

Methods for exploring primordial elements  
of youth spirituality

by

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## Methods for exploring “primordial” elements of youth spirituality

### 1. Background to the study of primordial spiritual experience

This paper contends that ‘primordial’ experiences play an important, and often overlooked, part in the spirituality of youth, and describes both a method for uncovering them and some preliminary findings from an ongoing research project on the spirituality of youth.

By ‘primordial’ we mean ‘basic, original or fundamental’; our special sense of the term is defined in more detail at the beginning of section 3 below, in which this aspect of the method and some preliminary findings of our project will be presented.

But first, to provide the context necessary for the understanding of primordial spirituality, we discuss in section 1 a) our multidisciplinary approach, b) the history of the idea of spirituality and c) the way in which we have defined it. Next we provide d) a brief overview of religion and spirituality among youth in Australia, and e) of the theoretical orientations and previous research which the project takes into account, before concluding with f) an outline of the scope of the project, and of the sample for the first phase of interviewing.

In the following section 2, the analytical framework developed for application to the interview data is outlined.

#### a) A multidisciplinary approach

Although the perspective of this paper is predominantly sociological, we contend that spirituality, like religion, can only be studied adequately – even by sociology – by utilising a multidisciplinary approach. Failure to do so is a large part of the reason why much sociological research on religion peters out at ‘dead ends’. The following disciplines, which are listed in approximate order of their accessibility to sociologists, make valuable contributions to such a study:

- sociology of knowledge and sociology of religion,
- anthropology (especially linguistics and ritual studies),
- psychology (especially cognitive psychology, social psychology and psychology of religion). In this discipline, a single work of one individual: *Varieties of Religious Experience* by American philosopher / psychologist William James, a most gifted and persuasive writer, has had a prodigious, and in some ways limiting, influence on defining the paradigm of religious experience, shaping the conception of religion and the future study of religious experience;
- history of religions (especially the phenomenology of religion tradition),
- philosophy (especially epistemology and aesthetics),
- theology (especially fundamental theology, ecclesiology, theology of liturgy, pastoral theology).

Phenomenology, not so much a discipline as a method which has influenced history of religions, philosophy and the social sciences, is a particularly valuable tool, and one variety of ‘phenomenological sociology’, that of Husserl’s disciple Alfred Schutz, is utilised in our approach.

When the focus is narrowed to the investigation of ‘primordial’ spiritual experiences, resources from some of these disciplines, and especially from phenomenological method, are not merely valuable, but simply indispensable.

#### b) ‘Spirituality’ – a ‘master idea’ in Western culture

Researching the history of ideas on the development of the concepts of ‘spirit’ and ‘spirituality’ and its diverse uses in different fields of knowledge and different languages results in the discovery that most treatments are too narrowly religious – usually Christian.

At its most general, spirituality denotes immateriality, and connotes capacities which were thought to arise from 'going beyond' the material realm: particularly the human capacity for self-transcendence.

In their long history, the words 'spirit' and 'spirituality' have had a variety of more specific meanings; sometimes largely overlapping with 'religion', but sometimes quite distinct from it.

It may be helpful to distinguish three principal threads of meaning which contribute to 'spirit' / 'spirituality': the philosophical, the ethical and the religious. They are very long threads – each two and a half to three thousand years old. They emerge at the dawn of recorded history, and there are indications of much older pre-historic origins. They seem to have their roots in very similar reflections on basic human phenomena, but soon begin to develop somewhat independently of each other; they intertwine; sometimes influence each other, but remain distinct. They parallel each other in many different cultures e.g. Israelite, Greek, Indian, Egyptian.

#### 1) 'Spirit /spiritual /spirituality' in the Western philosophical tradition

The Western intellectual tradition is greatly influenced by the ancient Greek development of the conceptions of soul or spirit (Gk: *psyche*, Latin: *anima*) – notably by Plato and Aristotle.

The Greek philosophers, like thinkers in many cultures throughout the first millennium BCE, conceived of all living things as possessing spirit (*pneuma*– the breath of life), and as having a soul, or life-principle (*psyche*) departing at death; intangible; invisible; somehow independent of the materiality of the body. And being immaterial, hence it was also immortal, surviving the dissolution of the body in death.

The distinctive characteristic of Greek philosophy was to develop this line of reflection into the discovery of *mind*. In humans, soul's independence of matter enabled it to reach beyond (transcend) the material body to grasp reality in the form of ideas – to possess consciousness; and even to see itself, to reflect, to be self-conscious – soul showed itself as mind (*nous*). Spirituality in this sense was the basis of the distinctively human attributes: language, laughter, abstract thought, reasoning – all of those characteristics which were thought to elevate human life above that of lower primates.

For Aristotle, the single word which says all of this best is *rational* – rationality *defined* humanity (*homo est animal rationale*). Spirituality and rationality henceforth mean the same thing for a very long period in philosophy.

These Greek conceptions spread throughout the Hellenistic world. When Western civilisation collapsed under the impact of the barbarian invasions, parts of the Greek philosophical heritage survived in the Platonic and Neo-Platonic writings of the Christian Fathers. The distinctive contribution of Aristotle was lost to sight for some centuries, but rediscovered in the High Middle Ages in Arabic translations from the original Greek, in the work of Islamic philosophers Abu Nasr Muhammad al-Farabi, Abu 'Ali al-Husayn Ibn Sina and Abu al-Walid Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Ibn Rushd, who were well known in the universities of medieval Europe under the Latinised forms of their names, Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes. The rediscovery of Greek philosophy and art climaxed in the Renaissance.

The eighteenth century Enlightenment was later to reshape the ideal of Reason much more narrowly into the mould of abstract conceptuality and discursive reasoning; in reaction, the Romantic Revolution in philosophy, literature and art attempted to regain something of the breadth of the Renaissance vision of the human, integrating reason with affect and imagination. 'Spirituality' takes on a special meaning from this period, which in English, still has echoes today: *spirituality* is often used of a person's sensitivity to beauty, to the aesthetic dimension; similarly, one can speak of the spirituality of a work of art.

The period from Kant to Hegel in German philosophy represents the apogee of the philosophy of Spirit; but the idea lives on in phenomenology and other variants of the enduring idealist tradition.

## 2) The development of the ethical ideal in Western and Eastern civilisations

About 2500 years ago, during the first millennium BCE, human cultural evolution seems to have entered a new phase, marked by a radical change which spread through, or developed independently in, most ancient civilisations. It is often referred to as ‘ethical monotheism’, since a strong advance in the development of the ethical sense of life was coupled, in many cases, with a development from polytheism to monotheism. Although spirituality has later come to mean more than the reflective life, or the ethical life, the development of ethics marks an important stage on the path: it posits an interior dimension to human life, one in which the individual is confronted by standards for living which are ‘transcendent’ – which come from sources above and beyond the individual human level, and which are capable of making unconditional demands on the person.

In ancient Israel during this period, a radical monotheism begins to take shape, in marked contrast to the polytheistic fertility cults of neighbouring peoples. And in this context, the author of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the *Torah*, proclaims that it is the duty of Israel to love the Lord their God, and their neighbours as themselves; that this is more important than sacrifices offered at the altar. In succeeding centuries the major and minor ‘ethical prophets’ of Israel preached increasingly strict and explicit standards of justice by which all were bound.

Socrates (d. 399 BCE), in Plato’s account, believed that reflecting on life so as to pursue goodness was a command of God, and at his trial, declared that he could never desist from ‘examining’ his own and others’ lives, since ‘the unexamined life is not worth living’ (Plato 1961 pp. 71-2).<sup>1</sup> His courageous insistence on this dimension of ethical reflection and questioning in a society whose religion was still at a more primitive, amoral stage, was so unwelcome as to cost him his life – not an uncommon fate of ‘ethical prophets’.

In India, the Upanishads (e.g. the *Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad* c. 650 BCE) showed a developing ethical consciousness; the Hindu sages taught that *atman* (the human spirit) is identified with *Brahman* (God) ‘*tat tvam asi*’<sup>2</sup> (Beck n.d.).

The teachings of Gautama Siddhartha (Buddha 563-483 B.C.E.) draw sharply away from the worldliness of the *Vedas*; fulfilment of the ethical demands of the Noble Eightfold Path is the sole way of escape from the wheel of death and rebirth, fuelled by desire, which is the cause of all human suffering. Although Buddhism was later to become extinct in the native land of the Buddha, his teachings remain to this day extremely influential in China and South-East Asia.

Later developments in Hinduism – for example, the Yoga Sutras of Pathanjali (oral traditions written down between 200 BCE and 50 CE) – show a similar ethical emphasis; the first requirement on the path of Yoga is *Yama*—moral duty, right acting (Roszak 1975, p. 219).

Islam, the most uncompromising of all the monotheistic religions, appears on the world scene only centuries later (Muhammad 570-632 CE). It draws partly on Biblical sources, and presents in the

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<sup>1</sup> ‘If they thought he could just keep his mouth shut and stay out of trouble, that would be impossible. First because to keep his silence would be a disobedience to a direct command from God. Of course he knew they could not believe he was serious about this God thing so he puts it a different way, he explained to them that he felt it was his responsibility, “... to let no day pass without discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking and examining both myself and others,” he felt that this activity, “is really the very best thing that a person can do, and that *life without this sort of examination is not worth living ...*” [italics added].

<sup>2</sup> Lit. ‘that art thou’ -- ‘The primary message of the *Upanishads* is that this can be done by meditating with the awareness that one’s soul (*atman*) is one with all things. Thus whoever knows that one is Brahman (God) becomes this all; even the gods cannot prevent this, since that one becomes their soul (*atman*). Therefore whoever worships another divinity, thinking it is other than oneself, does not know.’ (Beck, *loc. cit.*)

*Koran* and the prescriptions of *shariat* (religious civil law in the Islamic theocracy) a complete ethical program for both the individual and society.

3) ‘Spirit / spiritual /spirituality’ acquires an even more transcendent meaning in Israel and Christianity

The philosophical sense of *pneuma* takes on a properly religious dimension of meaning, even more transcendent than ethical reflection, in the New Testament, in Neo-Platonic philosophy, in subsequent Christian patristic writing and in Christian and Gnostic theologies.

