

The New Religious Consciousness
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And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?
(W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*)

I: The hope for a new religion: four variations on a theme

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

In the first place, the robustness of democratic ideals had ultimately eroded the appeal of the political analogy used by theism to portray the divine-human relationship: God as King, and human beings as fearfully obedient subjects, given to uttering constant words of praise to the Lord and Master so as to escape eternal punishment and secure the blessings of heavenly reward. As James noted, this image is underpinned theologically by the theistic doctrine of creation out of nothing, which entails the absolute ontological separation between the Creator and his creation—a putative historical event which an enterprising English divine calculated to have happened in the year 4004 B.C. But for James, it was less important that developments in science and in the Higher Criticism of the Bible had directly refuted such literalism; far more significant, on his view, was the extent to which the Western spiritual imagination had been opened up and transformed by modern science's vision of a universe of nearly unimaginable age and vastness. Scientific inquiry had yielded a more impressive sense of Infinity than that inspired by religious dogma. Furthermore, the West's encounter with Eastern views only accelerated this transformation; for it was no longer possible to simply dismiss as 'atheistic' and 'primitive' spiritualities whose views of the vastness of the universe corresponded far more closely to the picture presented by our science than the cramped perspectives of our own religious traditions. In short, for those theists who were open to the influences of the new movements of thought, theism had become unacceptably parochial and quaint.

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

If there was to be a genuine re-visioning of the sacred, then, such a movement would

have to take account of both sides of James's argument; and therefore it would need to transcend and heal the various dichotomies enshrined, not only in the 'older theism', but also in the scientific tradition which had displaced theism—the dualisms of God/World, Faith/Reason, Mind/Matter, Experience/Knowledge, and so forth.

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

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

The initial hope of the Romantics had thus yielded to a paralyzing pessimism.

And yet, despite this discouraging record, the idea of a new religion—indeed, the fervent hope for it—did not fade. Joseph Campbell once noted that the one question he was most often asked during his public lectures of the 1970s and '80s concerned the possibility of a new religion. As early as 1949, Campbell himself had argued that we are in a chaotic transitional period, in which a new mythology, as the successor to all the great world religions, is being incubated; and he appears never to have doubted this.

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

In fact, however, as Campbell often pointed out, all such 'bounded horizons' have

dissolved in the modern age of multinational corporations, supersonic jet travel, and satellite television; and the worldwide effects of environmental destruction, as well as the threat of total nuclear annihilation, together further underscore that the 'new mythology' must consciously address itself to the world community as a unified whole. Sectarian exclusivism of all forms must yield to a genuinely universal inclusivism, and this means that the metaphors of myth must be understood in their proper, which is to say, non-literal sense. Like the Romantics, then, he identified the re-vivification of the sacred with a re-animation of what some have called the 'feminine values': reverence for Mother Earth; respect for the fecundity of the creative imagination; embracing the mystical; and seeking social harmony and unity through cooperation and mutual respect.

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

The belief that the dream, as the pure, unadulterated voice of Nature in us,² cannot be manipulated by the ego, is a corollary of Jung's unyielding belief in the absolute autonomy of the unconscious. Unfortunately however, if all we can do is to yield to the spontaneous activity of the deeper layers of the psyche, this would seem to return us to the waiting game which drove so many of the romantics to despair. And thus Campbell would seem to be only half an optimist. Yet, as Stephen LaBerge of Stanford University and others have conclusively demonstrated, in the case of the so-called 'lucid dream' (wherein one is consciously aware that one is dreaming), it is indeed possible to control, or at least to influence, the course of the dream. Perhaps, then, the half-pessimistic implications of Campbell's position are due to an unnecessary adherence to a dispensable dogma.

This, I take it, is roughly Wilson's own position; for he has argued that it *is* possible to consciously create this 'new religion'. This is accomplished by recognizing that the affirmative, visionary states of consciousness only fleetingly and sporadically enjoyed by the romantics: (i) represent a *truer* perception of reality than the world as viewed by ordinary consciousness, or

by the mind infected with pessimistic or negative attitudes; and (ii) that these states are potentially under the control of those individuals who are convinced of this possibility intellectually (one of his favorite examples is psychologist Abraham Maslow's ability to induce 'peak experiences' in his students merely by talking about them), and who are also willing and able to make the requisite highly disciplined mental efforts toward cultivating visionary perception.

