 2008/2009, p. 85). However, AHT Trustee Tanya Garland described her OBE which took place

during childbirth. It led her to a focus on spiritual experience and research with the AHT. She also trained to work with refugees as a teacher and counsellor, thus an underlying turn to altruism (Garland, 2019)

Opposing views

I recorded only 0.5% in the first thousand and 0.1% in the final thousand accounts in the category “opposes hypothesis”. I had decided to use the binary categories recording “supports hypothesis” and “opposes hypothesis” on the spreadsheets to get an understanding of the views of the correspondents. I did not find any accounts in the Archive which led to self-centredness, nor any which elicited malevolent attitudes towards others. It may be that such negative motivation precludes response to the Hardy Question, so that the Archive does not reflect the more selfish, even evil side of human nature. Under “opposes hypothesis” I recorded those who mentioned that there was no turn towards altruism as a result of their experiences.

On closer inspection of those accounts, however, I realise that in fact they did not record opposition to the principle that RSEs lead to a transformation to altruism, but contained an admission that despite an RSE, there had been no change in their own attitudes or behaviour. The expectation that there would or should be a change towards altruism seems to be universally accepted. Whether that is in fact the case, is explored in the accounts below.

This account contains an admission that there were no lasting fruits from the RSEs. Despite the comfort given by the experience, the correspondent is not transformed as much as she feels she should be. Whether this is an over-modest self-assessment is not easy to gauge, although I suspect it might be:

I was filled with peace and joy and with a deep humility, and could only bow down in the holiness of the presence of God. ... I felt a great urge to serve mankind in any lowly way. ... What has been the effect of this most profound experience on my life? Psychologically, and for my own peace of mind, the effect has been of the greatest importance. ... But I doubt whether it has made me a better person, for many people who have had no such experience are much more self-giving than I am and more devoted to the service of mankind. Whatever “good” I do is done from a sense of duty rather than any inspiration. [000388]

Some people seem almost unchanged by their experiences, although they treasure them. After an experience of light while paddling in Lake Garda, this correspondent summed up the lasting effects of her experience with no reference at all to any inner change, admitting to a sense of inadequacy:

I am in a way ashamed of having had such a wonderful experience & of not having had my life changed by the event ... my religious feelings are (1) a sense of wonder (& I often go back to that moment, & (2) a conviction that all the design in the universe comes from Divine Intelligence – it seems very weak & poor. [000119]

Other correspondents tell of RSEs which seem to have had no lasting fruits – apart from being clearly remembered:

During a quite ordinary walk near the centre of a City an intense emotion overcame me having as its central point the idea of love in the agape sense. ... In this sense, that it can be recalled, the experience may be said to have made some difference to life, but it made no noticeable alteration

to habits of thought and behaviour. I am even doubtful whether to regard this occasion as a religious one: no idea of God, personally or impersonally conceived entered in; the emotions were principally engaged, and the whole matter could have been the result of some emotional build-up to which I am subject. The only facet which makes it in the least outstanding is the fact that I retain the memory of it so clearly and can "recall" it. [000754]

Another correspondent, who described his beliefs as veering between atheism, agnosticism and Christianity, recounted an experience in the ruins of Fountains Abbey, but admitted to there being no fruits of the experience:

It was this holiness, in the sense of wholeness, to which I briefly felt attuned as though I were really in touch with life in all its continuity and purpose. ... Although the memory of the event was vivid and still is, it has not as far as I can tell made me act upon it in any concrete way and I have not for instance apparently become more religious nor do I attend church except for births, marriages and deaths. [000853]

These accounts are at variance with the hypothesis in that there are no discernible fruits of the RSEs and no turn from self-centredness to altruism, although they do seem to assume that there should be changes. Such experiences are, however, rarely found amid stories of positive effects within the Archive.

Avoiding an RSE

It seems that some people have an intimation of a power beyond the everyday self, which they choose to ignore. In a sense, this opposes the hypothesis, as it is a rejection of what might challenge the everyday order and

routine of life. Such experiences may be more numerous than appear in the RERC Archive, as the turn away from strange, potentially powerful experiences is perhaps a normal reaction for people who do not believe in a spiritual dimension or who suspect that there may be more to life than initially appears but prefer not to engage with it. They may not respond to the appeal for RSEs, recognizing their own hesitation to engage with such experiences.