(a) Scriptural roots of ‘spirit /spiritual’

--OT: Heb. *ruah* ; shows a breadth of meaning parallel to that of Gk. *pneuma*. Initially breath, wind; breath of the mouth; breath of life; spirit, animation, agitation, temper, disposition, vivacity, vigour, courage; spirit of the living being in men and animals; departing at death; spirit of God as inspiring ecstatic state of prophecy, imparting energy, resting on the Messianic king; *ruah elohim* (the spirit of the Lord); God’s creative power – hovering over the waters in Gn.1.<sup>3</sup>

--NT: especially in the epistles of the apostle Paul: Gk. *pneuma* spirit, and *pneumatikos* – spiritual, referring to the person under the influence of the divine Spirit (also applied to charisms, blessings, hymns, conduct). ‘Spiritual’ in this sense is contrasted by Paul with two other modes of being: *psychikos*, pertaining to the human soul, indicating what belongs to the merely natural level of human being, to an earthly, ‘secular’ world (1 Cor 2:14-15) and, at the opposite extreme from the Spiritual, *sarx*, *sarkikos*: the flesh, the fleshly person (‘flesh’ here denoting not the body, but the principle of finitude, limitation, sinfulness, opposition to God).<sup>4</sup>

(b) ‘Spirituality’

(1) Earliest uses in English: a) ‘the spirituality’ vs. ‘the temporality’ – the clergy; the body of spiritual / ecclesiastical persons (1441 *Pol Poems, Songs*); also, ecclesiastical property or revenue held in return for spiritual services; b) the quality or condition of being spiritual; attachment to things of the spirit as opposed to material / worldly things (1500 Dunbar).<sup>5</sup>

(2) Despite the Reformation’s rejection of monasticism, the teaching of the Reformers paid great attention to piety, to the manner of living the gospel, and movements like Pietism and Methodism have at their core highly developed ‘spiritualities’.

(3) Influenced by the ‘turn to the subject’ in philosophy’s modern period from the seventeenth century, spirituality became increasingly the **interior** dimension of religion’s public, external and visible world of doctrine, ethics, ritual and community.

(4) From the seventeenth century, especially in France, *spiritualité* /spirituality refers to a person’s manner of living the Christian life and seeking ‘Christian perfection’, and particularly to their mode of private prayer – to the intense cultivation of religious self-consciousness. Particularly in the religious orders, there developed ‘styles’ or schools of spirituality: Benedictine, Ignatian, Carmelite, Alphonsonian. Each of these centred on a particular way of praying, but encompassed an entire spiritual lifestyle, applicable not only to the monks and nuns of the orders, but gradually, adopted also by small numbers of laity for whom piety was a primary concern. Spirituality was their personal, affective style of living the Christian life<sup>6</sup>.

(5) In the late twentieth century, from an almost exclusively Christian, (and mostly Catholic) usage, ‘spirituality’ expanded to embrace the world: of the twenty-five volumes of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, (Cousins 1985) only three volumes were devoted to Christianity.

Nowadays, the term ‘spirituality’ is used by young people to refer to beliefs, practices or lifestyles drawing on exotic or ‘New Age’ sources (such as Asian martial arts, Goddess worship or neo-

<sup>3</sup> Briggs, Driver & Brown, Hebrew Lexicon.

<sup>4</sup> Schweitzer, 1968.

<sup>5</sup> Oxford English Dictionary.

<sup>6</sup> The master work documenting this phase is Viller *et al* 1932.

paganism). Or spirituality may consist of a mix of themes from traditional and non-traditional sources. Some who show no interest in traditional religion seem nonetheless to be considerably influenced by these alternative spiritualities; others interpret their lives in completely secular ways. In summary: through the centuries of Christianity, 'spirituality' comes to imply much more than 'humanity' – it is the attraction to the things of the Spirit rather than to earthly things, and, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century, has come to mean the conscious living of a Christian way of life – especially its personal, interior dimension, in contrast to public, external, visible religious rituals and institutions. But now in late modernity, spirituality, while retaining the sense of a person's interior life, begins to be understood as no longer necessarily linked to institutional religion; sometimes even standing in opposition to it.

Only against the background of the development of the main strands of meaning in the term 'spirituality' can we approach the task of defining what it is to mean in our research project.

### c) Defining 'spirituality'

#### (1) Ways of defining spirituality

The article 'Preparing spirituality for citizenship' by Jacqueline Watson (2003) illustrates a courageous but confused approach to definition. She sets out to take Wittgenstein's advice, and derive the meaning of spirituality from its *use* – in this case, in a quite small set of journal articles. She does not recognise that even within this limited range, the word is used in some quite different and incompatible senses. Watson tries nonetheless to arrive at a sort of general, all-embracing definition.

As if we realised that from usage, 'blue' sometimes means a colour; sometimes 'down or depressed', sometimes 'vulgar, rude, obscene' as in 'blue jokes'; and we ended up with a definition of 'blue in general' as 'coloured depressed vulgarity'!

Hay and Nye (1998), cited by Watson (2003 p.12), fall into this mistake when they locate spirituality as 'delicacy of awareness', 'musical or poetic sensitivity' at one end of the scale and spirituality as 'mystical experience' at the other. They are quite correct in identifying both of these as among the shades of meaning attached to the word, but these two meanings are not variants of some basic form, but equivocal – quite different from each other, having arisen in different historical circumstances, in response to different developments, as our condensed history of the word shows. Thus Hay and Nye force two different meanings of spirituality (the philosophical-aesthetic and the religious) on to the *same scale*.

The confusion rampant in the Watson paper is a good argument for stipulative definitions over lexical definitions in research. Lexical definitions classify usage; stipulative definitions declare that in using the term 'spirituality', the writer intends the meaning 'X' and not other usages such as 'Y' and 'Z'. It is sometimes said that definitions are 'arbitrary'; this is true in the sense that one can draw definitional boundaries wherever one chooses, but not in the sense that there is no reasoned basis for the choice. Including some meanings and excluding others must be supported by appropriate arguments.

A stipulative definition should have a strong connection with at least one family of meanings in usage; otherwise, we are inventing pure technical jargon, which people will find very difficult to interpret, because it strays far from common usage.

So we are not obliged to include in our definition everything that fits into the idea of 'spirituality' in its philosophical sense of 'having a mind, a rational soul, a psyche, consciousness, capable of reflection on itself', nor in the aesthetic sense of 'delicacy of awareness, sensitive receptivity to art'. These senses certainly occur in the history of the word's usage, but we may wish legitimately to emphasise in our research some more specific, more closely defined meanings.

The other great weakness in the Hay and Nye approach (on which we comment because Watson seems so taken with it) is the idea that spirituality, 'like all awareness, is a biologically inbuilt

constituent of what it is to be human' (p. 14). If 'spiritual awareness' were a feature of our biology, everyone would be spiritually aware all the time! But ideas are not innate! Awareness is an activity, not a biological structure.

We are not born with a set of visions / visual experiences, but with eyes, which have the capacity for sight. If anything in the line of spirituality is 'biologically inbuilt', it can only be the organic basis of the capacity for awareness: e.g. the development of a brain and nervous system of a certain size and complexity of organisation, with certain capabilities. The research tradition stemming from Alister Hardy sees spiritual awareness as probably universal in humans. Such an idea presents no problem; but the zoologist in Hay leads him to postulate too hastily an organic basis for this universality. The notion of awareness / consciousness as 'biologically inbuilt' makes no sense, but is not the only foundation for a universal experience.

Secondly, awareness, or consciousness, is always awareness *of something* (or as phenomenology says, consciousness is *intentional*). For Hay, the aim of spiritual development is 'to be aware of one's awareness, and to reflect on this experience'. This amounts to awareness of awareness of awareness, and Hay does not want to 'emphasise the religious or cultural forms of spirituality' (which is what people are spiritually aware *of*)! Such a reflective process is possible, but it is the profoundest and most subtle of philosophical reflections – in its extreme abstractness,<sup>7</sup> it is light-years from the kind of spiritual awareness teachers strive to develop in children.

## (2) Our definition of spirituality.

We are in no doubt as to our *field of interest*: when high proportions of the population were active in Christian religious institutions, spirituality was the personal dimension of religious faith which shaped people's understanding and action. Now that such active involvement has greatly declined, especially among young people, does religion continue to influence their spirituality? Are there spiritualities of other kinds? And if not, what has taken their place in providing life's meaning and shaping the way it is lived? Or in other words, what are the cultural resources utilised by Generation Y as interpretive structures for their life-journeys and life-stories?

For our purposes, we define spirituality as *a conscious way of life based on a transcendent referent*. Our definition is not 'lexical' – it does not claim to sum up the way everyone uses the word; nor is it *essential* – aiming to establish definitively what spirituality is. Rather, it is *stipulative* – it states what the term spirituality shall mean in our project.

As we use it, 'way of life' means here a worldview, an ethos and a set of practices.

My worldview is a way of understanding 'my' world and my place in that world, and provides a frame of reference within which I can assign meaning to my experiences.

Ethos is elegantly defined by Geertz as 'the tone, character and quality of life; its moral and aesthetic style and mood' (1973, p. 89). My ethos includes my feelings about myself, others, my world; it is the source of my values, practices and commitments.

A set of practices is also implied in the notion of a 'way of life': they are the means by which it is enacted, by which it influences or shapes the lived reality. They may be ritual or non-ritual, collective or private; e.g. reading, reflection, meditation, prayer, music, dance, drama. Most spiritualities give a prominent place to "doing forms", as it is called in martial arts: repeating symbolic actions: as in Yoga, Tai Chi, the Japanese Tea Ceremony, and those forms of worship called 'liturgical'. Spiritual practices may extend to acts of altruism or benevolence towards others; our study pays particular

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<sup>7</sup> It is what Lonergan calls the *insight into insight*, what Husserl describes as the *transcendental reduction* in which the very processes by which consciousness itself is constituted are revealed; there are parallels in some types of Eastern meditation.

attention to the ‘social consequences’ of spirituality: ways in which social interaction is shaped by spiritual beliefs – either consciously or without deliberation.

