


THE NEW RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

Joseph M. Felser



**And what rough beast,
its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem
to be born?**

—W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

I. The Hope for a New Religion: Four Variations on a Theme

William Butler Yeats's 1920 poem offers a striking illustration of a key recurring cultural theme of the past century and a half: the hope for a "new religion" to replace what William James, in his 1908 Hibbert Lectures, had termed an "older monarchical theism" that had grown "obsolete and obsolescent." What, in James's view, had caused this development?

In the first place, the robustness of democratic ideals had ultimately eroded the appeal of the political analogy used by theism to portray the divine-human relationship: God as King, and human beings as fearfully obedient subjects constantly praising the Lord so as to escape eternal punishment and secure the blessings of heavenly reward.

As James noted, this image is underpinned theologically by the doctrine of creation out of nothing, which entails the absolute ontological separation between Creator and creation—a putative historical event which an enterprising English divine calculated to have happened in the year 4004 B.C.

For James, it was less important that developments in science and the higher criticism of the Bible had directly refuted such literalism; far more significant, in his view, was the extent to which the Western spiritual imagination had been opened up and transformed by modern science's

vision of a universe of nearly unimaginable age and vastness. Scientific inquiry had actually yielded a more impressive sense of infinity than that inspired by religious dogma.

Furthermore, the West's encounter with Eastern views only accelerated this transformation; for it was no longer possible to simply dismiss as atheistic or primitive those spiritualities whose views of the vastness of the universe corresponded far more closely to the picture presented by science than to the cramped perspectives of our own religious traditions. In short, for theists who were open to the influences of the new movements of thought, theism had become unacceptably parochial and quaint.

On the other hand, as James himself argued elsewhere, the tacit metaphysical foundations of modern scientific inquiry were equally unacceptable to many of these same theists. Science's metaphysic was an imperialistic, mechanistic materialism, which threatened to discredit and eradicate the very idea of the sacred, i.e., the belief in an experience of an invisible order of reality that is the ultimate source of all meaning, value, truth, and being. In the brave new world of "hard" scientific fact, there would indeed be no room for such intangibles as consciousness or invisible power, despite the experienced reality of these phenomena.

If there was to be a genuine revisioning of the sacred, such a movement would have to take account of both sides of James's argument. Therefore it would need to transcend and heal the various dichotomies enshrined, not only in the older theism, but also in the scientific tradition that had displaced theism—the dualisms of God/world, faith/reason, mind/matter, experience/knowledge, and so forth.

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As philosopher Colin Wilson has ably documented,¹ however, while many of James's contemporaries in the Romantic movement and their successors, including Yeats, openly yearned for a "new religion" to replace Christianity, many fell headfirst into despair and creative arrest and, in all too many instances, succumbed to madness and/or suicide when Wordsworth's spontaneous and initially exhilarating vision of "unknown modes of being" had simply proved too difficult and too elusive to sustain. This mood is captured in Wordsworth's own "Ode: Intimations of Immortality":

The things which I have seen I now can see
no more. . . .
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

Despite this discouraging record, the fervent hope for a new religion did not fade. Joseph Campbell said the one question he was most often asked at his public lectures in the seventies and eighties concerned the possibility of a new religion. As early as 1949, Campbell himself had argued that we are in a chaotic transitional period in which a new mythology, as the successor to all the great world religions, is being incubated. He appears never to have doubted this.

Campbell, however, preferred to speak of a new mythology rather than a new religion because of what he diagnosed as the mistaken tendency of religious traditions to concretize symbolic imagery or to favor a literal reading of the metaphorical language of mythology. Such a reading of the myth reduces its timeless meaning to something of purely local and historical interest: universally valid psychological and metaphysical insights are thus converted into moral imperatives of relative significance, and the inward mystical experience of the individual is downplayed in favor of public forms of collective worship. For example, the image of the Holy Land is typically read, not as a reference to an inward condition of peace which consists, at least in part, of a harmonious adjustment to whatever environment one happens to find oneself in (the divine being unconditionally ubiquitous), but rather as the name of a specific, uniquely blessed piece of God-given real estate, over which much blood has historically been spilled. The true meaning of the myth is thus inverted—and subverted in the service of the interests and power of a particular community.

FROM "BOUNDED HORIZONS" TO WORLD COMMUNITY

In fact, however, as Campbell often noted, all such "bounded horizons" have dissolved in the modern age of multinational corporations, supersonic jet travel, and satellite television. The worldwide effects of environmental destruction and the threat of nuclear annihilation underscore that the "new mythology" must consciously address itself to the world community as a unified whole. Sectarian exclusivism of all forms must yield to a genuinely universal inclusivism, and this means that the metaphors of myth must be understood in their proper nonliteral sense. Like the Romantics, Campbell identified revivification of the sacred with a reanimation of what some have called the feminine values: reverence for Mother Earth, respect for the fecundity of the creative imagination, embracing the mystical, and seeking social harmony and unity through cooperation and mutual respect.