According to Wilson's diagnosis, Romantic pessimism is based on the fallacy that consciousness is essentially passive; whereas he argues that all consciousness is essentially intentional—that, like an archer who fires an arrow at a target, one must deliberately fire one's attention at an object in order to grasp its significance. Just as the phenomenon of the 'double take' shows that there is a difference between merely looking and truly seeing—for unless I concentrate, say, on my watch, I will not see the time, and be forced to look again—so the meaning of the world as a unified whole can only be grasped by one who makes the requisite mental effort to establish close co-operation between the analytical intellect (the 'scientist' of the 'left brain') and the holistic, synthesizing, intuitive imagination (the 'artist' housed in the 'right brain'). Believing that the widespread development of these visionary modes represents an extension of human freedom and the next stage in human evolution—a step we can and indeed *must* bring about—Wilson maintains that a properly informed and therefore reasonably confident conscious mind can influence and engage the creative unconscious, and thereby promote the development of what he calls 'Faculty X': the capacity, not only for mystical experience, but also for those psychic powers which, like telepathy and precognition, illuminate the limitations of a materialist view of reality and self. The optimistic individuals who accept this evolutionary assignment are, in his view, the precursors of the new religion.

There is, however, yet a fourth position, located on the spectrum somewhere in between the Campbell/Jung view and Wilson's. This view sees the evolution of the new religion neither as strictly a matter of choice and effort, nor as the mere effect of an automatic process beyond our control, but as a combination of the two. Psychologist Kenneth Ring, philosopher Michael Grosso, and others have suggested that such apparently diverse phenomena as UFO close encounters and abductions, near-death experiences, and spontaneous kundalini awakenings actually share a similar morphology and purpose. This form and function is akin to the initiation rituals of ancient mystery cults, in which an individual is suddenly removed from the safe confines of everyday reality and directly introduced, *via* an ecstatic union with a supra- (and super-) human source of energy, to another, far deeper view of his or her identity and the nature of reality. The common function, then, is to *make possible* a wholesale transformation of the individual. The initial, essentially spontaneous and uncontrolled experience may or may not serve as a stimulus or catalyst for more lasting changes which the person must bring about

through sustained effort. Interestingly, many of the changes recorded by individuals who have had such experiences and built upon them echo the programmatic requirements of the new religion as stipulated by Campbell and Wilson: reverence for the earth; a belief in a non-sectarian, universalist spirituality; enjoyment of the mystical experience; the development of psychic powers, etc. Finally, then, when enough individuals have followed this path, a kind of critical mass will occur, leading humanity as a species to a radically new, and perhaps even developmentally final, stage of collective spiritual consciousness.

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

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

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

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The Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh has said that he does not agree with the traditional

Christian view that hope is a virtue; because by focusing our attention on an imagined future which is supposed to compensate for the anguish and pain of our past, we are preventing ourselves from fully experiencing and seeing deeply into the present moment, which is always where life has to be met and lived. Or, as Jesus says in that verse from the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas (which Campbell himself so liked to quote): "The Kingdom of the father is spread out upon the Earth and people do not see it." What is it, then, that is right before our eyes, but has hitherto escaped our notice?

What is presently available, and what our lingering preoccupation with future world history only serves to disguise, is more than merely a 'new religion', if by that term we mean the same basic formulas of the past, only with new and different values plugged into the variables of x and y —a new deity (let's try a female one this time around), a new mantram, etc. For what James, Campbell, Wilson, et. al *themselves represent and embody in their respective inquiries (as different from each other as they are) is a radically new form of religious consciousness*. If salvation through the worship of a personal God is the epitome of the religious point of view of the West; and if liberation through the enlightened identification of the self with the transpersonal ground of being captures the essential religious formula of the East; then I want to suggest that it is a certain principle of *inquiry* which provides not only the basic structural form of a this new religious outlook, but also its touchstone, its very heart. But what, then, is the meaning of 'inquiry' in this context?