‘Transcendent’ means here a reality (in the phenomenological, subjective sense) which is beyond the individual, either in the sense of something supernatural / religious / otherworldly, or in the sense of an ethical ideal towards which a person strives to shape their conduct – even when this ideal has no explicit religious foundation. At its simplest, it may be just the endeavour to live a decent life, or to emulate an admired person. Even in the avowed secularist, who might well explicitly reject the commonsense notions of ‘spirit’, ‘spiritual’, ‘spirituality’, or even go further to reject the idea that conduct should be governed any ethical rule originating outside the individual, we postulate a ‘spirituality’ which contains an element of transcendence: everyone’s socialisation into the worldview of his or her culture represents an elementary transcending of their biological nature, giving them access to a standpoint beyond the self from which they acquire a scheme of reference for assigning meaning to individual experiences, and a sense of a continuous self with a past, present and future which can be integrated into the unity of a biography (Luckmann 1967 pp. 43-49).<sup>8</sup> In sum, a system of reference which locates the individual within a wider, more inclusive context involves transcendence, at least in an elementary sense.

Finally, in defining spirituality as a *conscious* way of life, we postulate, following Socrates, an element of reflectiveness. However the degree of reflectiveness varies greatly with age, or rather maturity, and should be seen as an important developmental aspect of spirituality.

Obviously, then, spirituality, in our definition, will include a way of life, and a way of making sense of life, which is based on a traditional world religion, or on an ‘alternative’ religion (whether ancient or new); it may also take the ‘post-traditional’ form (to be discussed in more detail below) – which does not draw on any one source, but eclectically blends traditional, alternative and secular elements.

Spirituality may also take the form of a way of life which seeks to follow an ideal which is not religious, supernatural or otherworldly – for example: to live a good life, or virtuous life. Or it may be a way of life modelled on that of an exemplary person, whether real or fictitious, perhaps simply a parent, relative or teacher. Even if they are not religious, ethical ideals are transcendent in the sense that they call on the individual to aspire to a manner of being and acting which is beyond or higher than his or her present level of existence.

In our proposed definition we do not intend to include every possible meaning of spirituality:

- spirituality does not include *all* human activity; this sets a boundary so broad as to be useless for circumscribing a research project;
- spirituality does not include *all* ‘relational consciousness’ (as it does for Hay and Nye, 1998) even though this is a fundamental human phenomenon; again, this includes too much; the definition does not focus our project on a manageable area;
- aesthetic awareness is not sufficient to satisfy our definition; this is too narrow a focus;
- spirituality does not include a mere idea with which a person may toy idly, without much understanding of it, without any specific associated practice, without any impact on the person’s worldview or lifestyle – e.g. someone says they believe in reincarnation, but knows only that it means being reborn on earth again after death, and this knowledge does not affect their actions or practices; in our definition, reincarnation would not be a part of that person’s spirituality. The same is true of mere opinions on religious issues.
- according to many authors, the distinctive characteristic of the spirituality of the ‘post-traditional’ or ‘postmodern’ era is that it is a *bricolage* of many themes, not necessarily organised by any unifying principle. Now, it is certainly the case that the ‘spiritual environment’ is highly pluralistic. Every variety of ‘spirituality’ seems to be on display in the media, on the Internet. This variety is in turn reflected in the perceptions of individuals as in a mirror. Research which succeeded in harvesting only these superficial perceptions could

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<sup>8</sup> We would not, however, go on, with Luckmann, to designate this phenomenon as ‘religious’ in an elementary sense (p. 49).

perhaps mistake this pot-pourri for the subjects' own spirituality, and conclude that its variety and disorganisation characterise the era -- an example of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. Without claiming that this conception of 'postmodern spirituality' is purely a product of such a mistake, we should be slow to postulate it as general, until we have explored beyond surface reflections of the environment, perceived by the individual and reported to us, to the level of what is really owned and acted on by the individual.

#### **d) Religion and spirituality amongst young people in contemporary Australia**

In contemporary Australia only a very small proportion of the youth population has anything to do with organised religion. There has been a growth of interest in alternative forms of spirituality, but the percentage of the population identifying with a major religion has fallen from 89 per cent in 1961 to 72 per cent in 2001. The percentage of the Australian population attending religious services at least monthly almost halved from about 39 per cent in 1960 (Mol 1985, p. 58) to 20 per cent in 1998 (Bellamy et al. 2000, p. 5). Only 14 per cent of all Australians in their twenties attend religious services at least once a month compared with 35 per cent of people seventy years of age or older. Attendance has declined most sharply in the mainstream, previously well-subscribed Christian denominations. While 27 per cent of those 70 years or older attend Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox or Uniting Churches, only 7 per cent of people in their twenties attend those denominations.

Approximately the same number of people in their twenties attending Anglican, Uniting and Orthodox churches combined are attending Pentecostal churches. While mainstream churches are attracting comparatively few younger people, several of the smaller denominations such as Pentecostals, have grown in numbers and are maintaining high attendance rates (Hughes 2001).

Despite their low level of involvement in organised religion, or perhaps because of it, many young people appear to take a positive view of 'spirituality'. Whereas the word used to refer to the cultivation of personal religiosity based on the religious tradition of a community (especially Christian), it seems possible that for many in contemporary society spirituality is not so often based in, or derived from, one particular tradition or source; rather the individual assembles items from a variety of sources available in the 'spiritual marketplace' (Roof 1999) into a loose collage (Bibby 1993; Hughes et al. 1995; Bruce 1999). Instead of providing a spiritual 'home', locating one's identity in a particular community, contemporary spirituality may be experienced as a journey - a 'spiritual quest' (Batson et al. 1993; Wuthnow 1998).

Giddens (1994) argues that since World War Two a 'post-traditional social order' has emerged in western societies, whereby tradition, including religious tradition, is increasingly open to 'interrogation or discourse'. No longer aligning themselves with any particular institution, tradition, or meaning-making system, individuals make meaning by drawing on an ever-increasing range of resources. This has implications for both religion and spirituality. As religious themes have begun to become available 'unbundled' from particular traditions and communities, 'spirituality' has come to be understood by many as more radically individual; self-constructed rather than accepted; free to borrow from various traditions, but separable from religion, and at times reacting against it - an alternative to religion (Marler & Hadaway 2002).

In our interviews, the term 'spirituality' is used by young people to refer to beliefs, practices or lifestyles drawing on exotic or 'New Age' sources (such as Asian martial arts, Goddess worship or neo-paganism). Or spirituality may consist of a mix of themes from traditional and non-traditional sources. Some who show no interest in traditional religion seem nonetheless to be considerably influenced by these alternative spiritualities; others interpret their lives in completely secular ways. In summary: through the centuries of Christianity, 'spirituality' comes to imply much more than 'humanity' - it is the attraction to the things of the Spirit rather than to earthly things, and, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century, has come to mean the conscious living of a Christian way of life - especially its personal, interior dimension, in contrast to public, external, visible religious rituals and institutions. But now in late modernity, spirituality, while retaining the sense of a person's interior life, begins to be

understood as no longer necessarily linked to institutional religion; sometimes even standing in opposition to it.

### e) Theory and Research on religion / spirituality

1) Theories of spirituality as a commodity chosen in an enlarged market:

In the well-known theories of Batson, Schoenrade & Ventis (1993), Wuthnow (1998, 1999), Roof (1999) and Davie (1994) youth spirituality is pictured as follows: in the 'post-traditional' situation, young people are on a Quest for meaning; their spirituality is one of 'Journey, rather than Home'; they select from a 'market-place' of spiritualities and put together their own eclectic combination independent of institutions -- they 'believe without belonging'. But few of these theories take account of continental philosophies of post-modernism which argue that an even more radical change has taken place in the relation of the individual to society.

2) Theories that postulate a radically changed relationship between individual and society in the postmodern world, leading to a spirituality of alienation:

In traditional sociological theory, the individual is first initiated into the social world ('primary socialisation') in a once-and-for-all manner in early childhood; and later will undergo various kinds of 'secondary socialisation' as preparation for specific social and occupational roles. Through these roles the individual is inserted into the network of social institutions which will organise and structure a considerable proportion of his or her life.

Continental theories of postmodernity postulate a very different relationship between individual and society. According to Alain Touraine, we are seeing "the end of the definition of the human being as a social being, defined by his or her place in society which determines his or her behaviour and actions". Instead, the combination of the "strategic definition of social action that is not oriented by social norms" and "the defence, by all social actors, of their cultural and psychological specificity . . . can be found within the individual, and no longer in social institutions or universalistic principles' (1998, 177). This theme of the changed social location of the individual in postmodernity, and the new intensity of focus, is a common feature across the whole range of theories.

"Modern society exists in its activity of 'individualizing' (Bauman 2000, 45). Individualization is a fate, not a choice (46). It consists in transforming human identity from a given into a task, and giving the actor responsibility for that task and for its consequences.

"Freedom was desired as an absence of obtrusive and insidious constraints and limits. Our ancestors thought of freedom as a state in which one is not told what to do and not forced to do what one would rather not do. . . . The price . . . is insecurity (or, rather *Unsicherheit*: a much more complex discomfort, which includes uncertainty and unsafety alongside insecurity) . . ." (Bauman 2001a, 44).

Pierre Bourdieu reflects on the conditions necessary for a person to be capable of hoping for social transformation. "To have a well thought-out intention to transform the present, a modicum of hold on the present is needed. But people find that none of the most important levers and safeguards of their current situation come under their control e.g. in the case of loss of employment because of recession in the economy. Any social position is in the longer run precarious. Fear is diffused and ambient; it haunts consciousness and the subconscious. It renders all futures uncertain' (Bourdieu 1998, 97).

How is unity maintained in a differentiated society? "Until recently, . . . a normative answer to this question was sought – as if participation in society led to the assumption of a minimum of obligation. . . . increasing differentiation leads to an increasing generalization of . . . norms and values . . . their directive value decreases when the complexity of society increases" (Luhmann 1990, 422-23). "The cosmologically/religiously founded continuum of meaning breaks down, and . . . religion is reduced to one social function among others and condemned to a kind of faithless belief" (427). Ethical and political discourse is not now framed around the concept of the 'just society' but around 'individual rights'. Margaret Thatcher declared: 'There is no such thing as society'.