The following is an extract from the only experience in the final thousand accounts explored, which I recorded as “opposes hypothesis”. Although it did not exactly negate the hypothesis, it was an example of avoiding an RSE, which the correspondent was aware might have had a powerful effect. He snapped out of the situation and returned to the everyday and subsequently admitted to there being no fruits. He was listening to music in a church one afternoon, a rehearsal for a concert:

I must have fallen into some sort of trance and I suddenly became aware that when I came out of it I would burst into tears and go on and on crying. Fortunately I came out of this state and continued happily with our day out. However the feeling I had was overpowering and has remained with me for some time. I was not unhappy or depressed. Fruits: It did not influence any decisions I made or how I live(d) my life. [005447]

Here is another account, where it seems possible that an RSE might have occurred, but the correspondent admits to turning away:

... then one morning on waking, a knowledge that a tremendous force was bearing down on me. I called it God; it was like a great flood and I knew with certainty that I had to “build a defence against it”, or be

overwhelmed. It was another level of awareness, like an opening in consciousness. ... it has been obvious to me that had I been willing to let go my intellectual pride and selfishness, that incoming tide could have done its work on me. ... I have in myself failed to build on the experiences of 1953. [000108]

The examples in this section serve as a contrast to most of the accounts in the Archive, which were often the result of a deep dissatisfaction of some kind, physical, psychological or spiritual. Change was sought. The correspondents above were fairly satisfied with life and did not want the disruption which acquiescence to a power beyond the everyday self may well have triggered.

Conclusion

In the Archive many people offer a self-assessment of the fruits of their experiences, describing how they felt, what changed in their own lives and how that affected those around them. Their assessments seem modest rather than self-aggrandizing as they often ascribe their attitudes and beneficial deeds to a higher power.

From those testimonies it is evident that the fruits of experience range widely, from lifting of depression or fear; giving up drugs or alcohol; finding a new direction in life and above all, experiencing love – feeling loved and expressing love for others. The range of fruits were explored in Chapters 6 and 7 and in this chapter, it has been seen that so often beneath the variety of personal fruits lies the transformation from an unsatisfying focus on the self to a full, loving engagement with life and other people. This change of heart, an inner shift away from self-centredness, elicited a variety of individual responses but which

overall indicated a turn to altruism. The most plentiful fruits of RSEs and IEs evident from this study of the Archive stemmed from this change of focus toward love and compassion for others.

This transformation was manifest with or without involvement of religion. In some cases, the RSE led to rejection of formal religion, replaced with an acknowledgement of an ultimate reality from whence came love, offering comfort and guidance, which seemed to remain with the correspondents throughout their lives. Other correspondents related their experiences to their religious beliefs, practices and communities, which sustained them in their response. In those cases, it was apparent that they were often led to a deeper religious engagement, which encouraged and supported altruistic action. What was not always the case, was the actual outward evidence of a response. Intentions did not always lead to action. However, it did seem to be the case that RSEs were expected to and in fact did entail new, less selfish attitudes. There was often a sense of love being at the heart of the experience and ideally of the fruits. This will be further explored in the concluding chapter, which will address the research questions and evaluate the findings.

CHAPTER TEN

FROM I TO WE

Summary

Structure

First research question

Second research question

Third research question

Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

Conclusion

Summary

This chapter concludes the thesis by returning to the three research questions, with a consideration of what has been established by this study as well as offering suggestions for future directions of research. An evaluation of the effect of the metaphor of fruits of experience, which underlies the thesis is given, followed by the results of the first research question, an overview of the variety of fruits of RSEs in the Alister Hardy RERC Archive, with a particular focus on the changes in attitude to religion and spirituality. The second question is linked to the first in relation to those changes, as an interpretation of RSEs which offers the opportunity to include a non-religious understanding is explored, that of Wildman's category of intense experiences. This is followed by a consideration of the third research question, whether the hypothesis has been upheld, that underlying the variety of fruits of experience found in the Archive is a turn from self-centredness to altruism.

In conclusion, I offer a summary of the contribution this study has made to our understanding of the fruits of RSEs as recorded in the RERC Archive and the significance of this in the wider field of the study of RSEs and IEs. This is followed by an assessment of how this study might have been improved and suggestions for further research. Finally, I indicate the implications for individuals and society as a whole, of the fruits of RSEs and IEs.

Structure

The mixed methods approach is taken to the research, analysing the first and final thousand accounts of RSEs from the RERC Archive in a quantitative approach, offering an overview over time, coupled with an IPA-based qualitative

analysis of particular accounts. This offers an in-depth assessment of the fruits of experience. The metaphor of fruits of experience underlying the thesis is not original, as it has been widely used in the Bible and in the scholarly literature, usually related to the establishment of the genuine nature of religious experiences. However, I chose to explore the nature and variety of those fruits, with a focus on just how experiencers were changed.