II: Traditional religion and the limits of inquiry

Our English word 'inquiry' (or 'enquiry') comes from the Latin verb *quaerere*, which means both 'to ask' and 'to seek'. Now asking a question is usually thought of as a strictly intellectual process: one is attempting to acquire new information, or to improve his or her grasp of some old information. But 'seeking', on the other hand, suggests an action which involves not only the head, but the will and the feelings too. 'Seeking' is a practical activity in which the seeker's deepest desires, needs, and interests are engaged; it is an adventurous journey whose success or failure depends very closely on the character of the seeker. This is a quest, not simply to 'find out about something' at one remove, but to directly and personally experience some basic, transforming truth. 'Seek' is related to the verb 'to see', and sight, typically judged to be our most immediate form of perception, is a metaphor for presentational knowing, or what Bertrand Russell called 'knowledge by acquaintance'. (As Job says to Yahweh, when He reveals Himself in the whirlwind: "Before, I heard of you with my ears, but now I see you with my eyes.")

Thus, in the original sense of 'inquiry', quest and question are inextricably related: 'Knowledge' is to be identified, not with a list of affirmations or a collection of facts, but rather, with a complex activity of question and answer, whereby the information sought is significant

and intelligible only in relation to the aims, intentions, and actions of the knower. Just as the true meaning of Yahweh's revelation to Job, or Krishna's to Arjuna, for example, can be grasped only through the kind of agonized soul-searching experienced by those respective seekers, both of whom are asking questions about cosmic justice. If, as the English philosopher R.G. Collingwood once observed, information is merely the body of knowledge, whereas questioning is its soul, then without the soul, the body turns into a corpse. Which suggests that genuine understanding can be achieved only via an active participation in a process of inquiry in which the whole person is engaged.

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

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While both the traditional religions of the West, as well of those the East, have had a place for this principle of 'inquiry' in their respective schemes, in each case that place is ultimately secondary, provisional, and thus highly circumscribed; inquiry is a temporary means to an end; it is a recessive, rather than dominant, trait. In the Occidental traditions, inquiry is subordinated to the goals and values of salvation through worship, where the parameters of questioning are determined by the requirements of adhering to certain fixed theological formulas (God is One; God is three persons in one substance, etc.) and/or certain practical rules of ethics and piety (e.g., wear a hat when you pray; take your hat off when you pray; don't eat pork). In the Oriental systems, the principle of inquiry is eclipsed by the ideal of liberation, which requires adherence to a relatively fixed set of meditative techniques designed to produce enlightenment and experiential identification with the transpersonal ground. (Since gods, on the Eastern view, are themselves but personifications of this same ground, dogmatic attachment to theological beliefs, or any suggestion that the god is the final reality, is regarded as an obstacle to liberation.)

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

openly prohibited.

In the Oriental situation, as Campbell has observed, absolute surrender to the chosen teacher (guru) is the usual requirement; hence any criticism of the guru disqualifies the student for instruction. Westerners who have studied in the East have essentially confirmed this view. Swami Radha, for example, has described how her insistence on questioning and occasionally even opposing her guru, Swami Sivananda, led to raucous rebukes from the guru's other disciples, who were incredulous at her impertinence (!) in addressing the Master in such an apparently disrespectful and impious fashion.

On the Occidental side, all of the theisms emphasize the importance of obedience to duly appointed religious authorities who are the custodians of an already revealed Truth; but because Judaism and Islam are traditionally more preoccupied with practices than with theology, the circumscription of inquiry in Christianity is perhaps even more emphatic. For the Christian, the act of affirming certain specific beliefs just *is* the key to salvation. Martin Luther, for example, once admitted that any reasonable person who observed world affairs would have to conclude that either there is no God, or that, if He exists, He must be unjust; therefore, he went on to argue, we should silence our rational faculty and its foolish objections. From Luther's perspective, this misology (hatred of reason) is dictated by self-interest; for, as he went on to say, Scripture declares that the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Original Sin are historical and metaphysical facts, surer and more certain than sense and life itself. To question these 'facts' is to tempt God, which amounts to jeopardizing one's salvation. Institutional Christianity thus regards doubt—the seed of all questioning—as having been primordially planted by the Devil, who is usually depicted as God's arch-enemy: the epitome and cause of all evil, the commander-in-chief of the army of unbelievers. Were it not for the insinuations of the Evil One in his serpentine disguise, Eve never would have questioned—even for a moment—the wisdom and justice of God's gastronomical restrictions; and we would all still be hanging around the Garden, partaking of the (non-forbidden) fruit. On this view, then, evil *is* unbelief.