As de Tocqueville long ago suspected, setting people free may make them *indifferent*. The individual is the citizen's worst enemy, he suggested. The individual tends to be lukewarm, sceptical or wary of the 'common good', of the 'good society' or 'just society'. What is the sense of *common* interests unless they let each individual satisfy his or her *own*? The only two useful things 'public power' can do is to observe 'human rights', that is, to let everyone go his or her own way, and to enable everyone to do this in peace – by guarding the safety of a person's body and possessions (Bauman 2001b, 49).

Touraine's interpretation, taken literally, would seem to make it impossible to speak of 'society' any longer; and attempts to formulate social policy would make no sense.

Theories of postmodernism may nonetheless serve a useful purpose: as a dramatic metaphor for the changed sense of self, and the pervasive alienation from society, characteristic of late modernity, especially among youth. No interpretation of their situation, or policy recommendations for supporting among them a sense of belonging, can afford to ignore these factors, to which postmodernist theory draws attention.

However, that extraordinarily prescient observer, de Tocqueville, quoted above, long ago offered an alternative interpretation, applicable to the late modern situation, but harmonising with classical social theory. He presaged today's symptoms of social dysfunction as the consequences of (extreme) individualism, and foresaw clearly the threat it poses to the social fabric. The individual pursuing only personal or family interests does not support the citizen's concerns. Individualism is not moved to act for the common good, or for social justice, but instead sees the only function of the State as to protect the safety of individuals and their possessions (de Tocqueville 1839/1997).

In summary, theories that define contemporary Western society as having moved into a decisively new 'postmodern' phase tend to define the isolation of the individual and the eclipse of community as socially determined and irreversible. De Tocqueville, without postulating any such seismic shift in social relations, attributed similar effects to (extreme) individualism. This may be the more parsimonious explanation; but both approaches serve to warn us that today's young people are growing up in a situation in which the forging of basic social relationships is far more difficult than it was half a century ago. The present project seeks to shape its research questions and analysis against this background of theoretical understanding.

The search for personal meaning; the construction of the life-story:

Young people make sense of their lives, identities and experiences through the stories they tell about themselves, their values and experiences. Telling stories enables individuals to make sense of their experiences, to order events in a coherent fashion, relate events to other events, attribute causality and create a sense of biographical continuity for themselves.

The cultural stock-in-hand on which individuals can draw for their stories ranges from complex narratives which embody entire worldviews down to component ideas, values and symbols, expressed in language, music, clothing, leisure activities, whole 'lifestyles'. Moreover, people in different social settings access and adapt these cultural materials in different, socially-structured ways, and the kind of picture or story that results has important consequences both for the individual and for the society.

Bauman, describing how people construct life-narratives in an increasingly individualized society, suggests that "the point of the utmost sociological relevance is . . . where the boundary between one's doings and the conditions under which one acted (and, by definition, could not have acted otherwise) is drawn in the course of the narrative. . . . Lives lived and lives told are closely interconnected. What is taken for granted as an unchangeable condition in the telling, is likely to be accepted as one in the living. One lives one's life as a story yet to be told, but the way the story hoping to be told is to be woven decides the technique by which the yarn of life is spun." (2001, 7-8). As mentioned above, Giddens (1994) argues that now, in Western societies, individual biographies are formed 'reflexively', as individuals make meaning by drawing on an ever-increasing range of resources.

Sociological theory, from the time of the discipline's founders, identified *religion* as intimately involved in the process of socialisation (Durkheim, 1912/1961). Religion authoritatively defines the relationship of the individual and the society: it is the zone of culture containing the “master-narrative” which encodes the culture's worldview; it provides the language for expressing the sacred or transcendent, the rituals and other practices for maintaining its place in daily life. Religion also comprises an ethos—a detailed value system for individual and social life, given religious legitimation in the worldview, ranging from general principles to detailed practical norms. Religion lays the foundation for community life (Putnam, 2000, p.66).

*Spirituality*, in the traditional context, largely overlapped with religion. In contemporary society, where religious themes have begun to become available 'unbundled' from particular traditions and communities, 'spirituality' has come to be quite widely understood in a much more individualistic mode: self-constructed rather than simply accepted from one's religious tradition; free to borrow from various traditions, but separable from religion, and at times reacting against it - an alternative to religion (Marler & Hadaway 2002, Fuller 2001). It becomes possible for young people to have a very low level of involvement in organised religion, but still to view spirituality positively.

There are several alternative explanations for the changes in participation in institutional religion, especially among those in their late teens and twenties. Some sociologists note the development of consumerist attitudes to religion: Luckmann and secularisation theorists suggest that religion, still intimately entwined with the formation of personal identity, is now restricted to the private sphere, and that its dominant themes are personal autonomy, self-development and self-realisation. Instead of embracing the worldview and ethos of one particular tradition and religious community, the individual assembles items from a variety of sources available in the 'spiritual marketplace' (Roof, 1999) into a loose collage (Bibby, 1993, Hughes *et al.*, 1995; Bruce, 1999). For many, contemporary spirituality is experienced and understood as an evolving story or journey - a 'spiritual quest' rather than the location of one's identity in a particular community (Batson *et al.*, 1993; Wuthnow, 1998).

Religion and spirituality are significant in relation to citizenship, we believe, for reasons that echo Weber's argument against Marx: no doubt the decline in adherence to institutionalised religious communities and the growth of individualistic spiritualities is mostly a reflection of the changed social location of the individual in post-traditional society; but culture is not *always* the dependent variable vis-à-vis economic and social change: where spirituality remains attached to a religious community, there is a basis for resistance to individualising trends. “Religious institutions tend to promote norms of cooperation and a worldview that encourages a focus on problems lying *outside* the self” (Crystal & DeBell, 1998).

f) 'The Spirit of Generation Y' – The Spirituality of Australian Youth and Young People aged 13-29. This is an ongoing three-year research project (Singleton, Mason & Webber 2004).<sup>9</sup> The project began in 2002 with a pilot study, consisting of 20 lengthy interviews, and was used to refine our definition of spirituality, our interview schedule, and an initial analytical framework.. It was followed in 2003-2004 by Phase 1 of the main project, recently completed, which consisted of 40-minute, in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 64 teenagers and young adults from widely varying backgrounds. Phase 2, now commencing, comprises a telephone survey of a national random sample of about 1100 teenagers and young adults; in Phase 3, another 70 qualitative interviews will be conducted – some of them with the same subjects who were interviewed in Phase 1.

The purpose of the first phase was to investigate in detail the variety of spiritualities to be found in our target age-group. As in all qualitative research, it was not our aim to profile the population, or to describe typical cases, but to explore in depth a selection of cases chosen to manifest the range and variations of spirituality.

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<sup>9</sup> The article cited here is a description of the methodology developed for the pilot project of the study. The present paper takes up and develops further one aspect of that methodology: dealing with primordial experiences.

*Target sample.* The sample was designed to include a diverse range of young people, including private and public school students, tertiary students, those in the workforce, the unemployed and those from both high and low socio-economic backgrounds. We sought to have equal numbers of male and female informants, and an appropriate mix of rural and urban. The sampling was strategic: we sought to interview a number of people from each cohort so as to enable us to get a sense of the types of spiritualities one might find amongst these different groups.

*Achieved sample.* In the core project, a total of 64 interviews were conducted with young people aged 13–29. Approximately half were female and half male.

Age Group	No.	%
13-14	12	19
15-19	43	67
20-24	4	6
25-29	5	8
Total	64	100

Informants were recruited from a range of organizations. Over half were recruited through schools (four schools participated in the project, two Catholic and two Protestant). One quarter of informants were involved in a week-long programme devoted to the development of civic consciousness and skills among youth. The rest of the sample was recruited through a community college, a ‘work for the dole’ scheme, a regional Catholic Education Office and a Bible College.

Sixty-one per cent of informants were born in Australia to Australian parents. Twenty-eight per cent were second generation Australians: 14 per cent had parents from an English-speaking country (UK and New Zealand) and 14 per cent from a non-English speaking country (Poland, Holland, Italy, Greece, Lebanon, Syria, Mauritius, Malaysia, Philippines, Papua New Guinea and Brazil). The remaining 11 per cent of informants were born overseas; eight per cent of these in non-English speaking countries.

The interviews took between 30 minutes and an hour to conduct. A better quantitative measure of content is the approximate number of words spoken by the person being interviewed, which varied from 620 to 10,500 words. As might be expected, younger informants were less articulate, with some notable exceptions. The transcripts of the more extensive interviews ran to fifteen pages of single-spaced type.

## 2. Analytical framework

Our subjects’ spirituality is understood and described in terms of an analytical framework derived partly from theory, but strongly shaped by successive attempts to frame meaningfully the rich content of the interviews themselves. We see spirituality as having three components: worldview, ethos and practices.

### *Worldview*

What is the shape of this person’s life-story? (Has any story with a defined form even emerged yet?) How do they see and project themselves in relation to their world? What beliefs and ideas do they draw upon in interpreting their experience? Sometimes, there will be components which are both more subtle and more influential than clearly-formulated ideas; so we also ask: what significant experiences does this person relate? These may give rise to various forms of *experiential knowledge* – and come to expression as ‘sensings’, intuitions, feelings, moods, motivations, attractions, questions etc., rather than clearly formulated rational reflections.

### *-Articulation of the worldview:*

To what degree, we further ask, is our subject’s spirituality named, explicit, expressed, articulated, known, owned, understood, recognised, and reflected on?

*-Coherence of the worldview:*

are the stories, beliefs and ideas which are present consistent with each other, or are there marked discontinuities? What structural pattern or patterns do we see linking items of content? What level of complexity can be accommodated? How is ambiguity handled? Are incompatible items forced into a Procrustean fit? Is there a tendency towards the unity of a 'system', (imported or created, whether explicitly recognised or not)? Where is there flexibility, and where rigidity? What seems more stable and settled, and what is in flux?<sup>10</sup>

*Ethos:*

Spirituality, as we see it, does not consist solely, or even primarily, of stories or beliefs or ideas. These may be quite dependent upon ethos, memorably defined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 127) as 'the tone, character and quality of life; its moral and aesthetic style and mood'; which also includes values (more universal or general principles of evaluation), attitudes (more particular affective orientations towards specific objects or ideas – especially towards the self, others, the surrounding society) and dispositions (habitual preparedness to act in a specific manner). Geertz's conception alerts us to such subtle but powerful components as the usual feeling-tone of a person's life; and elements of style and mood derived from aesthetic as well as moral values and criteria.