Metaphors “free the imagination to think of many possible connotations” (Ward, 2020, p. 35) and in this study that of the fruits of experience extended the range of exploration to include the themes of seeds, growth, maturing, harvest, sharing and especially nurturing. I think of the fruits of RSEs as developing over time, not as the isolated results of one-off experiences. The metaphor also led to the parable of the sower, with the range of responses to RSEs considered as different types of soil, explored in terms of religious, spiritual and secular attitudes within individuals and in society as a whole. Underlying the research was the image of seeds growing and maturing, as it was evident that when people felt loved and supported, when their troubles were eased, and they were nurtured, they were able to turn outwards, to blossom and care for others. Simply focusing on consequences would not have opened the analysis of the Archive in such a rich way.

The IPA approach was particularly helpful as I juxtaposed the correspondents’ responses with my own analysis, detailed in one particular example, but borne in mind throughout the thesis.

First research question

The first question, “What, in the RERC Archive, are the ‘fruits’ of RSEs in terms of inner transformation and outward behaviour?” has not been previously specifically researched, despite the widespread citation of fruits in relation to RSEs in the religious and scholarly literature. A decline in Christian background between the 1970s and the 21st Century is evident from the percentages found in the early and late accounts in the Archive. Yet I found evidence of spiritual awareness, often in a gradually evolving and maturing relationship to a power beyond the everyday, both immanent and transcendent, as expressed by Hardy (1971, p. 2; 1979/2006, p. 139).

Fruits develop over time, as the experiences are reflected upon and absorbed into the life of the correspondent. RSEs are hardly ever experiences of God or of religious figures, but rather felt as a presence or power which may be interpreted as God, an awareness of a spiritual dimension, but one which has personal effects, the fruits analysed in this study.

My initial focus regarding the range of fruits is on the changes in spiritual and religious attitudes, which are at the heart of the inner transformations and many correspondents told of embarking on a spiritual search or of re-evaluating their faith. Although many turned away from formal religious belonging and practice after their RSEs, as their experiences did not seem related to worship or doctrine, they nonetheless often describe a different, deeper spiritual engagement. Others feel a strengthening of faith after experiences which seem to confirm their convictions, and there were accounts of coming to faith from a position of unbelief.

Religious or spiritual interpretations of RSEs can offer a coherence, linking events in people's lives in a discernible pattern within a greater framework. This is unavailable in a materialist worldview, where experiences risk being dismissed out of hand or ignored, which is why the second research question is important, as it offers an appreciation of the significance of RSEs without entailing any form of belief.

In my research it became evident that trust in a transcendent power, however conceived, whether within or beyond the individual self, helps to nurture the fruits of the experiences. I found evidence of a deepening understanding, a move from superficial engagement or even lack of interest in the spiritual, to a profound connection. Prayers uttered in extremis, at times without faith in whatever or whoever was appealed to, when there was simply no other way to cope, were answered. Handing over to a higher power, with or without any certainty of a response seems to work and often leads to a re-evaluation of the meaning of life. Many correspondents in fact followed Hardy's suggestion of an experimental faith, sincerely placing their trust in a power beyond everyday reality, whether experienced as beyond the self or deep within. Hardly anyone who contributed to the Archive was left unchanged by their experience in religious and spiritual terms.

From my research, it seems evident that experiencers are able to manifest the fruits of experience more fully if sustained by a spiritual or religious awareness. Support from within a religious or spiritual community is helpful for many correspondents and indeed, for some, that remains the most important aspect of religion. Other correspondents evolve their own deepening practice as a result of their RSEs, which also nurtures the fruits. A sense of support from a beneficent

higher dimension affects relationships for the better with experiences of love. This seems to enable correspondents to focus outward and to manifest altruism, which is explored in the third research question.

The most frequently found fruits are those of comfort and guidance. In despair, pain or depression, a sense of comfort is often gratefully received. Correspondents are helped to overcome fear in difficult situations and given courage to face the future. Those asking for guidance, seeking a purpose in life seem to receive it and then feel that they receive help to follow their course. Many correspondents describe this sense of purpose and new meaning in life, one of Hardy's consequences of experience, and they seem supported in their ventures.

The fruits of experiences of light seem to be a deep awareness of a spiritual presence, which can be transformational, within the self and beyond. Profound mystical experiences of oneness and interconnectedness lead to an understanding of the unity of humanity and the cosmos and a submersion of the individual self in the whole, frequently leading to universal love, compassion and altruism.

Most correspondents interpret their experiences in their own way, few refer to scholarship, which evidently has more resonance with the researcher. Responses are individual, some attribute their experiences to a higher power, some analyse them, whereas others simply accept them. There does not seem to be a universal pattern, apart from the correspondents' stress on the significance of the experiences to them, as they submitted them to the Archive and their relief at being able to share what had happened, after previously feeling unable to speak about RSEs. Some correspondents hope for clarification, which has not been forthcoming since early correspondence with Hardy and Robinson. Contributors nowadays are thanked but

not offered further advice, apart from the offer of joining the AHT to find out more. However, that offers the opportunity to connect with others who understand RSEs, and to gain access to the range of publications produced by the RERC, which may then be helpful, perhaps including this thesis.