This explains the paradox of one of the greatest books of religious inquiry ever written, namely, St. Augustine's autobiographical Confessions. In that text (written by him when he was already Bishop of Hippo), one of the ubiquitous phrases is 'from my own experience', as Augustine shows time and again how his relentless quest for psychological and spiritual peace combined with his equally relentless use of his own critical judgment in evaluating and rejecting a series of religious and philosophical positions, until at last he came to accept the Christian faith. One of those rejected positions was the religion of Manichaeism, which he had earlier adopted but eventually abandoned, he says, essentially because that religion required him to profess certain beliefs even though they were at variance, not only with the principles of sound scientific, mathematical, and moral reasoning, but also with evidence gleaned from his personal

observations of nature and his own inward psychology. Yet, while he was writing about this episode of youthful discovery, he was also orchestrating the persecution of Donatist and Pelagian 'heretics' for placing *their* own respective hearts and minds before the authority of the Church and *its* established theology. And more than a millennium later, the Holy Inquisition would force Galileo Galilei to do exactly what Augustine himself in good conscience could not do, namely, to publicly affirm a belief system (the geocentric hypothesis) which was contrary to his personal observations and the highest available standards of scientific reasoning.

How, then, could Augustine and the Church justify this apparent violation of his own principle of inquiry? Only by pointing to the infinitely painful consequences of unbelief: eternal damnation. On this view, it is exceedingly fortunate, not only for Augustine, but for all of Christendom, that he went on his spiritual quest and that it had the result that it did; but since what he found was, as he believed, the only, full, and final Truth (and not merely the best answer he was able to come up with thus far), it is therefore in everyone else's interest *not* to take his process of inquiry as a model, but rather, to accept, without question, the answers he obtained. Judging for oneself while going on one's own adventure for one's own experience is far too spiritually dangerous, on this view.

Thus it is that our religious heroes, their achievements deemed way beyond our own ordinary, unheroic powers, become super-elevated objects of adulation. We are reduced to revering the results of the hero's creativity rather than attempt to cultivate the quality of spiritual creativity in ourselves; conformity with the requirements of worship or liberation as interpreted by officials who view themselves as the custodians of Answers becomes the rule. Jung, for one, lamented this condition of 'sheer imitation' and diagnosed it as a symptom of psychic laziness. As individuals, he argued, we should become producers of our own spiritual lives rather than passive consumers of a pre-packaged religion; if we expect to really reap the rewards of spirit, we must cease to be spectators and become active participants in the life of the spirit. To use an analogy which did not occur to Jung: It is as if the football fan expected to become physically fit and skilled at playing football by devotedly watching the Sunday games, worshiping the players, cheering his favorite team, memorizing the statistics, and so forth. But this is absurd.

There are, of course, key exceptions to this 'consumerism' in some of the older religious traditions—the ideal of the individual vision-quest found in many of the Native American tribes of the great plains being perhaps the most conspicuous counter-example. As Campbell has noted,⁴ this emphasis on the importance of the individual experience—even when it conflicts with the received wisdom of the community—is built into the myths themselves. In the Navaho myth of "Where the Two Came to Their Father," the two young heroes set off on a quest to gain help from their father in order to slay some monsters that are plaguing their community. Though the boys are told by their mother that they can go in any direction except North, the northerly

path is exactly the one they select—as it should be. Since the community has got itself into this fix precisely because it was afraid of this undiscovered country, the unknown, forbidden, dangerous route is the necessary one.

This is underscored by the motif of the trickster-figure—coyote or rabbit—who is often also the creator god. (Compare this with the Biblical dualism of God *versus* Satan—which Jung diagnosed as a symptom of the dissociation of divine personality.) The message of this myth, says Campbell, is that the divine is known in and through chaos, darkness, disruption, and doubt; and that the dynamic energy which disrupts and explodes conventional forms *is* just the divine breaking through. Hence, change and ambiguity are not to be despised or avoided by holding fast to static forms, if those forms have outlived their usefulness.