Contrary to the pessimistic Romantics, Campbell earnestly believed that such a new mythology would arise in due course, though he could not by his own theory say exactly what the new form would be. For in his view, following C. G. Jung, genuine symbolic forms—that is to say, images and words which, just because they are not taken literally, have the power to direct the mind past the objects of the visible world to the mysterious transcendent ground of all objects—are always and necessarily the spontaneous productions of the creative unconscious, or what Campbell called the "mythogenic" zone. This is not a process that can be initiated or managed by topmost consciousness. A true symbol cannot be artificially manufactured or invented by the rational intellect. Thus, just as one cannot forecast or control one's own dreams, the final outcome of this incipient mythological transformation cannot reasonably be predicted. In this sense, the development of a new religion is beyond science, if by science one means the drive for prediction and control.

The belief that the dream, as the pure, unadulterated voice of Nature in us,² cannot be manipulated by the ego, is a corollary of Jung's unyielding belief in the absolute autonomy of the unconscious. Unfortunately, however, if all we can do is to yield to the spontaneous activity of the deeper layers of the psyche, this would seem to return us to the waiting game which

drove so many of the Romantics to despair. Thus Campbell would seem to be only half an optimist. Yet, as Stephen LaBerge of Stanford University and others have demonstrated, in the case of the so-called "lucid dream," in which one is consciously aware that one is dreaming, it is indeed possible to control, or at least to influence, the course of the dream. Perhaps, then, the half-pessimistic implications of Campbell's position are due to an unnecessary adherence to a dispensable dogma.

This, I take it, is roughly Wilson's own position, for he has argued that it is possible to consciously create this "new religion." This is accomplished by recognizing that the affirmative, visionary states of consciousness only fleetingly and sporadically enjoyed by the Romantics (1) represent a truer perception of reality than the world as viewed by ordinary consciousness, or by the mind infected with pessimistic or negative attitudes, and (2) that these states are potentially under the control of those individuals who are convinced of this possibility intellectually and who are also willing and able to make highly disciplined mental efforts toward cultivating visionary perception. One of Wilson's favorite examples for this view is the psychologist Abraham Maslow's ability to induce "peak experiences" in his students merely by talking about them.

TOWARD AN INTENTIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

According to Wilson's diagnosis, Romantic pessimism is based on the fallacy that consciousness is essentially passive, whereas he argues that all consciousness is essentially intentional—that, like an archer who fires an arrow at a target, one must deliberately fire one's attention at an object in order to grasp its significance. Just as the phenomenon of the "double take" shows that there is a difference between merely looking and truly seeing—for unless I concentrate, say, on my watch, I will not see the time, and will be forced to look again—so the meaning of the world as a unified whole can only be grasped by one who makes the requisite mental effort to establish close cooperation between the analytical intellect (the "scientist" of the left brain) and the holistic, synthesizing, intuitive imagination (the "artist" housed in the right brain).

Believing that the widespread development of these visionary modes represents an extension

of human freedom and the next stage in human evolution—a step we can and indeed must bring about—Wilson maintains that a properly informed and reasonably confident conscious mind can influence and engage the creative unconscious, thereby promoting the development of what he calls Faculty X. This is the capacity, not only for mystical experience, but also for those psychic powers, such as telepathy and precognition, that illuminate the limitations of a materialist view of reality and self. The optimistic individuals who accept this evolutionary assignment are, in his view, the precursors of the new religion.

There is, however, yet a fourth position, located on the spectrum somewhere between the Campbell/Jung view and Wilson's view. This view sees the evolution of the new religion neither as strictly a matter of choice and effort, nor as the mere effect of an automatic process beyond our control, but as a combination of the two. Psychologist Kenneth Ring, philosopher Michael Grosso, and others have suggested that such apparently diverse phenomena as UFO close encounters and abductions, near-death experiences, and spontaneous kundalini awakenings actually share a similar morphology and purpose. This form and function is akin to the initiation rituals of ancient mystery cults, in which an individual is suddenly removed from the safe confines of everyday reality and directly introduced, via an ecstatic union with a supra- (and super-) human source of energy, to another, far deeper view of his or her identity and the nature of reality.