Many people had experiences, particularly OBEs, NDEs, ELEs and ADCs as well as meaningful dreams, which transformed their views of death, leading them to a loss of fear and to belief in an afterlife. This is a profound and significant finding, confirmed by scientific studies of NDEs in particular. The fact that such experiences appeared in the Archive before NDEs were named and are found throughout the ages and in different cultures, suggests that they are innate. Those who recounted such experiences were changed, they became less materialistic and more spiritual, they valued life more deeply and developed a more accepting and empathetic attitude to others. Similar changes were also found as a result of less dramatic experiences. Overall, the fruits of RSEs are manifest in transformed attitudes to life and death, the self and others and to ultimate reality.

Second research question

The question “Is the designation Intense Experience as expounded by Wesley J. Wildman in his *Religious and spiritual experiences* (2011) helpful for researchers when evaluating RSEs, particularly those of people who do not consider themselves religious?” enabled comparisons between religious, spiritual and non-religious responses to RSEs. IE is an all-embracing term, without overt religious connotations, yet also wide enough to include such views. The category may well enable people, in particular the non-religious, to admit to experiences which up to now, they might have suppressed or considered frightening or delusional. Such

experiences can be spontaneous and short-lived or extend over a longer period of searching or reflection and their designation as IEs can embrace a religious, spiritual or non-religious response. The results of my research showed that a high proportion of RSEs can be encompassed by the term IEs.

The designation IE, by removing religious or spiritual connotations, may well enable more people to admit to having such experiences and IEs might then become accepted as a normal part of life, rather than strange and puzzling anomalies. Although formal religion does offer a means of understanding such experiences, it is often subsequently dropped as too superficial or even irrelevant as a response. As traditional religious engagement wanes, different spiritual paths will no doubt be explored and an openness to the messages of IEs may encourage deeper reflection on what really matters in life and what that entails in terms of attitudes to the self and others. The categorisation of such experiences as intense demonstrates that these experiences are not confined to religious or spiritual teachers, saints or mystics or to traditions of the past or present, but are common to all. This would be a huge relief for many who reject religious interpretations, and thus are worried by not being able to understand their experiences. The designation of such occurrences as intense also highlights their significance, and they are often transformative, altering people's attitudes to themselves and to others.

It is important to remember that Wildman's definition of IEs is situated within a particular theological outlook, that of the union of religious naturalism with ground-of-being theism (Wildman, 2011, xii-xiii) from which the category derives its coherence. This may alienate some religious believers, who will retain the label of religious experience and a specifically religious interpretation (supernaturalist or

supranaturalist) for what happens to them. For many, however, a more open spirituality is at the heart of their beliefs and aspects of the definition IEs could stand without all of Wildman's criteria being necessary. Those of an SBNR persuasion may be happy with the term intense, although they may prefer spiritual. Atheists may well find such experiences meaningless however designated, yet the terminology might nonetheless be acceptable to them for those inexplicable experiences. The fact that many experiences occur in childhood also supports the categorisation, as analysis and exploration of religious concepts are only undertaken later and may change over time. IEs offer the opportunity for an evolution of understanding without necessarily involving engagement with religious traditions or beliefs.

Wildman's more detailed exposition of what he means by IEs, including the five faces of intensity may be considered too detailed and limiting for the huge variety of RSEs in the Archive, and for my focus on fruits, the additional phenomenological components were not helpful. However, the species-wide applicability of his definition of IEs (Wildman, 2011, p. 104) was reflected in the results of my empirical research, with a very high percentage of experiences falling into that category, supporting the case for its comprehensive usefulness. The universality of IEs seems to indicate that humans are hard-wired for spirituality, as Hardy believed.

The main advantage of the category of IEs lies in the naturalist view of a range of experiences which have so often been side-lined as too strange and inexplicable in terms acceptable to rationalists. As defined by Wildman, there is nothing irrational about IEs. This may enable people to admit to their experiences

in a way which has been impossible for them hitherto. Hesitation to share experiences has lessened over time, especially since the sixties, when mind-altering substances became popular and an expansion of consciousness began to be a reality for some. In the seventies, NDEs became known (Moody, 1975/1976) and eventually accepted, even in the scientific community (van Lommel et al., 2001). NDEs challenged the materialist paradigm of death as the end of consciousness (van Lommel, 2010) opening the door to links with RSEs (Rankin, 2019). All this supports greater understanding of RSEs and IEs, with the latter offering a more universally acceptable designation.