Insofar, then, as the posture of questioning signals a movement away from the firm ground of accepted fact and bold assertion, it is at the same time a movement towards the unknown god, an opportunity for transcendence. And this is exactly why Jung pointed out that any life-crisis which disrupts one's previously accepted self-image (e.g., the death of a loved one, the loss of a job) can also be the occasion for a deep religious experience—but only if the inner uncertainty is consciously embraced and neither repressed nor disowned and projected outward, where it then becomes the occasion for the expression of fear and hatred of those who do not comply with or conform to the socially accepted Message.

That the older religious traditions for the most part demand such conformity and thereby tend to radically limit individual inquiry can, I think, hardly be denied; and what is more, Campbell's own analysis of the deep narrative structure of the hero-myth suggests that this is no historical accident—that there is something intrinsic to the myth itself that is the cause of this tendency. But what could this possibly be?

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In his epochal The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949), Campbell identifies three distinct stages in the typical hero adventure: (i) departure (or separation from the community), where the "hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder;" (ii) fulfilment (or initiation into a new form of consciousness), in which "fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won;" and (iii) return (to the—or a—community), in which "the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man," including the establishment of new religious institutions.⁵ Following the Aristotelian recipe for a dramatic narrative, the typical hero story has a definite beginning, middle, and end. Campbell portrays this narrative structure in pictorial form by using the image of a two-dimensional circle intersected by a horizontal line passing through the center, marking the thresholds of descent/departure and ascent/return. Depicted as an arrow closing in on itself, this circle resembles a geometric *ouroboros*: the mythical snake swallowing its own

tail.

Yet, the feature of the traditional conception of the religious hero which makes for those tendencies towards dogmatism, conformism, and intolerance may just be this sequential progression of three discrete stages in which the core experience of visionary fulfilment occurs, once and for all, in an essentially complete form, at the midpoint of the hero journey. What follows that experience is indeed work—attempting to put this vision to practical use for the benefit of others, and therefore developing and elaborating the vision—but not a work of rigorous self-questioning, continued soul-searching, or a quest for further—and perhaps truer—visions; *those* activities properly belong only to the first and (early) second stage of the journey. Thus, for example, even though Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Mohammed, and Jesus all rejected the religious status-quo of their respective communities and embarked on a visionary quest for a new understanding and experience of the sacred, each of these revolutionaries in turn gave birth to religious orders whose conservatism characteristically discourages further individual inquiry of a heroic kind.

If Campbell's analysis of the universal hero 'monomyth' as a closed circle is accurate, it would seem that the cult of hero-worship is a natural and inevitable result of viewing inquiry as a developmental stage like adolescence—that is, as a phase through which the hero merely passes and leaves behind. This marginalization of inquiry is reinforced by the tendency (on the part of others and on the hero's own part) to treat the hero's achievement or visionary experience with reverence rather than with respect. The difference between the two is that the attitude of respect is not inconsistent with a critical examination or an honest appraisal of the imperfections of the recipient of respect; but what is revered is placed beyond the reach of these sorts of evaluations. And without such reflection, the means and motive for further development are either absent or blocked. To remove the question from the quest is to stunt the evolutionary growth of the seeker.

This explains, at least in part, the vehemence of the reaction against traditional religion displayed by such critics as Friedrich Nietzsche. He maintained that the hero-founders of religions are characteristically unable and unwilling to raise critical interpretive questions about their experiences—questions concerning the objective reality of the phenomena experienced, the reliability of their own perceptions and judgment, and the like. For Nietzsche, this is not merely an epistemological problem, but also a moral one: the hero's refusal to engage in rigorous self-examination after the revelatory fact betrays a damning weakness of character, a barely disguised determination to evade difficult questions so as not to disturb—indeed, in order to foster—what could only be sheer fantasy. From Father of the Church Tertullian's declamation 'I believe *because* it is absurd,' to the current rage for angels among some members of the New Age (ironically, Nietzsche makes a point of mocking those who claim to hear angels' voices),

there is certainly ample evidence to support the charge that traditional religion will stifle questioning (both of self and of authorities) when and if it becomes useful or necessary to do so.