The common function, then, is to make possible a wholesale transformation of the individual. The initial, essentially spontaneous and uncontrolled experience may serve as a stimulus or catalyst for more lasting changes which the person must bring about through sustained effort. Interestingly, many of the changes described by those who have had such experiences and built upon them echo the programmatic requirements of the new religion as stipulated by Campbell and Wilson: reverence for the earth; a belief in a non-sectarian, universalist spirituality; enjoyment of the mystical experience; the development of psychic powers, etc. Finally, then, when enough individuals have followed this path, a kind of critical mass will occur, leading humanity as a species to a radically new, perhaps even developmentally final, stage of collective spiritual consciousness.

As different from each other as these four views are, they are all in accord in this respect: the new religion is a goal whose realization is projected into a glorious future. This futurism, however, is largely an unconscious carryover from the messianic/prophetic and apocalyptic/millenarian strains of the biblical traditions, with their conception of historical time as a linear process, with a definite beginning and an end, and their emphasis on the action of the divine in and through a human history which requires redemption from an inherent sinfulness—its natural tendency to fall short of the greater glory of God. But what if the survival of these strains turns out to be a distorting factor?

Consider, in this regard, the many UFO and near-death experiencers who have reported visions of world-wide nuclear or environmental cataclysm. In a number of these cases, specific dates have been attached to these precognitions. For example, in 1985, Ring reported that many of his NDE subjects identified 1988 as the year in which the world or human history would end.³ But of course the date has come and gone without any such result.

What we have, then, is the same pattern as in early Christianity, which expected the arrival of the New Jerusalem within the lifetime of Jesus' contemporaries—the same pattern found with the several false messiahs in Jewish history. First comes the elevation of expectations or anxieties. This is followed by the great disappointment, or relief, when the promised cosmic denouement fails to materialize; and this in turn leads to a reinterpretation of the meaning of signs and wonders, the restoration of hope—and on and on, in a continuous, exhausting cycle of religious manic depression. Now, if the real Age of Aquarius fails to arrive on schedule (Terence McKenna, for instance, claims that 2012 A.D. will mark the end of history and our life as physical organisms), is there any reason to doubt that disappointed New Agers will become as despondent and pessimistic as their Romantic predecessors? I think we may need to jettison these ancient habits of mind in order to see the problem of the new religion in a new and clearer light.

EXPERIENCING AND SEEING THE PRESENT MOMENT

Thich Nhat Hanh has said that he does not agree with the traditional Christian view that

hope is a virtue. By focusing our attention on an imagined future, which is supposed to compensate for the anguish and pain of our past, we prevent ourselves from fully experiencing and seeing deeply into the present moment, which is always where life has to be met and lived. Or, as Jesus says in that verse from the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, "The Kingdom of the father is spread out upon the Earth and people do not see it."

What is it, then, that is right before our eyes, but that has hitherto escaped our notice? What is presently available, but what our lingering preoccupation with future world history only serves to disguise, is more than merely a new religion—if by that term we mean the same basic formulas of the past, only with new and different values plugged into the variables of *x* and *y*—a new deity (let's try a female one this time around), a new mantram, etc. For what James, Campbell, and Wilson represent in their respective inquiries is a radically new form of religious consciousness.

If salvation through the worship of a personal God is the epitome of the religious point of view of the West, and if liberation through the enlightened identification of the self with the transpersonal ground of being captures the essential religious formula of the East, then I want to suggest that it is a certain principle of inquiry that provides not only the basic structural form of this new religious outlook, but also its touchstone, its very heart. What, then, is the meaning of inquiry in this concept?

II. Traditional Religion and the Limits of Inquiry

Our English word "inquiry" comes from the Latin verb *quaerere*, which means both "to ask" and "to seek." Now, asking a question is usually thought of as a strictly intellectual process; one is attempting to acquire new information, or to improve one's grasp of old information. But seeking, on the other hand, suggests an action that involves not only the head, but the will and feelings, too. Seeking is a practical activity in which the seeker's deepest desires, needs, and interests are engaged. It is an adventurous journey whose success or failure depends closely on the character of the seeker. This is a quest, not simply to find out about something at one remove, but to directly and personally experience some basic, transforming truth.

"Seek" is related to the verb "to see," and sight, typically judged to be our most immediate form of perception, is a metaphor for presentational knowing, or what Bertrand Russell called "knowledge by acquaintance." As Job says to Yahweh; when He reveals Himself in a whirlwind, "Before, I heard you with my ears, but now I see you with my eyes."

Thus, in the original sense of inquiry, quest and question are inextricably related. Knowledge is to be identified, not with a list of affirmations or a collection of facts, but rather, with a complex activity of question and answer, whereby the information sought is significant and intelligible only in relation to the aims, intentions, and actions of the knower. Just as the true meaning of Yahweh's revelation to Job, or Krishna's to Arjuna, can be grasped only through the kind of agonized soul-searching experienced by those respective seekers, both of whom are asking questions about cosmic justice. If, as the English philosopher R. G. Collingwood once observed, information is merely the body of knowledge, whereas questioning is its soul, then without the soul, the body turns into a corpse. This suggests that genuine understanding can be achieved only via an active participation in a process of inquiry in which the whole person is engaged.