My focus on altruism does raise the question as to whether IEs, while engaging with ultimate concerns and the spiritual depths of reality, omit the moral force inherent in the spiritual response to RSEs. The category of IEs offers an understanding of meaning and value in life, but what many correspondents describe sounds more powerful. This study of the fruits of RSEs and IEs leads beyond ultimate concerns, to experiences of the power of love which transform the experiencer and in turn affect attitudes to others. In Wildman's categorisation, love and altruism are not mentioned. Experiences situated within a spiritual or religious discipline may lead to a more demanding response, with the fruits then better supported. However, IEs offer a definition acceptable by a large percentage of experiencers, enabling them to move on from labels and beliefs to a focus on the significance of the experiences.

Third research question

Once the range of fruits of experience had been established, answers were explored to the question "Can the hypothesis that a turn from self-centredness to

altruism is the dominant category underlying the variety of fruits of experience, be supported through analysis of the RERC Archive?”. Analysis of the fruits of the RSEs enabled me to gauge the underlying attitudes and resultant changes wrought by RSEs. In the early accounts about a third of the correspondents were found to support the hypothesis, which fell to about a quarter in the final thousand. No-one opposed the hypothesis by describing a turn from altruism to self-centred attitudes.

The data from this study support the assumption in the literature, scholarly and religious, that altruism is an expected fruit of RSEs. Some accounts specifically mention falling short of such an outcome, in particular with regard to outward action. Yet the underlying assumption remains, and in the Archive, there is evidence of an inner turn from a focus on the self, whether manifest in selfish attitudes, depression or self-absorption, to a concern for others, with a sense of compassion and sensitivity to their well-being. In my research I consider altruism as an attitude of mind which would lead to outward altruistic behaviour when required, tapping into an underlying disposition. Whether on an individual basis or through charitable efforts organised by religious communities, a caring attitude for others is evident in many who have reported RSEs or IEs. The assumption that altruism will be a fruit of RSEs seems to be the default position of those sending their accounts to the RERC, particularly Christians, and is evident in many cases, even if not explicitly stated.

In wording my hypothesis as exploring a turn from self-centredness to altruism as the dominant category underlying the variety of fruits of experience in the RERC Archive, I wanted to consider whether or not people are naturally

altruistic and co-operative, or whether the prevalent materialist assumptions of human selfishness and greed are evident in the accounts. I recorded only 7% as clearly showing no turn, having an altruistic focus prior to their experience. This indicated the need for a change. However, I found evidence of a recognition that selfish attitudes were somehow wrong and brought unhappiness to the correspondent. Although few described themselves as being self-centred before their experience, many were in personal difficulties, sometimes as a result of a focus on themselves. In those cases, the RSE seemed to liberate them by offering a change of perspective, to seeing themselves as part of a greater whole, increasing their sense of connection with others and with the world around them. Some correspondents seemed to be in need of either spiritual or religious understanding to help in dealing with problems in life. Once those needs had been met, they seemed liberated, and able to appreciate life and to interact with others. This goes against current materialist assumptions that humans are essentially self-centred. Those reporting mystical experiences of an awareness of the essential unity of all, in contrast to a sense of individuality and separateness, seem to be motivated to altruism. Their strong sense of being one with the whole of creation, part of an interconnected humanity, leads to feeling the pain of others as their own and to a motivation to ease suffering.

Rather than conducting experiments (Batson, 2019) or setting up dictator games to explore altruism and religious ideas (Hoffman et al., 2019) the relation between religion, spirituality and altruism has been explored in this study by citing actual experiences of individuals and recording changes in their beliefs and attitudes. The accounts include the correspondents' own interpretations, to which

are added those of the researcher, highlighting a complex interaction of religious, spiritual and non-religious responses to RSEs and IEs, particularly in relation to altruism.

Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

As I reflected on the possible limitations of this thesis and in particular on the hypothesis, I wondered if I might have been too timid to use the word love. My hypothesis focused on the transformation from looking inward, self-absorption, to looking outward, in compassion and care for others. This had its roots in the study of the fruits of RSEs more generally. As this is an academic thesis, I chose to use altruism in the third research question, mindful of Comte (1865) and Ricard (2013/2018). But as I worked through the accounts, like Post (2019, pp. 165-166) I began to consider whether love rather than altruism captured the essence of my topic. Was love perhaps at the heart of the transformations – both as experienced and as reflected in inner and outer fruits? In his writing, Sorokin (1954/2002) focused on love, as does Templeton’s Institute for Research on Unlimited Love, which defines this unselfish, universal love as extending to all and deemed a “Creative Presence underlying and integral to all of reality” (Post, 2003, vii). Such love is reflected in the major religious traditions (Sorokin, 1954/2002, p. 3) particularly in the teachings of Jesus (Ward, 2017) and linked with a higher power, the supraconscious enabling overriding of the ego (Sorokin, 1954/2002, pp. 145-147). My choice of altruism was also in line with an attempt to include those who reject religious terminology.