*Practices:*

How is spirituality expressed in action? How does it shape the way a person regularly acts? As we have emphasised from our earliest reports, we believe that much less weight should be assigned to a mere idea with which a person may toy idly, without much understanding of it, without any specific associated practice, without any impact on the person's lifestyle. So our interviews enquired in detail about practices related to spirituality.

We found it useful to construct a set of 'types'<sup>11</sup> of spirituality, which combine the dimensions of worldview, ethos and practices:

*Traditional:* grounded in the tradition of a world-religion (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism);

*New Age:* embracing a framework from one or more New Age religions or spiritual paths: (e.g. neo-paganism, goddess worship, Wicca, channelling, Reiki, crystals); or occult or paranormal<sup>12</sup> beliefs and

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<sup>10</sup> This focus on coherence does not imply any preference for consistency on our part, or any negative judgment on 'inconsistencies'. Inconsistencies are of great interest; they may indicate a transition under way; or a fidelity to the 'truth of experience', in tension with premature or inadequate systematisation. Most of our informants are adolescents – they are developing in myriad ways; inconsistencies are to be expected, and may be a sign of personal growth; consistency may indicate either maturity or rigidity and difficulty in changing, or the influence of a very strong cultural pattern. Neither alternative prompts us to negative evaluation.

<sup>11</sup> There is a large literature, some of it highly critical, on Weber's original notion of the 'ideal type'. We do not intend to survey or debate the issues here. Suffice it to say that an ideal type is a kind of 'pure form' -- not intended as a detailed representation of any empirical reality, but a combination of characteristics serving as a kind of communicative shorthand. As revised by phenomenologists Husserl and Schutz, the 'type' is revealed as the basic currency of discourse, and the building block from which we construct the 'structures of relevance' through which we manage our existence in the everyday lifeworld. E.g. I post a letter, assuming that it will be collected from the pillar box by an anonymous worker of the type "postal worker", processed by others of the same type, and eventually delivered by another anonymous person of the type "postman". Without this process of 'typification', our everyday life would be completely unmanageable (Schutz & Luckmann 1973).

<sup>12</sup> Spirituality and the paranormal / occult: according to recent empirical studies, beliefs belonging to these domains (ESP, precognition, psychokinesis, witchcraft, spiritualism, belief in ghosts, superstition) should be distinguished from religious beliefs (MacDonald 2000, p. 187). In factor analysis they load together on a separate factor, distinct from religious components; they have been found to have a 'positive relation with indices of pathology and with psychological variables typically thought of as reflecting negative aspects of functioning. For example, paranormal beliefs have been found to be related to unusual thought and behaviour patterns including psychotic disorders (e.g. schizophrenia, schizotypy), external locus of control, suggestibility,

practices: (e.g. spiritualism, belief in ghosts, superstition, astrology); or elements of Eastern or esoteric religious practice detached from the tradition to which they belong: (e.g. Yoga, Tai Chi, TM); *Eclectic*: a collage of themes from disparate sources, sometimes including elements from traditional religions – for many authors, this is the paradigmatic ‘post-traditional’ spirituality; *Secular*: ways of making sense of life which reject religious traditions; sometimes finding an alternative base in science, philosophy or economic theory; often predominantly pragmatic and atheoretical; *Self-developmental*: focussed largely around issues of personal autonomy, self-development, self-realisation; *Embryonic* (unformed, undeveloped, inchoate, tentative, emergent, amorphous, nascent): largely implicit and unreflective – because of the subject’s early adolescent stage, or lack of education, cultural, social or family ambience, or brutalisation, or other factors which have impeded development.

Particular strategies, to be described shortly, were employed to explore the ‘primordial’ dimension of spirituality in these interviews.

### 3. Primordial spiritual experiences.

#### a) ‘Primordial’ Spiritual Experience

We wish to explore the hypothesis that, underlying the fully conscious aspects of spirituality’s worldview and ethos, there is a more elusive dimension: the intuitions not formulated in concepts, the preconceptual, non-rational components; what Polanyi (1967a; 1967b) refers to as ‘the tacit dimension’, ‘personal knowledge’, and what Bellah indicates when he proposes that religion could be defined as ‘the intuition of the felt-whole of existence’ (Bellah 1970). This kind of awareness does not fit within the narrow confines of knowledge as it is defined by Enlightenment rationality – discursive, abstract, conceptual. Yet, according to these authors and their predecessors,<sup>13</sup> it is nonetheless a form of genuine knowledge, and may be more influential than rational understanding on how life is lived by ordinary people.

We postulate that there are spiritual experiences which give rise to an experiential knowledge which, for various reasons<sup>14</sup>, is not brought, through reflection, to conscious rational knowledge. Commonly, this may occur because the subject lacks any framework of interpretation in which such experiences can be assigned meaning. Consequently, these events of inchoate spiritual awareness remain in a realm beyond words, lurking on the periphery of consciousness<sup>15</sup>, in what Schutz (1967), in a suggestive metaphor, calls the ‘penumbra’. Since they have not been reflected on and conceptualised, people are not aware of them in such a way as to be able to answer direct questions about them. They are primitive, basic, fundamental to more developed forms of religious experience and spirituality, prior to explicit religious faith, yet continue to play a role underlying these more developed levels of religious experience, beliefs and knowledge.

If it seems to be the case that people’s deepest sense of themselves, and of what matters most in their lives, lies at least partly in a realm beyond words, nonetheless this need not make it completely inaccessible; there are other ways in which it can be recognised and expressed.

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and temporal lobe signs’ (Macdonald & Friedman 2002, p. 118).

<sup>13</sup> The notion of a kind of experiential knowledge in which what is known remains inchoate and pre-conceptual was very familiar in mediaeval Scholastic philosophy. It went by such names as affective, connatural, or ‘dark’ knowledge, and played an important role in the theology of faith, of morality and of mysticism. Polanyi, not much interested in religion, seems to have independently rediscovered this form of knowledge, and applied it to understanding scientific creativity.

<sup>14</sup> Especially in a secular climate of thought, there are obstacles to expressing, or even acknowledging such experiences, which may lead to the consciousness of them being suppressed – pushed even further out into the near-darkness of the outer periphery of consciousness. One of the most potent of these is the fear of ridicule.

<sup>15</sup> Not in the Freudian unconscious.

The final component of our hypothesis, then, is that it is possible to ‘evoke’ spiritual experiences – to assist the subject to retrieve them from the periphery of consciousness, and to acknowledge, express and recognise them, by means of appropriate symbols.<sup>16</sup>

We propose the term ‘primordial’ to describe this elementary, fundamental kind of religious or spiritual experience.<sup>17</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘primordial’ as “original, fundamental, existing at the beginning” (etymologically derived from the Latin words *primus* (first) and *ordiri* (to begin)).

Our hypothesis is supported by a considerable body of previous research (although other researchers have not used the term ‘primordial’ to designate a class of religious or spiritual experiences).

b) Findings of earlier survey research on religious / spiritual experiences in the UK and Australia Research on religious experience in the tradition of Alister Hardy (1966), carried forward primarily by Edward Robinson (1977, 1978, 1987, Robinson and Jackson 1987), and David Hay (1987, 1990, Hay and Nye 1998), concludes that religious / spiritual experience is virtually universal -- that it is inherent in humanity and culture. We will briefly review this work, and some parallel research we have conducted in Australia.

In 1966, in his pioneering survey of religion in Australia, Hans Mol (Mol 1971) included the question: “Have you ever experienced the presence of God since childhood?” 48% of the sample answered in the affirmative.

In 1983, as part of the World Values Study Survey, ‘Hardy’s question’<sup>18</sup> on religious experience was administered to a national sample of Australians aged 14 and over.<sup>19</sup> 44% of respondents gave a positive reply. The corresponding figure for Britain 9 years earlier had been 36%. There are indications that in the decade previous to 1976, there had been an increasing trend in responses to similar questions in both Britain and the USA (Hay, 1985:115-117). In Britain, age, years of education and social class were positively associated with report of religious experience; in Australia, there was no association with these variables, but a clear echo of the strong association found in Britain with church attendance and ‘importance of spiritual experience’.<sup>20</sup>

The following table compares the British and Australian responses.

**Table 1. Reported frequency of religious experiences**

	Britain 1976	Australia 1983		
	All	All	Men	Women
Once or twice	18%	13%	11%	14%
Several times	10%	15%	13%	18%
Often	6%	10%	8%	12%
All the time	2%	6%	5%	6%
TOTAL	36%	44%	37%	50%

The Australian response was significantly higher than that in Britain, peaking at 50% of women respondents, and showing a slightly greater frequency (‘several times’ vs. ‘once or twice’).

The British responses showed that those over 55 were much more likely to report an experience.

<sup>16</sup> Our theory of symbols is based on Husserl’s theory of appresentation as developed by Schutz (1967 p. 314).

<sup>17</sup> In the context of this paper, these words are used interchangeably, except where otherwise noted.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Have you ever been aware of, or influenced by, a presence or a power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?’

<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, Hardy’s question was not included in the ESS nor the US version of the WUSS.

<sup>20</sup> The closest parallel question in the AVES in Australia was ‘Importance of God in life’.

The Australian responses were evenly distributed across age groups: 42% of those aged between 16 and 24 answered positively, and 44% of those over age 65.

Even more interesting was the denomination of those responding affirmatively to the question above:

**Table 2. Denomination of those reporting religious experience**

	<b>Britain</b>	<b>Australia</b>
Anglican	33%	37%
Catholic	41%	47%
Other Christian	68%	81%
Agnostic	23%	21%
Atheist	24%	36%

In both countries, it is remarkable that a significant proportion of those who regarded themselves as agnostics or atheists reported such experiences. The strongest response, especially in Australia, came from “Other Christian” denominations – not surprisingly, since many of these denominations – especially Pentecostals -- place much greater emphasis on religious experience than more traditional churches.