For the religious inquirer, then, the key questions concern identity and relationship. Who and what am I *really*, beyond the ego—beyond this body and this socially and culturally produced self-image? What is the ultimate reality of the universe as a whole? And what is the true relationship between my real self and this deep ground? Ideally, the inquirer comes to understand these truths through some sort of personal experience of his or her true nature in relation to this source.

While the traditional religions of the West as well as those of the East, have had a place for this principle of inquiry in their respective schemes, in each case that place is ultimately secondary, provisional, and highly circumscribed. Inquiry is a temporary means to an end; it is a recessive, rather than dominant, trait. In the Occidental traditions, inquiry is subordinated to the goals and values of salvation through worship, where the parameters of questioning are determined by the requirements of adhering to certain fixed theological formulas (God is One; God is three persons in one substance, etc.) and/or certain practi-

cal rules of ethics and piety (e.g., wear a hat when you pray; take your hat off when you pray; don't eat pork). In the Oriental systems, the principle of inquiry is eclipsed by the ideal of liberation, which requires adherence to a relatively fixed set of meditative techniques designed to produce enlightenment and experiential identification with the transpersonal ground. (Since gods, in the Eastern view, are themselves but personifications of this same ground, dogmatic attachment to theological beliefs, or any suggestion that the god is the final reality, is regarded as an obstacle to liberation.)

THE DEMAND TO SUBMIT TO AUTHORITY

Although both traditions recognize that a seeker asking the proper questions may be led to the right guru or text, or be brought to experience a true revelation, still, at a given point, the quest is expected to be essentially complete, and it is then no longer appropriate to raise critical questions concerning the meaning of the experience, the text, or the pronouncements of the priest or guru. One is simply supposed to submit to a greater authority, who ostensibly knows best. Ancillary issues concerning the exact significance of this submission may subsequently be raised, but it is assumed that, by and large, the main questions have been fully answered. To believe or act otherwise is typically either tacitly discouraged or openly prohibited.

In the Oriental situation, as Campbell observed, absolute surrender to the chosen teacher is usually required. Westerners who have studied in the East have confirmed this view. Swami Radha, for example, has described how her insistence on questioning and occasionally even opposing her guru, Swami Sivananda, led to raucous rebukes from the guru's other disciples, who were incredulous at her impertinence in addressing the master in such an apparently disrespectful and impious fashion.

On the Occidental side, all of the theisms emphasize the importance of obedience to duly appointed religious authorities who are the custodians of an already revealed truth. But because Judaism and Islam are traditionally more preoccupied with practice than with theology, the circumscription of inquiry in Christianity is perhaps even more emphatic. For the Christian, the act of affirming specific beliefs *is* the key to salvation. Martin Luther, for example, once admitted that

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any reasonable person who observed world affairs would have to conclude that either there is no God or that, if God exists, then that God must be unjust. Therefore, he went on to argue, we should silence our rational faculty and its foolish objections. From Luther's perspective, this *misology* (hatred of reason) is dictated by self-interest; for, as he went on to say, scripture declares that the trinity, the incarnation, and original sin are historical and metaphysical facts, surer and more certain than sense and life itself. To question these "facts" is to tempt God, which amounts to jeopardizing one's salvation. Institutional Christianity thus regards doubt—the seed of all questioning—as having been primordially planted by Satan, who is usually depicted as God's archenemy, the epitome and cause of all evil. Were it not for the insinuations of the Evil One in his serpentine disguise, Eve never would have questioned the wisdom and justice of God's gastronomical restrictions, and we would all still be hanging around the Garden. In this view, evil is unbelief.

This explains the paradox of one of the greatest books of religious inquiry ever written, namely, Saint Augustine's autobiographical *Confessions*. In that text, written when he was already Bishop of Hippo, one of the ubiquitous phrases is "from my own experience," as he shows time and again how his relentless quest for psychological and spiritual peace combined with an equally relentless use of his own critical judgment led to his rejection of a series of religious and philosophical positions, until at last he came to accept the Christian faith. One of those rejected positions was the religion of Manichaeism, which he had earlier adopted, then abandoned because it required him to profess beliefs at variance with both reason and his own experience.

At the same time, however, Augustine was orchestrating the persecution of Donatist and Pelagian "heretics" for placing their own respective hearts and minds before the authority of the Church's established theology. And more than a millennium later, the Holy Inquisition would force Galileo Galilei to do exactly what Augustine himself in good conscience could not do, namely, to publicly affirm a belief system contrary to his own observations and the highest available standards of scientific reasoning.