I recorded the link between feeling loved and giving love in my spreadsheets, which seemed to suggest further exploration into the origins and

expressions of love in the Archive. Indeed, this theme was addressed as *The fifth love* by Fox (2014). He gave an overview of attitudes to love in the scholarship and more generally (Fox, 2014, pp. 10-12) and cited many examples from the RERC Archive in his study of a love which seemed to come from another dimension, particularly in times of dire distress. Love was Fox's focus, whereas it emerged as a powerful fruit in mine, as this example clearly shows:

I was infused with an indescribably beautiful sense of tranquillity and well-being; a deeply felt state of connectedness and wonderment, and bliss, and above all, LOVE. Only it was a million times more powerful than any previous experience of love, because I AM love, and the golden light that unites everything IS love and everything that is, is love; living vibrating love; and love is a golden light that unites everything in existence in a never ending dance, a joyful interplay of bliss and union. In physical reality I was sitting bolt upright in bed, having woken suddenly and unexpectedly from a deep sleep. During the weeks previous I had been moving increasingly to the edge of burn-out due to physical exhaustion and emotional pressures.
[005454]

Another suggestion would be widening the scope of the study. The RERC Archive comprises about 6,600 accounts of RSEs, each valuable and each sharing experiences of profound significance to the correspondent. I have focused on the fruits of two thousand, but future research might explore them all. I chose to investigate a number of categories of RSEs, but these might be expanded to include answers to prayer, possibly with a comparison between attitudes of belief in the efficacy of praying before and after the RSE. The fruits of the spirit as enumerated

in the Bible and in the Catholic faith might also be explored. Research could be undertaken into various Christian denominations as to their links with RSEs as well as different religious traditions, demographics and cultural backgrounds. Accounts of experiences in meditation might be researched in the Archive with and without religious links.

The AHT might launch a survey among its members into the fruits of their RSEs, with in-depth interviews providing additional qualitative data. Wildman's IEs and intensity hypothesis might be investigated in greater detail in the Archive and research undertaken into the response of the AHT membership to the category of IEs. There are additional collections in the Archive donated by the Fenwicks and Emma Heathcote-James which could also be analysed, the former with a focus on NDEs and the latter on experiences of angels and ADCs.

The Archive itself might be improved for future researchers, with upgraded word search technology supplanting the inadequate "Subjects" box. Questionnaires could be offered to new correspondents for more in-depth study of RSEs and contact might be made with the contributors, as was the case in the early days of research. A new launch of the Hardy Question might be undertaken – using not just newspapers, but also involving the internet and social media. This would be particularly interesting as it could be conducted world-wide, but even if limited to UK, it would nonetheless reflect a multicultural society, quite different from that of Hardy's day.

Closer links might be established with organisations involved with bringing together science and religion, such as the Scientific and Medical Network and the Galileo Project cited earlier, as well as the Ian Ramsay Centre in Oxford, with

which the RERC co-operated on the Global Project. The Society for Psychical Research and the Institute of Noetic Sciences have expressed interest in co-operation, and the Churches' Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies have offered to send accounts of RSEs to the RERC, which could expand the Archive. Further links with research into the hard problem of the relation between mind and brain could be established, in relation to spirituality (Taylor, 2018) and contributing to work citing personal experiences similar to those found in the Archive (Post, 2014, 2019; Kripal, 2019). The findings of this thesis are in line with much new thinking with regard to personal experiences, which are now being accepted rather than side-lined as research data.

This thesis also points the way to closer links with institutions exploring spiritual experience and altruism or love, such as The Institute for Research on Unlimited Love. Religious leaders now advocate a turn towards valuing goodness and morality in the face of contemporary attitudes, whether or not linked with their own tradition, (Dalai Lama, 1999, 2011; Sacks, 2020). There is a general recognition of the need for a move toward altruism in society, which has been particularly highlighted in the past year during the coronavirus pandemic, when communities recognised the need for mutual support. My thesis indicates that some of our deepest experiences reveal that if humans are able to acknowledge the good found deep within in themselves and follow their best instincts, they are able to manifest this much-needed altruism.

Conclusion

In undertaking this study, I wanted to explore the great variety of fruits of RSEs in the Archive and then to move beyond, to delve into their meaning. I

began with an acceptance of the genuine nature of these experiences, honouring the confidences shared with the RERC and I listened carefully to people's deepest thoughts and feelings. These accounts seem to be telling us something, something important about ourselves, our world and our relationship to each other.