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

As Idries Shah has observed, though these two terms share a common root and were originally used interchangeably, their meanings gradually grew apart. For 'experiment' came to refer to a situation "in which the experimenter remained as far as possible outside the experience."⁶ That is to say, the scientific ideal came to be understood as an attempt to provide a situation in which personal factors, such as the needs, wishes, feelings, interests, and intentions of the investigator, were to be discounted or altogether eliminated; the goal being to produce results which could be duplicated by anyone (anywhere, anytime) who correctly followed the agreed procedures. What is discovered is thus known not in and through the individual's direct personal experience as such, but rather, indirectly and quantitatively, *via* the sheer repetition of the result. Only what is capable of being repeated, and thus statistically formulated, is real, cognitively significant, and valuable; and what isn't—what is peculiar, personal, private, etc.—isn't.

Of course, more recent developments in advanced theoretical physics have raised serious questions about this dualism of 'experience' and 'experiment'—developments which tend to support James's contention that it is the height of absurdity for science to attempt to suppress or ignore the subjective element of experience; for reality is like a thread running through the 'beads' of individual consciousness—remove any of the beads and you have broken the thread. It is indeed a commonplace in the new science that the observer cannot be removed from the observed, that subject and object are strictly inseparable. From relativity theory we learn that all observations are conditioned by the specific points of view from which they are made; while

quantum mechanics teaches us that the sheer presence and aim of the experimenter determines the outcome of the experiment, and that different intentions and interests yield different outcomes. Is light a wave or a particle? Well, that depends.

Whereas the older scientific viewpoint was guided by the quixotic ideal of somehow beholding Nature as it really exists, in itself, apart from the beholder, the new science—courtesy of *avant garde* physics—is coming around to the position that has been held by the Idealist tradition in Western philosophy ever since Kant: What appears to be objective reality, as something external to our minds, is actually shaped and determined through the pre-conscious activities and deep, implicit structure of human consciousness; and therefore our task is to become self-consciously aware of the nature and form of our contribution in creating our world of experience—including our religious experience—in order to assume full responsibility for our creative powers and their proper use.

It follows that it is only in and through a reflective analysis grounded in an engaged participation in the realm of religious experience—and not by simply dismissing such experience or by pretending to study it as a disinterested outside observer—that that experience can be understood and evaluated. And it likewise follows that the religious experiencer is obliged to recognize that his or her interpretations and understandings, as the functions of a finite and therefore necessarily partial and fallible human perspective, can never be presumed to be beyond criticism or the possibility of revision and reformulation. For if we cannot ever reasonably claim that we know that we are simply beholding Nature, as it is in itself, apart from the act of beholding it, then the same goes for God, the Absolute, or whatever name we use to designate the highest reality. In truth, the seeker's experience of simply 'seeing' the sacred only seems to him or her (or others) to be absolutely direct, unmediated, pure; but that vision is always and necessarily informed and affected by the fact that it is a particular human subject who is having the experience.

The *desideratum* of a new religious consciousness—entertained, for the moment, strictly as a hypothesis—is therefore to remedy not only the defects of traditional religion, but also the excesses of the scientific reaction against that tradition. This means building on the original sense of *quaerere*, in which 'inquiry' is understood as an undivided, living unity of quest and question, heart and mind, experience and knowledge, practice and theory. Traditional science says that the existential elements of the quest must be purged in order to properly raise and address legitimate questions—that intellect must be 'pure' in order for information to be trustworthy. For traditional religion, the imperative is to preserve the key achievements of the quest by protecting them from questions arising out of reflection, criticism, wonder, doubt, and boredom. But if there is no such thing as 'pure' intellect, and if, as Lama Govinda has said, even the best food, if preserved too long, turns rotten, then a new religious consciousness must

eschew the fragmentation born of both religious protectionism and scientific reductionism. How could this be done?

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

(David Bohm and F. David Peat, *Science, Order, and Creativity*)

III: Religion as inquiry: illustrations and corollaries

Imagine, if you will, that instead of a flat, two-dimensional circle, the mythic quest of the religious hero is represented by an open, three-dimensional spiral, extending ever outward, encompassing more and more of the Transcendent, and simultaneously revealing deeper and deeper portions of the identity of the Self. As befitting the reality of the Infinite, this spiral has neither a clearly identifiable point of beginning nor a definite end-point: 'spirit' cannot be defined, once and for all. 'Departure', 'fulfilment', and 'return' are regarded, not as distinct, compartmentalized stages of a linear sequence of narrative episodes, but rather, as three simultaneously existing, inextricably intertwined aspects of every single moment of the adventure.