How could Augustine and the Church justify this apparent violation of his own principle of

inquiry? Only by pointing to the infinitely painful consequences of unbelief: eternal damnation. In this view, it is regarded as exceedingly fortunate, not only for Augustine, but for all Christendom, that he went on his spiritual quest and that it had the result that it did. But since what he found was, as he believed, the only full and final truth, it is therefore in everyone else's interest *not* to take his process of inquiry as a model, but rather to accept, without question, the answers *he* obtained from *his* inquiry.

Thus it is that our religious heroes become elevated objects of adulation. C. G. Jung, for one, lamented this condition of "sheer imitation" and diagnosed it as a symptom of psychic laziness. He argued that we should be producers of our own spiritual lives rather than passive consumers of prepackaged religion. If we expect to reap the rewards of spirit, we must cease to be spectators and become active participants in the life of the spirit.

EXPLORING THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

There are exceptions to consumerism in some older religious traditions, as in the vision quest of Native American tribes. An emphasis on individual experience—even when it conflicts with received wisdom of the community—is built into the myths themselves. In Navajo myth, for example, there is a story of two boys who set off on a quest to save their community from monsters. Though told that they can go any direction but north, the northerly path is exactly the one they select. This is as it should be, since the community has got itself into its fix precisely because it was afraid of the undiscovered country.

This view is underscored by the trickster figure, the coyote or rabbit, who is often regarded as the creator god. The message of the myth is that the divine is known in and through chaos, darkness, disruption, and doubt. The dynamic energy which disrupts and explodes conventional forms is the divine breaking through. Change and ambiguity are not to be avoided by holding to static forms, if those forms have outlived their usefulness.

That older religious traditions for the most part demand conformity and tend to limit individual inquiry can hardly be denied. Moreover, Campbell's own analysis of the structure of the hero-myth suggests that this is no historical accident—that there is something intrinsic to the myth itself that causes this tendency.

In his epochal *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell identifies three distinct stages in the typical hero adventure: (1) departure, or separation from the community, where the "hero ventures forth . . . into a region of supernatural wonder"; (2) fulfillment, or initiation into a new form of consciousness, in which "fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won"; and (3) return to the community "with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man," including establishment of new religious institutions.⁴

Visionary fulfillment occurs in essentially complete form by the midpoint of the hero's journey. What follows is development and elaboration of the vision into a form the community can use, but this is achieved by closing off the spirit of inquiry of the first stage of the journey. Thus, even though Abraham, Moses, the Buddha, Muhammad, and Jesus all rejected the religious status quo of their respective communities and embarked on visionary quests, each in turn gave birth to religious orders whose conservatism characteristically discouraged further individual inquiry of a heroic kind.

This marginalization of inquiry is reinforced by a tendency to treat the hero's achievement or visionary experience with reverence rather than respect. The difference between the two is that an attitude of respect is not inconsistent with critical examination or honest appraisal of the imperfections of the recipient of respect. But what is revered is placed beyond the reach of these sorts of evaluation. Without such reflection, the means and motive for further development are either absent or blocked. To remove the question from the quest is to stunt the evolutionary growth of the seeker.

This explains, at least in part, the vehemence of reactions against traditional religion by such critics as Friedrich Nietzsche. He maintained that hero-founders of religions are characteristically unable and unwilling to raise critical interpretive questions about their experiences. For Nietzsche, this is not merely an epistemological problem, but also a moral one. The hero's refusal to engage in rigorous self-examination after the revelatory fact betrays a damning weakness of character, a barely disguised determination to evade difficult questions so as not to disturb—indeed, in order to foster—what could be sheer fantasy. From Tertullian's declaration, "I

believe because it is absurd," to the current rage for angels among some members of the New Age, there is ample evidence to support the charge that traditional religion stifles questioning. Nietzsche makes a point of mocking those who claim to hear angels' voices.

THE ERROR OF SCIENTIFIC OBJECTIVITY

Yet Nietzsche's further characterization of reasonableness as a determination to scrutinize one's own experiences as severely and objectively as a scientific experiment hints at an error that is the inverse of that of traditional religion. If the old religious attitude errs by fleeing from an objective examination of its experiences in an attempt to freeze the meaning and value of those experiences, then traditional science errs by supposing that genuine objectivity is obtainable through an eradication of the personal and subjective. The paradox is that the modern scientific consciousness was born in the affirmation of individual experience over and against the authority of the medieval Church and its traditions. A mere four years after Galileo's run-in with the Inquisition, Descartes in his *Discourse on Method* (1637) invented modern philosophy with his vow to become his own authority and judge the truth for himself, through his own experience of the world and his own reason, rather than merely accept what he had been taught by the Jesuits. This is why Nietzsche's juxtaposition of "experience" and "experiment" is so significant.