About 50% of those who attended a church at least occasionally responded positively; and about 27% of those who said they never attended apart from weddings and funerals. Again, what is striking is that so many of the second group reported an experience of this kind.

When Hay later pursued the topic by conducting 172 personal interviews in the northern industrial city of Nottingham, the proportion responding positively (62%) rose to double the level of the survey response (which in Nottingham, had been 30%); a face-to-face interview appeared to be a much better setting in which to raise this sensitive topic than a mere question on a survey form (1987).

In a later survey in Britain (1987) by Hay and Heald, a positive response of 48% was reported (Hay 1990).

Further research in Australia has taken the following form: in the 1996 survey and again in 2001, a subsample (N=5661) of Catholics attending Mass on the weekend of the survey in a large sample of parishes throughout Australia were asked a set of questions about religious experiences. A shorter set of questions was asked in the 2001 survey; the results were very similar to those of 5 years before.

The research design was based on a chronological framework, exploring:

- remote antecedents of the experience: e.g. personal religious background variables;
- proximate antecedents: the situation or occasion of the experience
- the experience itself: often indescribable -- an ‘ineffability gap’;
- proximate aftermath: immediate affective response and interpretation;
- remote aftermath: later effects, re-interpretations, evaluation.

Three multiple-response questions on kinds of religious experiences (rx) and the circumstances of their occurrence were shaped to accommodate three varieties of religious experience:

- direct, explicit experiences -- the classic Protestant conversion experiences and some others similar;
- primordial, implicit experiences:
  - in positive circumstances: ‘ecstasies’: rx and peak experiences,
  - in negative circumstances ‘boundaries’: rx in life-crisis situations; akin to those of James’s ‘sick soul’, and Batson and Ventis’s ‘existential concerns’.

Respondents were asked “Have you ever experienced any of the following?” and how often. There followed a list of nine of the more well-known, explicitly religious experiences, such as being

‘baptised in the Spirit’ or ‘born again’, or experiencing an answer to prayer, or being called or guided by God. Responses were:

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
19%	22%	39%	19%

Those over the age of 50 were more likely (65%) to have had such experiences ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’, compared with younger people (51%); and women (61%) more than men (53%).

Two further sets of questions asked about experiences of quite a different kind: those which take place in everyday life, when an event which is usually quite ordinary becomes the occasion of an experience of God.

“Have any of the following ordinary events had special meaning for you because they strengthened your awareness of God?”<sup>21</sup> Two lists followed: one of events which are usually experienced as ‘positive’, such as a wedding or the birth of a child; the other containing various challenging or difficult circumstances of life, such as a death in the family or a crisis in a relationship.<sup>22</sup>

When asked how often they had such experiences, the responses were:

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
2%	11%	44%	43%

Again, women and those over 50 were more likely to answer ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’.<sup>23</sup>

Obviously, these ‘everyday life’ experiences are much more common than the ‘explicitly religious’ kind.

The next survey question asked about the occasion or setting in which the experience took place:

*Q. Has this happened in any of the following situations? (Mark all those that apply)*

Then followed a list of 19 situations (ten ‘highs’ and nine ‘lows’) in which such an awareness might have occurred. The ten most common situations, in order from most often chosen to least often chosen, were as follows:

- The birth of a child / or a special moment with a child
- Enjoying the beauty of nature
- Death of a family member or friend
- An answer to prayer
- A sense of being guided by God
- At mass, or another service, or praying with a group
- Accepting Jesus as Lord and Saviour
- While in some place that is special to you
- Being healed by God
- In personal suffering

<sup>21</sup> We deliberately avoided using the term ‘religious experience’ because we believed it would be unfamiliar and off-putting to Catholics. In attempting to elicit such events, one must adapt to the ‘religious culture’ of the people we are addressing. The full text of the questions and answer options is given in Appendix B.

<sup>22</sup> The theory underlying our research led us to expect that both of these kinds of situations could be occasions of strong encounters with transcendence, because in different ways, they take us to the ‘boundaries’ or ‘edges’ of experience -- the heights and depths -- where our finite selves reach their ‘limits’, and brush up against the infinite.

<sup>23</sup> The effects of age and gender are independent. Although women predominated in the sample, they were represented proportionately in both age groups; it is not the case that a higher proportion of the older age group were female.

There was very little difference in the order of these choices between those under and over the age of 50, and between men and women, except that women were more likely than men to choose “the birth of a child”<sup>24</sup> and “an answer to prayer”.

We wanted to know about the “aftermath” of the experience; how did it leave them feeling? What were they thinking? Did they “know” anything more than before? Did they have any new beliefs or convictions? Did they do anything different as a result? The question we asked was: “How did this event strengthen your awareness of God?”, and a list of possible responses to the occurrence was given; it was equivalent to asking: ‘How did you feel / what did you know immediately afterwards?’.

The order of the eight most common responses (from most frequent to least frequent) was:

- a moment of truth, of deeper conviction that God was real / God became more important in my life
- I had a strong sense of awe, wonder
- Being forgiven, renewed
- Extraordinary joy without any clear reason
- A sense that my surroundings, the universe, other people and myself were totally one in God
- A sense of determination to change my life
- A new understanding of the relationship between Jesus’ life and mine
- A sense of the harmony or order in the universe / of the meaning and purpose in events.

Younger (under age 50) respondents were a little more likely than older people to choose ‘awe, wonder’; the older group more likely to choose ‘being forgiven’. Women chose ‘extraordinary joy’ and ‘can’t describe’ more often than men. Otherwise a common pattern prevailed across age and gender.

Finally, we wanted to know how they viewed the experience in retrospect. How did it stand up to later reflection? As merely a moment when they got “carried away”, or did it seem to have lasting significance? When asked “How valuable do you now think this experience was?”, very few chose ‘Not valuable at all’ or ‘Not very valuable’; nearly 20% were undecided about the value of the experience, but the large majority (80%) chose either ‘Very valuable’ (60%) or ‘The most valuable experience I ever had’ (20%).

Recalling that almost 90% of the sample reported such an experience, we discover that, with the benefit of hindsight upon an event which may have occurred only once and long ago, no longer caught up in the emotion attached to the occasion, most of those who had such an experience judge it to have been ‘very valuable’; and for one fifth, it seems to have been the discovery of the ‘pearl without price’!

The responses also varied according to the occasion / situation / circumstances in which the experience had occurred.

Table 3 shows, first, in the left column, ten kinds of experience, in order, according to *how frequently people rated this experience as the most valuable experience in their life*. Second, it shows the three most frequent responses to each type of experience (the response with 1 in its column was the most frequent for the type of experience named at left, so for example, the three commonest responses to a strong experience of God’s presence while hearing a sermon were, first, “a new understanding of the relationship between Jesus’ life and mine”, second “a sense of determination to change my life”, and third, “a moment of truth, of deeper conviction that God was real / God became more important in my life”).

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<sup>24</sup> In interviews conducted over several years as part of other projects, women who mention the birth of a child stress that the experience of God did not occur every time they gave birth; more usually they point to one occasion, and often it is not the birth of their first child.

**Table 3. The ten most highly valued experiences, and most common responses to each**

	Sense of awe	Universe one with God	Extra-ordinary joy	Sense of being forgiven	Loss of fear of death	Conviction that God was real	Sense of meaning in universe	New relationship with Jesus	Determined to change life
1 Birth of a child / or a special moment with a child	1	3	2						
2 Beauty of Nature	2	3					1		
3 A death in the family	3			2	1				
4 At Mass / in prayer group				2		3		1	
5 In Sacred / special place		1	3				2		
6 Personal suffering				3	1				
7 Quiet reflection / prayer				3		2		1	
8 A wedding		3	1		2				
9 Desolation / despair						3		2	
10 Hearing a sermon						3		1	

Results of these two large random-sample surveys convinced us that primordial experiences were very common amongst church-attenders in one denomination.

The question of whether they would also be commonly experienced by people of other denominations, and those professing no religion, and particularly whether they would be observed among and young people (in these age-groups, church attendance is at its lowest level) still remained to be answered, although the 1983 World Values Survey had provided some encouragement to believe that the answers to these question would be affirmative.

The “Spirit of Generation Y” project provided an opportunity to explore both of these questions.

### c) Method

Our method requires firstly a careful phenomenological *epokhe* (bracketing) exercise:

- not assuming that all ‘strong believers’ or religious conservatives are fundamentalists; being careful to use that label as accurately descriptive of groups with that historical origin and self-designation, rather than as a broader pejorative; similar care with the label ‘superstition’; avoiding pejorative labels generally – also for New Age practices;
- particular care in interpreting responses of those whose spiritual style is distasteful or repugnant to the researcher;
- rejecting the assumption that spirituality is a purely or basically rational knowledge or belief about which the believer can or should be able to answer simple rational questions;
- rejecting the assumption that whatever happens to be called ‘spirituality’ will function as such in our defined sense of the word; (our interview schedule does not use the word spirituality at any point); i.e. rejecting the identification of “common-sense” and “scientific” usages of terminology;
- avoiding asking “researcher’s questions” of the subject: e.g. “Are your decisions on X influenced by Y?” People are often unaware of what influences them. The answer to this question can only be determined by a disciplined process of scientific inquiry, which is a researcher’s task, and which the subject is generally not equipped to engage in.

Our methods for developing a ‘thick description’ of contemporary youth spirituality will be illustrated by examples, first from our pilot study, consisting of 20 long interviews, then by means of selections from the 64 interviews of Phase 1 of the project.

One popular research approach has been to ask subjects whether they consider themselves ‘a spiritual person’ (e.g. Marler and Hadaway 2002); others have asked directly about spirituality. We pursued this line of questioning in the very first draft of our interview schedule. As a starting point for discussion, we asked informants: ‘Now, I want to ask you about the term spirituality. Different people have different ideas of what spirituality might be. What is your idea of spirituality?’. Typical responses included 13-year-old Stephen: ‘The term spirituality, what does that mean? It must be aims or something, I don’t know, aim for the top or something.’ 12-year-old Peter replied: ‘If you believe

in something, God or something.’ The informants’ answers not only reflect uncertainty about the term itself; this question did not provide us with a useful pathway for asking follow-up questions.