This means that the visionary experience is treated as an open invitation to further inquiry, as opposed to an occasion for the closing of a controversial case. New experiences are welcomed rather than discouraged. There are no set limits to pondering the meaning of these experiences, for it is always possible to alter one's interpretation of these events, and hence to revise—even radically—one's beliefs and concepts, which are thus accepted only on a provisional basis. In other words, symbolic images and ideas are consciously recognized as such, and never idolatrously confused with the ultimate reality to which they point; like the stars on a night sea journey, they serve as Nature's luminous guides to spiritual navigation. Given the presence of such experiences even in the absence of specific beliefs and conceptions of a fixed kind, the prerequisite of visionary experience is understood, not as unquestioning obedience (faith), but as a certain quality and degree of attention—conscious, concentrated, attention directed to one's dreams, feelings, thoughts, intuitions, inspirations, and so forth. No part of human nature is written off, ignored, or repressed, since there is no way to predict in advance the source of the insight that will enable the hero to push the envelope of experience. Self-mistrust and self-hatred (especially when such attitudes are theologically sanctioned) only hinder the realization of our tremendous potential. Spiritual creativity thus depends on a sympathetic knowledge of and respect for the whole self—a willingness to listen. The ability to inspire attitudes of openness, respect, trust, and attention as habits of consciousness is one of the chief boons bestowed on others, as intolerance, exclusivity, rigidity are replaced by the values of

acceptance, inclusiveness, and flexibility.

* * *

What I have maintained all along, however, is that the new religious consciousness is far more than an imaginary hypothesis: it is a living reality, embodied and reflected—in varying degrees, of course—in the life and work of real individuals. Some of these seekers began their quests in the bosom of one of the traditional religions, such as fundamentalist or evangelical Protestantism (Gloria Karpinski, Janet Lee Mitchell, Paul Solomon), Roman Catholicism (Jane Roberts⁷) or the Anglican communion (F.W.H. Myers); while from the scientific counter-tradition have come those trained in such fields as medicine (W. Brugh Joy), modern academic philosophy (Mike Grosso), or both (William James, Raymond Moody); while still others (James again, Jung, Michael Talbot) always seem to have had one foot in the camp of science, and the other in that of this new religious spirit.

What all of these investigators share is a profound commitment, first and foremost, to what I have been calling 'inquiry'. They possess a firm conviction, based on personal experience, of what James termed 'the reality of the unseen', coupled with an equally firm refusal to insult this mysterious reality by giving it a final name or definition, or even by providing a 'one size fits all' set of directions for relating to it. For each of them, the individual search itself is the essential form of religious practice, and the continuing process of inquiry is more important than any particular answer obtained, or experience enjoyed, along the (infinite) way. What each demonstrates by his or her example—James, for instance, had openly wondered about his own mental and physical health following a mysterious but intriguing episode in which he seemed to be having three different dreams simultaneously— is that rigorous self-questioning is the mark of a strong and clear mind, not a weak and murky one; and that it is possible to take religious experiences extremely seriously and to accept the reality of phenomena which orthodox science dismisses without at the same time becoming dogmatically attached to any particular theory of said phenomena. And this shows that it is neither necessary nor advisable to jettison the critical faculties or curb one's inquisitiveness in order to fully participate in the religious quest. Concerning a formative religious experience he had as a teenager, Solomon thus writes:

Perhaps the most enduring result of the experience has been a solid, undeniable and 'unshakable' knowledge of a living presence of God that is not dependent upon belief. I have found that the experience did not confirm (or deny) the [Baptist] religious doctrine and dogma I had been taught, but rather began a quest for knowledge and understanding This transformation experience did not seem at all like a graduation, but like an initiation, a beginning of a quest.⁸