As Idries Shah has observed, though these two terms share a common root and originally were used interchangeably, their meanings gradually grew apart. For "experiment" came to refer to a situation "in which the experimenter remained as far as possible outside the experience."⁵ That is to say, the scientific ideal came to be understood as an attempt to provide a situation in which personal factors, such as the needs, wishes, feelings, interests, and intentions of the investigator, were to be discounted or altogether eliminated. The goal was to produce results that could be duplicated by anyone, anywhere, at any time, who correctly followed the agreed procedures. What is discovered is thus known not in and through the direct personal experience of the investigator, but through sheer repetition of results. Only what is capable of being repeated, and thus statistically formulated, is real, cognitively

significant, and valuable. What isn't—what is peculiar, personal, and private—isn't.

THE DUALISM OF "EXPERIENCE" AND "EXPERIMENT"

More recent developments in advanced theoretical physics have raised serious questions about this dualism of "experience" and "experiment." These developments tend to support James's contention that it is the height of absurdity for science to attempt to suppress or ignore the subjective element of experience. For reality is like a thread running through the beads of individual consciousness; remove any of the beads and you have broken the thread. It is a commonplace in the new science that the observer cannot be removed from the observed, that subject and object are inseparable. From relativity theory we learn that all observations are conditioned by the specific points of view from which they are made. And quantum mechanics teaches us that the sheer presence and aim of the experimenter determines the outcome of the experiment, and that different intentions and interests yield different outcomes. Is light a wave or a particle? Well, that depends.

Whereas the older scientific viewpoint was guided by the quixotic ideal of somehow beholding nature as it really exists apart from the beholder, the new science is coming around to the position held by the Idealist tradition in Western philosophy ever since Kant: what appears to be objective reality is actually shaped and determined through the preconscious activities and deep, implicit structure of human consciousness. Therefore our task is to become self-consciously aware of the nature and form of our contribution in creating our world of experience; including our religious experience, in order to assume full responsibility for our creative powers and their proper use.

It follows that it is only in and through a reflective analysis grounded in an engaged participation in the realm of religious experience—and not by simply dismissing such experience or by pretending to study it as a disinterested outside observer—that the experience can be understood and evaluated. Likewise it follows that the religious experiencer is obliged to recognize that his or her interpretations and understandings, as the functions of a finite and therefore necessarily partial and fallible human perspective, can never

be presumed to be beyond criticism or the possibility of revision and reformulation. For if we cannot ever reasonably claim that we know that we are simply beholding nature, as it is in itself, apart from the act of beholding it, then the same goes for God, the Absolute, or whatever name we use to designate the highest reality. In truth, the seeker's experience of simply "seeing" the sacred only seems to him or her to be absolutely direct, unmediated, pure. But that vision is always and necessarily informed and affected by the fact that it is a particular human subject who is having the experience.

The *desideratum* of a new religious consciousness—entertained, for the moment, strictly as a hypothesis—is therefore to remedy not only the defects of traditional religion, but also the excesses of the scientific reaction against that tradition. This means building on the original sense of *quaerere*, in which "inquiry" is understood as an undivided, living unity of quest and question, heart and mind, experience and knowledge, practice and theory.

Traditional science says that the existential elements of the quest must be purged in order to properly raise and address legitimate questions—that intellect must be "pure" in order for information to be trustworthy. For traditional religion, the imperative is to preserve the key achievements of the quest by protecting them from questions arising out of reflection, criticism, wonder, doubt, and boredom. But if there is no such thing as a pure intellect, and if, as Lama Govinda has said, even the best food, if preserved too long, turns rotten, then a new religious consciousness must eschew the fragmentation, both of religious protectionism and of scientific reductionism. How could this be done?

It may be possible, for example, to entertain a range of assumptions with trust and confidence, in which none is so sacrosanct as to lie beyond serious questioning. If such an approach were an integral part of the religious attitude, then the basic conflict between religious and scientific attitudes would cease. Indeed, a religious inquiry would be just as open as a proper scientific inquiry. (David Bohm and F. David Peat, *Science, Order, and Creativity*)

III. Religion as Inquiry: Illustrations and Corollaries

Imagine, if you will, that instead of a flat, two-dimensional circle, the mythic quest of the

religious hero is represented by an open, three-dimensional spiral, extending ever outward, encompassing more and more of the transcendent, and simultaneously revealing deeper and deeper portions of the identity of the Self. As befitting the reality of the Infinite, this spiral has neither a clearly identifiable point of beginning nor a definite end-point. "Spirit" cannot be defined, once and for all. "Departure," "fulfillment," and "return" are regarded, not as distinct, compartmentalized stages of a linear sequence of narrative episodes, but rather as three simultaneously existing, inextricably intertwined aspects of every single moment of the adventure.