For these reasons, taking particular account of the age range of our target group, we stopped using the words ‘spirituality’ and ‘spiritual’ in the interview schedule. Instead, we formulated less obtrusive, more focussed questions (see below). As the interviews progressed, the value of this approach became clear: those who were prejudiced against some particular form of spirituality did not write off the interview as concerned with something irrelevant.

Our interview schedule also placed a considerable premium on eliciting personal narratives – stories recounting their own experiences – as opposed to asking questions which draw on formal conceptual knowledge. Recent research demonstrates that telling stories enables individuals to make sense of their experiences, to order events in a coherent fashion, relate events to other events and create a sense of biographical continuity for themselves (Kerby, 1991; Alasuutari, 1995; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Singleton, 2001). Consequently, an informant’s personal orientation, sense of self, values and worldview are all apparent in the stories they tell about themselves (Kerby, 1991; Singleton, 1999; 2001). Personal narratives reveal not only what people do and experience, but also how they feel and decide, and they reveal these dimensions in a much more real and natural way than if we asked ‘What do you feel about X?’.

#### *Questions for providing a ‘thick description’ of spirituality*

Our stipulative definition of spirituality – a conscious way of life based on a transcendent referent – led us to inquire about spiritual practices, beliefs and experiences. If an informant indicated religious belief and affiliation, we asked about the beliefs and associated practices such as personal prayer, Bible reading, attendance at services and other activities. We also asked about alternative and ‘New Age’ practices which are now part of the broader ‘spiritual marketplace’ (Roof, 1999), as well as those usually classified as ‘paranormal’, such as reading one’s horoscope and following its advice, taking part in a séance, having a tarot reading. Questions about these practices and beliefs were formulated in ways which would encourage storytelling (for example: Have you ever got seriously into: yoga, meditation, Tai-Chi, chanting? Can you tell me the *story* about how you came to be involved in this activity?).

Certain kinds of spiritual practices are characteristic of age groups, something we took into account when formulating questions. Australian adolescents are more likely to have participated in a séance, read their horoscope, or had a powerful encounter with nature, whereas those in the young adult bracket may have participated in what Roof (1999) describes as ‘client services’ (i.e. paid services), like visiting a medium.

Our interview schedule also invited narratives about various kinds of experiences of transcendence. In the manner of other studies, we asked, in the pilot stage of our project, direct questions about feeling close to nature or feeling some kind of spiritual force. Some people relate such experiences to the meaning of their existence.

Our methodology has three distinctive features: no direct mention of the term spirituality, the soliciting of personal narratives and the use of symbolic techniques to evoke primordial spiritual experiences.

We noted earlier that even experiences of which the subject initially had no recollection could be evoked by the use of symbols. The first technique we adopted for this purpose was to utilise a non-verbal symbol: the photograph. We showed each subject eleven photographs selected from the *Photolanguage Australia* series (Cooney & Burton, 1986),<sup>25</sup> asking: ‘Which of these pictures says

<sup>25</sup> These photographs are an adaptation of the French original, replacing European landscapes and subjects with Australian ones. The original authors elaborated a substantial body of theory underlying the technique (see Baptiste *et al.*, 1991; Baptiste & Bélisle, 1991; Babin *et al.*, 1974). Briefly, ‘The method uses black-and-white

most about you or your life? Why?'. This technique was designed to draw forth perspectives on the self which engage the imagination of the interviewee; the images in which people see themselves or their lives are much richer than the mere ideas they have about themselves: the images are often invested with strong affect; with hopes and fears and strivings.

A second technique was adapted from Maslow (1970, pp. 59, 84 ). Exploring 'peak-experiences', he found that subjects found it difficult to recall them, and showed a certain reluctance to doing so. So he devised a method for assisting his research subjects to bring these experiences into the focus of awareness. He called his approach 'rhapsodic isomorphic discourse'; stripped of the jargon, it consists, firstly, in the creation of an encouraging and approving atmosphere in which subjects felt safe to recall and express their experiences. Secondly, the method involved telling stories about, or giving examples of, such experiences. These can evoke in the hearer by a kind of association, the hitherto implicit or suppressed awareness of analogously similar experiences. The hearer may not have had any of the actual experiences mentioned by the researcher; they may in fact recall things vastly different from the examples, but which are nonetheless part of the 'family' of primordial spiritual experiences in which we are interested.

#### d) Pilot study: techniques and responses

The photos elicited a series of interesting responses.<sup>26</sup> For example, 21-year-old "Aldi" said:

S: All right. I think I've got it already. It's got to be that one.

I: *Yeah, the one with the boy holding the stick up to the big tree?*

S: Only because I have a bit of a reputation with my friends as kind of being the little child-like one and I hopefully have a bit of an aura like this little childish mischief thing going on. I don't know if you've noticed. But yeah and it's also the little boy standing in front of the really big tree. It's kind of like he's just discovered that there's something bigger than him the world.

In similar fashion, 22-year-old "Romi" said:

S: I've picked three. I'll explain all three. That one.

I: *That's the man in the boat.*

S: Because I love the sea. I love to walk by the sea. And the boat is like going off to have an adventure somewhere. This one is the railway lines because it's like all these different things combining: family, uni, and jobs. And everything is going somewhere. And also this one because of the church windows. When I was overseas, which was one of the biggest things in my life, I went to so many churches and all so beautiful and they all looked something like that. And I loved sitting in them because it was so quiet and beautiful. I went to one that was one of the Benedictine monks'. It was a chapel and there was one other person there. It was out in the country and all the monks had come out to sing. I was sitting up there, and they were all singing.

Both informants' answers indicate significant elements of their worldview and the ways in which they see themselves, and both relate different kinds of experiences of transcendence.

Second, we asked the following question:

"People sometimes say they sense a kind of presence or power, or feel they are a part of something bigger than themselves. Often they can't understand it. Sometimes it happens like this: (*The remainder of this question was on a card, given to the respondent to read.*)

"When someone you love dies, or you are extremely stressed, you sense a presence which brings very strong comfort or reassurance; or you are in the country or at the beach, and suddenly you feel strongly

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photographs which have been chosen for their aesthetic qualities, their capacity to stimulate the imagination, the memory and the emotions, and their ability to challenge the viewer to thoughtful reflection. Photos which can be described as symbolic become a key to enable a person's past experience and sub-conscious to find a conscious expression' (Cooney & Burton, 1986, p. 2). Hay and Nye (1998) successfully used evocative photos in their study of children's spirituality.

<sup>26</sup> Interviewer questions are preceded by I:, subject responses by S:.

that you are united with the world around you, or nature seems especially beautiful or amazing. Has anything like that ever happened to you? Can you tell me about it?"

This question elicited several accounts of spiritual experiences from the small pilot sample. Here is one example: in response, self-professed atheist, 22-year-old "Richard" said:

S: I'd say this is the closest. I'll give you a story of the closest I've ever come to spirituality in my entire life. [It] would have to be when I was looking after the woman with emphysema. Her name was Gladys and she was a very, very devout Christadelphian. So she always reminded me how the Jews killed Jesus [informant was Jewish] ... you know, but I took that in my stride and she would always try and convert me to her faith. Anyway, after caring for her for about eight months, you know, one day before I stopped, I had to stop, she just said that she would remember me, and even though I didn't believe that she was going to heaven or hell or whatever, and that there's an after life, that affected me profoundly. It made me feel very good, and that's the closest.

(e) The vignettes of spiritual experiences

Revising the interview schedule after the pilot project, we moved a step closer to Maslow's method, replacing the above question on primordial experiences with an invitation to the interviewee to read a card containing four vignettes of such experiences -- short first-person accounts, drawn from Maxwell and Tschudin's (1990) analysis of selected cases from the archive of the Alister Hardy Centre for the Study of Religious Experience.<sup>27</sup> We included both 'numinous' and 'mystical' experiences (in the latter, the self and the transcendent are not sharply distinguished, but rather experienced as unified; so that the transcendent loses its attribute of distance, and is experienced instead as 'immanent'). We expected that actual vignettes would be more evocative than the questions formerly used.

What follows is an excerpt from the analysis of the responses of two subjects in the main interview series to the photographs and vignettes.

"Rohan" chooses the photo of the railway tracks, commenting:

S: Because it's just gone in every direction. Like, you just don't know which way it's going to go. It's all mixed up.

I: *Yeah, so you feel at the moment sort of you're not sure where life's going?*

S: I'm not sure what I want to do with my life.

Later in the interview, Rohan reads a card on which there are several short descriptions of 'religious experiences'; and asked to select anything that reminds him of his own experience, indicates one of the accounts and comments: 'He goes on about how it's just useless and stuff and if there is a God, then how can bad things happen kind of things. That's what he's trying to say, and that's how I feel sometimes, you know.' The item on which he is commenting contains the phrase: 'feeling desperate about the uselessness of my life', and goes on to describe 'the feeling of a Presence, of Light, of Love, all around me.' There is nothing in the account about the problem of 'bad things happening'. That's something Rohan adds in, which he associates with the 'sense of how it's useless'.

Perhaps we can discern an edge of frustration, of anxiety here. He's like someone who realises that they have lost their way; lost confidence in the map they had been using up till now; there is a sense of being overwhelmed by the number of possible choices; but he seems to be holding panic at bay. There is also a calmness and a sense of confidence that he will be able to work things out.

Another of the scenarios begins with the words: 'No one in our family went to church, ...' and goes on to describe a strong experience of feeling one with the universe. Rohan comments: 'And this one, when no one in the family goes to church -- and that's how my family is.' But then, surprisingly, he adds: 'Sometimes you just feel, like, a religious presence when you think about it.'

He doesn't tell us any more about feeling this presence; unfortunately, the interviewer did not ask.

<sup>27</sup> The vignettes are reprinted in Appendix A.