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

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

experience.⁹

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

I felt liberated and peculiarly unburdened. The mystery of the Mystery was again nascent. I could once again apprentice myself to Life and feel the wholeness of its manifestations. . . . Much to my surprise, some of the 'sacred' viewpoints I had held to be Truth reversed or collapsed under the impact of the new way I perceived the world. For instance, I now no longer embrace the view that personal continuity follows death, nor do I embrace reincarnational perspectives, although each was a huge and significant foundation stone in my own earlier staging.¹⁰

Brugh Joy's sense of breakthrough, of freedom, which resulted from the apparently sudden collapse of his previous view of his own identity and relationship to the world underscores that a key function of the religious quest is to spur one on to discover the farther range of human powers. On this point I am in agreement with Wilson, Grosso, and Mitchell, all of whom have argued (following James and Myers) that the opposition that has sometimes been drawn between 'the spiritual' and 'the psychic' (or 'the paranormal') is unfortunate and misleading. On the dualistic view, whereas 'spiritual' implies a loosening the grip of the manipulative, insecure ego, and a recognition of one's place in the wider cosmic scheme, the value and importance of compassion, etc, psychic 'powers' such as clairvoyance, telepathy, and precognition are condemned as distractions and a potentially dangerous source of ego-inflation. But insofar as such experiences hint at our greater identity and the existence of an intimate, if mysterious, cosmic connectedness, they may serve as an impetus to identify and align ourselves with our deepest levels of being. That, improperly integrated, such experiences could corrupt or confuse the individual and lead him or her to try to impress or manipulate others does not make these experiences inherently evil or of dubious value, since, as Grosso observes,¹¹ even so-called 'spiritual' values and truths can be misunderstood and misused—as we have already noted in our examination of traditional religion and its relationship to inquiry.

In sum, what I am calling 'the new religious consciousness' satisfies many, if not most of the requirements of 'the new religion' as set out in the first part of my discussion, including: cultivating an inward mystical and visionary experience which is independent of dogmas and institutions; treating the experience as initiation, or as a potential catalyst for personal

transformation; recognizing a deeper human identity and power; upholding the truth of the connectedness of all things and the values of harmony and unity; and overcoming the dualisms of subject/object, experience/knowledge, etc. But I submit that the principle of inquiry is the central thread which binds these various elements together.

Naturally this synthesis will not satisfy or please everyone. The new religious consciousness abjures both the *a priori* radical skepticism of the scientific orthodoxy of mechanistic materialism (which knows very well, thank you—even without examining the evidence—that 'mystical' or 'visionary' experiences are meaningless, except perhaps as symptoms of some disease of individual or social psychology, and/or an unusually persistent form of intellectual error), as well as the *a priori* dogmatism of those religious 'true believers' who are certain that they, and they alone, possess the exalted keys to the kingdom. For their own respective ideological reasons and interests, both scientific skeptics and religious dogmatists will deny the feasibility of the new approach. Yet, in their stubborn refusal to acknowledge that one can indeed live a life of religious inquiry, they will be in the position of one who attempts to argue the hind leg off a donkey.

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

NOTES

¹in The Outsider (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1956).

²I have borrowed this phrase from Marie-Louise von Franz, On Dreams and Death (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. vii.

³in Chapter 8 of Heading Toward Omega (New York: Quill, 1985).

⁴in his lectures on the Transformations of Myth Through Time.

⁵Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, 2d ed. Bollingen Series 17 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p.30.

⁶Idries Shah, The Sufis (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1971), pp. xxvi-xxvii.

⁷I believe that the enormous contribution of the late Jane Roberts (and that of her husband, Robert Butts) to the development of the new religious consciousness has yet to be fully understood and appreciated. Her Adventures in Consciousness (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1975) is of especial importance.

⁸Paul Solomon, The Meta-Human: A Handbook for Personal Transformation (Norfolk, Virginia: Hampton Roads Publishing Co., 1990), p. 49.

⁹Janet Lee Mitchell, Conscious Evolution (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), p. 7.

¹⁰W. Brugh Joy, M.D., Avalanche: Heretical Reflections on the Dark and the Light (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), p. 7.

¹¹Michael Grosso, Soulmaker: True stories from the far side of the psyche (Norfolk, Virginia: Hampton Roads Publishing Co., 1992), p. 148.