In terms of the existing scholarship within the RERC Archive, this study has filled a gap by exploring the wide range of fruits of the experiences, rather than selecting particular types of RSEs for research as has been done previously. Interpretations reflecting different attitudes to religion and spirituality have been explored alongside an acknowledgement of contemporary non-religious views. Each account has been considered within the context of the life of the correspondent, whose voice is carefully heard, with the perspective of the researcher juxtaposed. Early and late accounts were selected to highlight changes in society over time, particularly in terms of religious attitude. This has offered a comprehensive, yet in-depth approach to the accounts in the RERC Archive.

In the wider context, this study opens a discussion of the significance of RSEs and IEs, not just for people interested in religious traditions and spiritual movements but for everyone, by focusing on what is learned from such experiences in terms of attitudes to the self and to others. It highlights that an understanding of interconnectedness, long championed by the mystics, also found in the Archive and now confirmed by modern physics, leads to an awareness of the importance of our attitudes to each other, to all sentient beings and to the planet as a whole.

Humans will always engage with the basic questions of meaning in order to make sense of life and how to live it. RSEs offer a glimpse of deeper

dimensions and the more we accept and explore such experiences, the more we will connect with the ground of being, Ultimate Reality, the Real or God, however named. In his research, Sir Alister referred to “a deep awareness of a benevolent non-physical power which appears to be partly or wholly beyond, and far greater than, the individual self” (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 1). This awareness has been evident in the RSEs explored in the thesis, and the beneficence of this power has been shown through experiences of being comforted, guided and loved. People often became sensitive to a deeper dimension, infusing life with meaning.

In my research I have found that humans seem to be compassionate by nature or at least aware of a seed of goodness within them, but that this is often hidden, submerged through force of circumstance or personal problems. RSEs often help to resolve these issues, allowing altruism to emerge. So often the focus in the media and in scholarship is on the negative, reinforcing an underlying assumption that everyone is ultimately out for themselves. But I have not found this to be the case in the Archive accounts.

The Archive offers a rich database, ripe for further exploration of the meaning and value of life as reflected in personal testimonies of spiritual and religious experiences, however interpreted or named. These experiences seem to be a natural part of human nature, whether or not linked to religion. My research indicates that some of the most profound, life-changing experiences that people have lead them to become more loving and altruistic. These fruits of experience are significant, particularly in today’s secular, sceptical, often selfish society, where instances of isolation and depression seem to be on the increase. The fruits of the profound experiences collected in the RERC Archive seem to encourage a

change of focus from “I” to “we”. The importance of this is encapsulated in a post by His Holiness the Dalai Lama on Facebook. It sums up what I have found in my research, and I will leave the last words in the thesis to him:

I believe that our strong focus on material development and accumulating wealth has led us to neglect our basic human need for kindness and care.

Reinstating a commitment to the oneness of humanity and altruism toward our brothers and sisters is fundamental for societies and organizations and their individuals to thrive in the long run. (Dalai Lama, Facebook post, February 25th 2020)

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Occasional Paper 41.

APPENDIX A



ALISTER HARDY TRUST RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE RESEARCH CENTRE

University of Wales Trinity Saint David
Lampeter, Ceredigion SA48 7DB

Phone +44 (0) 1570 424821

e-mail: RERC@uwtsd.ac.uk

* * * * *

The Research Centre collects accounts of people's religious, spiritual and paranormal experiences, which are kept in our Archive. The reports are transferred to a database in an anonymous form for ease of access for researchers and to protect confidentiality. Some details about you and your experience will be very helpful, to give authenticity to and to enhance our research.

We thank you for being willing to share the details of your experience with us.

On the following page is a form for you to complete. You are welcome to return it by email, remembering of course that email is not as private as regular mail. If you would prefer to return the form by post, you are most welcome. The address is on the form.

If you choose to reply by email, you may type your name at the bottom of the page and that will count as a signature.

* * * * *

PATRONS

His Holiness the Dalai Lama
His Eminence the Supreme Primate, Koken Monnyo Otani
The Right Revd Wyn Evans, Bishop of St Davids
The Right Revd & the Right Honorable the Lord Williams of Oystermouth
Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr
The Revd Dr John A Newton
Jonathon Porritt CBE
Swami Chidanand Saraswati

Religious, Spiritual or Paranormal Experiences
collected for
**The Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre, The Library,
University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter, Ceredigion SA48
7DB**