We are inclined, on theoretical grounds, to expect these scarcely articulated experiences to be present on the edge of consciousness, exercising a subtle subterranean ‘pull’ on young people’s explicit thinking and feeling.

“Katherine”

I: [Handing Card A28 to subject]. *Can you say if any of that applies to you?*

S: I stayed in a caravan park and I would go for a walk on the beach in the morning or night and just sort of that being at the beach makes you feel like not smaller but certainly there is something else out there. I certainly believe that experience has helped me convince myself almost that there is something else, something higher. I haven’t really decided to go searching as much as some others, simply because I don’t think at this stage of my life it’s most important that I make a decision of what I believe. Certainly that kind of experience has given me this feeling that there has to be something more around me, something bigger and if it something bigger it’s better.

[Later, after a question on belief in ghosts] . . . Certainly there have been times when I’ve felt a presence or something bigger or higher than me. I’m not sure what.

I: *Can you tell me about one of those?*

S: Well, I know that I was lying in bed one night after my grandfather had died, six months or whatever after and just thinking about it and I felt like he was almost with me, but there was no one in the room, but that feeling of some kind of spirit being there. . . . Certainly at the time I was thinking that it was my grandfather or hoping that it was my grandfather and sort of making me feel better about it and making it okay.

Both the sense of ‘something else’ in Nature, and of the presence of someone who has recently died, are very common ‘primordial’ experiences.<sup>29</sup> And in Katherine’s case, as is typical of such experiences, the subject has no clear framework of interpretation in which they are assigned the kind of meaning attached to a concept or idea. They may not fit in with previously learned beliefs from a religious tradition, or may even be disapproved of within that framework; they remain vaguer ‘sensings’ or intuitions arising from the experience; yet may nonetheless carry with them a strong sense of validity – the ‘truth of experience’, and powerful emotive weight and influence because of their directness and immediacy.

#### 4. Conclusion

In both the pilot project interviews and the Phase 1 interview series, many interviewee responses were similar to the examples we have described. They were given by subjects who were devoutly religious in a traditional mode, and also by those who had been brought up within a religious tradition, but were now suspending those beliefs, unsure as to whether they were still credible, or seeking further understanding. Most interestingly, similar replies were given by young people of quite secular mentality, who had either repudiated their former religious beliefs, or had not been brought up in any religious tradition, knew very little about religion, and were not curious to know more. But such responses were by no means universal in our interview sample.

The research team felt that the application of the methods left much to be desired: the interviewers, though skilful at achieving rapport with the subjects, and familiar with other religious and spiritual topics, were either unfamiliar with primordial experiences, or were not convinced by our rationale for them; in any case they did not project the kind of positive, encouraging style in asking these questions which Maslow found indispensable if subjects were to feel secure enough to give expression to this kind of experience. We have discovered numerous obstacles which confront informants in the expression of such experiences, in addition to those related by Maslow, which apply particularly in

<sup>28</sup> See Appendix A. Card A contained all four short vignettes of different kinds of religious or spiritual experiences. The last was of an experience of someone walking along a beach, and unusually, ‘feeling a part of something bigger and absolutely beyond me’. It contains no mention of any sense of a ‘Presence’.

<sup>29</sup> It is the ‘maze of railway lines’ picture which evokes Katherine’s sense of the rich confusion of her life, ‘all over the place’, and the nature-experience (described just above) on the card she is given which calls forth her recollection of the ‘sense of presence’ experienced on her beach walks.

the Australian cultural setting. The greatest fear on the part of people who are considering relating something of this sort is that they will be ridiculed or regarded as odd. Needless to say, this fear has its greatest potency for teenagers.

Although, in general, accounts of primordial experiences come more often from persons high in religiosity, with some of the most devout of these we drew a complete blank in interviews. We hypothesise that in highly religious types, such basic or primitive experiences may be 'overlaid' by much more specifically religious experiences within their own tradition. Also, because of the considerable dissimilarity in tone between primordial experiences and conventionally religious ones, people for whom orthodoxy is salient may experience some concern that such experiences are at variance with strongly-held religious beliefs. In some "high-church" religious styles, in contrast with, say, Pentecostal religion, such experiences are not expected or encouraged, and may be disparaged as dangerous, potentially heretical, or superstitious.

Many of the responses which were offered were brief yet promising, but were inadequately followed up by the interviewers with the further questions we had suggested.

Nonetheless, we are encouraged enough by these responses to believe that our methods are reasonably effective in evoking primordial experiences.

We face two further difficult tasks: first, for the large-sample telephone survey, which constitutes phase 2 of the project, how to adapt our methods to a situation where we must devise 'closed' questions with very few response options, have much less interview time and no possibility of showing the photographs. In addition, the telephone interview setting imposes more psychological distance between interviewer and subject, and probably (if we use the survey agency's interviewers), we will have to contend with an interviewer not familiar with the material and not likely to be capable of convincingly expressing an affirmative attitude in asking the questions, sufficient to provide the necessary sense of security. On the other hand, it is a common observation that people often speak more freely in settings in which they are safely anonymous, and have between them and the interviewer the insulating distance of voice-only telephone communication.

Our second task is to prepare for the second series of in-depth interviews scheduled to take place in Phase 3 (2005-2006) – both improving our methods and the technique of our interviewers so as to have the best chance of calling forth expressions of this important and fascinating dimension of young people's spirituality.

## **Appendix A**

### **Spiritual experience vignettes<sup>30</sup>**

#### **CARD A**

A. After my mother died, my life seemed empty, and I got very depressed. One afternoon I went into the kitchen to make a cup of tea, but before I could do it, I had the feeling of a heavy weight being lifted off my shoulders, and I said: "Thank you, God". I got better, and the feeling has never left me; I don't think it ever will. I have never lost my faith in God.

B. When my first child was born, she was jaundiced, and after a few days she was taken away. No one explained to me what was happening and I felt extremely anxious. I noticed the Gideon bible on the bedside table, picked it up and opened it. I don't know what I read. I've never been able to find it again. But as I read it, a great feeling of peace came over me and I knew everything was going to be alright. I had been frightened half out of my mind, and suddenly this calm, peaceful feeling took over; something told me that my daughter was going to be alright. The same thing happened one other time, after my husband and I had split up. I felt I just couldn't go on, and again, this calm, peaceful feeling took over and something told me that everything would be alright.

C. Alone in my room, feeling desperate about the uselessness of my life, I said out loud: "If there is a God, can you help me?" I was overwhelmed by the feeling of a Presence, of Light, of Love, all around me. I can't explain it. It appeared to last a minute or two, although I can't be sure. I lost all sense of time. I was left with an indescribable feeling of peace and joy. This moment completely changed my life. Everything suddenly seemed to make sense. I look back to those few moments as the most real and important in my life.

D. No one in our family went to church; I barely tolerated the religious education at school. About two years ago while on holiday, I went for a walk along the beach. It was a fine day, the sea, cliffs and sky were perfect. I had often seen that particular place before, but on this day I felt somehow strange. I was alone. It was as if time stood still. I could think of nothing, I only felt I was 'somewhere else'. I was part of something bigger and absolutely beyond me. My problems and my life didn't matter at all because I was such a tiny part of a great whole. I felt a tremendous relief. I was aware of feeling the beauty of everything that was there for eternity. I don't know how long I stood there; it could have been two minutes or twenty. I have never forgotten that day. Because of that experience I have become extremely interested in different types of religions and philosophies and have found many descriptions of experiences similar to mine.

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<sup>30</sup> These excerpts are from Maxwell and Tschudin (1990, pp. 40, 46, 80-81, 146).

## Appendix B.

Some people feel they came to faith gradually. For others, it began at a definite moment of commitment. Have you ever experienced such a moment of decisive faith commitment or Christian conversion?

1. No, I've had faith for as long as I can remember
2. No, I came to faith through a gradual process
3. Yes, at one specific moment in the last 5 years
4. Yes, at one specific moment more than 5 years ago
5. Yes, a number of specific moments of commitment or re-commitment
9. Don't know/not applicable

Have you ever experienced any of the following?

1. A dream or vision with a spiritual meaning
2. Being 'Born again'
3. A decision to accept Jesus as my personal Saviour
4. A clear answer to prayer
5. Healed by God's power in body, mind or spirit
6. God calling or guiding me to act in a particular way
7. God using me as an instrument for others

How often have you had experiences like this?

1. Often
2. Sometimes
3. Rarely
4. Never

Have any of the following ordinary events had special meaning for you because they strengthened your awareness of God?" (Circle UP TO THREE items from anywhere in the following two groups, and from those three underline the one that was the most important for you.)

0. Birth of a child / watching children / a special moment with a child
  1. A wedding
  2. Enjoying the beauty of nature
  3. Doing my own creative work
  4. Being in a sacred place - on pilgrimage, or just a place special to me
  5. At Mass or another service, or in a prayer group
  6. Quiet reflection or prayer alone
  7. Listening to music
  8. Reading the Bible
  9. Hearing a sermon / homily
0. Personal suffering or sickness
  1. A death in the family
  2. Feeling fear in a dangerous situation
  3. Feeling unable to cope with the evil or injustice in the world
  4. Feeling that life was meaningless
  5. Sensing the demand of conscience / feeling guilt
  6. Desperately searching for an answer
  7. A crisis in a relationship
  8. Feeling desolation, despair, loneliness, depression
  9. No; none of these events ever strengthened my awareness of God

How often have events like those strengthened your awareness of God?

1. Often

2. Sometimes
3. Rarely
4. Never

How did this event strengthen your awareness of God?

0. I had a strong sense of awe, wonder
1. A sense that my surroundings, the universe, other people and myself were totally one in God
2. Extraordinary joy without any clear reason
3. Being forgiven, renewed
4. Released from the fear of death
5. A moment of truth, of deeper conviction that God was real / God became more important in my life
6. A sense of the harmony or order in the universe / of the meaning or purpose in events
7. A new understanding of the relationship between Jesus' life and mine
8. A sense of determination to change my life
9. I can't describe how my awareness of God was strengthened; it just was

How valuable do you now think this experience was?

1. The most valuable experience I ever had
2. Very valuable
3. I can't decide whether it was valuable or not
4. Not very valuable
5. Not at all valuable

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