This means that the visionary experience is treated as an open invitation to further inquiry, as opposed to an occasion for the closing of a controversial case. New experiences are welcomed rather than discouraged. There are no set limits to pondering the meaning of these experiences, for it is always possible to alter one's interpretation of these events, and hence to revise—even radically—one's beliefs and concepts, which are thus accepted only on a provisional basis. In other words, symbolic images and ideas are consciously recognized as such, and never idolatrously confused with the ultimate reality to which they point. Like the stars on a night sea journey, they serve as nature's luminous guides to spiritual navigation.

ATTENTION TO EXPERIENCE

Given the presence of such experiences even in the absence of specific beliefs and conceptions of a fixed kind, the prerequisite of visionary experience is understood, not as unquestioning obedience (faith), but as a certain quality and degree of attention—conscious, concentrated, and directed to one's dreams, feelings, thoughts, intuitions, inspirations. No part of human nature is written off, ignored, or repressed, since there is no way to predict in advance the source of the insight that will enable the hero to push the envelope of experience. Self-mistrust and self-hatred (especially when such attitudes are theologically sanctioned) only hinder the realization of our tremendous potential. Spiritual creativity thus depends on a sympathetic knowledge of and respect for the whole self—a willingness to listen. The ability to inspire attitudes of openness, respect, trust, and attention as habits of consciousness is one of the chief boons be-

stowed on others, as intolerance, exclusivity, and rigidity are replaced by the values of acceptance, inclusiveness, and flexibility.

What I have maintained all along, however, is that the new religious consciousness is far more than an imaginary hypothesis: it is a living reality, embodied and reflected, in varying degrees, in the life and work of real persons. Some of these seekers began their quests in the bosom of one of the traditional religions, such as fundamentalist or Evangelical Protestantism (Gloria Karpinski, Janet Lee Mitchell, Paul Solomon), Roman Catholicism (Jane Roberts⁶), or the Anglican communion (F. W. H. Myers); while from the scientific counter-tradition have come those trained in such fields as medicine (W. Brugh Joy), modern academic philosophy (Michael Grosso), or both (William James, Raymond Moody); while still others (James again, Jung, Michael Talbot) always seem to have had one foot in the camp of science, and the other in that of this new religious spirit.

What all these investigators share is a profound commitment, first and foremost, to what I have been calling "inquiry." They possess a firm conviction, based on personal experience, of what James termed "the reality of the unseen," coupled with an equally firm refusal to insult this mysterious reality by giving it a final name or definition, or even by providing a "one size fits all" set of directions for relating to it. For each of them, the individual search itself is the essential form of religious practice, and the continuing process of inquiry is more important than any particular answer obtained, or experience enjoyed, along the (infinite) way.

What each demonstrates by example—James, for instance, had openly wondered about his own mental and physical health following a mysterious but intriguing episode in which he seemed to be having three different dreams simultaneously—is that rigorous self-questioning is the mark of a strong and clear mind, not a weak and murky one; and that it is possible to take religious experiences extremely seriously and to accept the reality of phenomena which orthodox science dismisses, without at the same time becoming dogmatically attached to any particular theory of said phenomena. And this shows that it is neither necessary nor advisable to jettison the critical faculties or to curb one's inquisitiveness in order to fully participate in the reli-

gious quest. Concerning a formative religious experience, he had as a teenager, Paul Solomon thus writes:

Perhaps the most enduring result of the experience has been a solid, undeniable and "unshakable" knowledge of a living presence of God that is not dependent upon belief. I have found that the experience did not confirm (or deny) the [Baptist] religious doctrine and dogma I had been taught, but rather began a quest for knowledge and understanding. . . . This transformation experience did not seem at all like a graduation, but like an initiation, a beginning of a quest.⁷

Janet Lee Mitchell's view is equally open-ended and free of dogmatic attachments:

I no longer have an anthropomorphic concept of God, but the word is still acceptable to me. My concept of God has changed several times as I have become more consciously evolved, and I am willing for it to change again if it will bring more life to my body and experience.⁸

In line with this self-consciously evolutionary perspective, these explorers typically view the act of self-questioning, not as an abstract intellectual exercise, or as a temporary means to an end, but as an inherently sacred space: a carefully fashioned receptacle for the divine mystery; an opening into which the transcendent can flow. In his book of the same name, W. Brugh Joy terms this type of experience "avalanche." In his case, "everything [he had previously] held as sacred collapsed into one large heap." But instead of immediately attempting to "fill this meaningless, painful void with something . . . anything," he held onto the pain of "nothingness" and found himself "shocked into ecstasy."