Name	Title	
Address	Phone Number	E-mail address
Postcode		
Country	Male / Female	
Date of birth	Date of your Experience	
Date of Writing to us	Age at time of Experience	
Religious Background	Geographical Location at time of Experience	
Occupation	Academic or Vocational Qualifications	
Would you be happy for researchers to contact you? (please delete as appropriate)	Yes	No
We would be most grateful if, to assist research, you would agree for this account of your experience to be recorded, in an anonymous form, on our database, located at The University of Wales Trinity Saint David in Lampeter and also available online to accredited researchers.	Database	Yes No
What was your experience? How did it feel? (If you have already sent us an account of your experience there is no need to complete this section)		
This box will expand as you type		
Please tell us something about the 'fruits of the experience'. (e.g. What did it prompt you to do or think? Did it influence any decisions you were making? Did it cause you to change the way you lived your life? etc.)		
This box will expand as you type		
What do you think caused the experience?		

This box will expand as you type

How did people react when you told them about the experience?

(e.g. friends, family, religious and medical professionals)

This box will expand as you type

Your signature

Date

Many thanks . Please return form to:
The Religious Experience Research Centre, The Library,
University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter,
Ceredigion, SA48 7ED

Email: RERC@uwtsd.ac.uk

For Office use:

Record number

Input by

Date

Director of Research: Prof Bettina Schmidt

CONFIDENTIAL DETAILS

*To accompany archived Religious, Spiritual or Paranormal Experiences
given to the Religious Experience Research Centre.*

We are very grateful to receive the account of your experience for our archive. Please be good enough to complete this form, remembering to sign and date it. Your details are kept confidential: we need them because it is important that we can prove all accounts of experiences are genuine.

When the questionnaire is used on-line, the boxes will expand, so you can type in as many pages as you want.

If you download or copy the form (and don't complete it online) please continue any section on a separate sheet of paper.

APPENDIX B

Instructions given to transcribers of accounts into the RERC Archive
by Jean Matthews, Archivist.

Type **exactly** as on the hard copy. All spelling mistakes, funny bits, silly bits, omitted words etc. If a word (or phrase) is spelt wrongly put the correct spelling in **square** brackets after it.

e.g. "I went to the skool [school] to colect [collect] my daughter"
(This is so that if someone does a search for this word and the word is not spelt right, it won't come up in the search. If it's there (in a square bracket) it will.)

All names of people mentioned should be hidden, to protect the identity of the writer, as well as any place names that might be obvious to someone who knew him or her. So instead of "my husband, George, and I moved to Hemel Hempstead in 1972, and we met George's friend Louise soon afterwards. Louise and I also became good friends and used to go shopping in St. Albans together" – "my husband, [name A], and I moved to [place A] in 1972, and we met [A]'s friend [name B] soon afterwards. [B] and I also became good friends and used to go shopping in [place B] together." Again, always use square brackets.

If you can't read a word, either have a guess and put a question mark in square brackets afterwards or put "illegible word" in square brackets.

e.g. “I saw a huge dreadful[?] being” or “I saw a huge [illegible word] being”

Subjects - Key words. Check whether they're on the list of key words. If not, make a note that that word should be added, but try to stick to the words that are on the list. Most usual ones are.

- *What happened in the actual experience/ what was felt / what they saw or heard, etc.:* e.g. Light; Love; Peace; Fear; or

- *Situation when the accident happened:* e.g. Car accident; Despair; Stress; Nature (if the experience took place in the countryside and this played a part/influenced, etc.); e.g. Music; Childbirth; Hospital, ...

Notes: Anything you think relevant e.g. “Very difficult to read”

REFERENCES: e.g. if it's in response to an advert in a particular magazine or paper or if they refer to a book which is relevant to the experience.

FRUITS: Copy and paste after the experience itself.

APPENDIX C

THE ALISTER HARDY RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE RESEARCH CENTRE

Director of Research: Prof Bettina Schmidt

University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter, Ceredigion, SA48 7ED

**Please read carefully, sign below, and send to RERC
at the address above**

email: RERC@uwtsd.ac.uk



Declaration on View and Usage of Confidential materials

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I also understand that permission, if given, would require full acknowledgement of the Trust and Centre's contribution to my research in any publication or lecture. I promise to reference all quotes with their Account Number (nearly always a 6-digit number) and 'Archive of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter, UK'. I undertake to inform the RERC about any outcomes from my research, to acknowledge the Alister Hardy Trust in the credits and to give two copies of any published material relating to this research to the Alister Hardy Library.

I understand that I must not make any attempt to contact a person or the relatives of any person who has sent to the Trust an account of experience (if required and appropriate the Centre may contact experients on my behalf); and that when I refer to the accounts of experience I must do so by number and not reveal any confidential details about the experient.

In order to protect this data, I also undertake not to circulate extracts from the accounts of experiences by electronic means, such as e-mail or Internet.

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