I felt liberated and peculiarly unburdened. The mystery of the Mystery was again nascent. I could once again apprentice myself to Life and feel the wholeness of its manifestations. . . . Much to my surprise, some of the "sacred" viewpoints I had held to be Truth reversed or collapsed under the impact of the new way I perceived the world. For instance, I now no longer embrace the view that personal continuity follows death, nor do I embrace reincarnational perspectives, although each was a huge and significant foundation stone in my own earlier staging.⁹

Brugh Joy's sense of breakthrough, of freedom, which resulted from the apparently sudden collapse of his previous view of his own identity and relationship to the world, underscores that a key function of the religious quest is to spur one

on to discover the farther range of human powers. On this point I am in agreement with Wilson, Michael Grosso, and Mitchell, all of whom have argued (following James and F. W. H. Myers) that the opposition that has sometimes been drawn between "the spiritual" and "the psychic" (or "paranormal") is unfortunate and misleading. In the dualistic view, whereas "spiritual" implies a loosening of the grip of the manipulative, insecure ego, and a recognition of one's place in the wider cosmic scheme and the value and importance of compassion, psychic powers such as clairvoyance, telepathy, and precognition are condemned as distractions and a potentially dangerous source of ego inflation. But insofar as such experiences hint at our greater identity and the existence of an intimate, if mysterious, cosmic connectedness, they may serve as an impetus to identify and align ourselves with our deepest levels of being. That, improperly integrated, such experiences could corrupt or confuse the individual and lead one to impress or manipulate others does not make these experiences inherently evil or of dubious value, since, as Grosso observes,¹⁰ even so-called "spiritual" values and truths can be misunderstood and misused, as we have already observed.

In sum, what I am calling the new religious consciousness satisfies many, if not most, of the requirements of the new religion as set out in the first part of my discussion. These include: cultivating an inward mystical and visionary experience independent of dogmas and institutions; treating the experience as initiation, or as a potential catalyst for personal transformation; recognizing a deeper human identity and power upholding the truth of the connectedness of all things and the values of harmony and unity; and overcoming the dualisms of subject/object, experience/knowledge, etc. But I submit that the principle of inquiry is the central thread which binds these various elements together.

Naturally this synthesis will not satisfy or please everyone. The new religious consciousness abjures both the *a priori* radical skepticism of the scientific orthodoxy of mechanistic materialism (which knows very well, thank you—even without examining the evidence—that mystical or visionary experiences are meaningless, except perhaps as symptoms of some disease of individual or social psychology, and/or an unusually persistent form of intellectual error), as well as

the *a priori* dogmatism of those religious "true believers" who are certain that they, and they alone, possess the exalted keys to the Kingdom.

For their own respective ideological reasons and interests, both scientific skeptics and religious dogmatists will deny the feasibility of the new approach. Yet, in their stubborn refusal to acknowledge that one can indeed live a life of religious inquiry, they will be in the position of one who attempts to argue the hind leg off a donkey.

What I have been suggesting, however, is that we do not have to sacrifice either rationality or spirituality if we are prepared to abandon superficial and outmoded conceptions of reason and spirit, and thereby honor both elements of our nature without reservation or compromise. This is our greatest challenge, our best opportunity, our highest calling. ■

Notes

1. Colin Wilson, *The Outsider* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1956).
2. I have borrowed this phrase from Marie-Louise Von Franz, *On Dreams and Death* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), vii.
3. Kenneth Ring, *Heading toward Omega* (New York: Quill, 1985), chapter 8.
4. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2d ed., Bollingen Series 17, 1972), 30.
5. Idries Shah, *The Sufis* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1971), xxvi-xxvii.
6. I believe that the enormous contribution of the late Jane Roberts (and her husband Robert Butts) to the development of the new religious consciousness has yet to be fully understood and appreciated. Her *Adventures in Consciousness* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1975) is of special importance in this regard.
7. Paul Solomon, *The Meta-Human: A Handbook for Personal Transformation* (Norfolk, Va.: Hampton Roads, 1990), 49.
8. Janet Lee Mitchell, *Conscious Evolution* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 7.
9. W. Brugh Joy, M.D., *Avalanche: Heretical Reflections on the Dark and the Light* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 7.
10. Michael Grosso, *Soulmaker: True Stories from the Far Side of the Psyche* (Norfolk, Va.: Hampton Roads, 1992), 148.

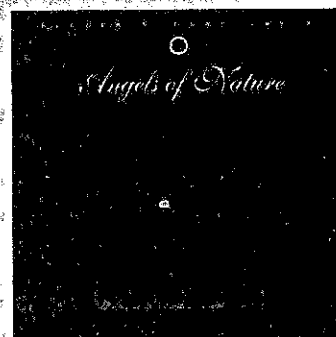
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