

**STUDYING AUSTRALIAN CHRISTIANITY:
A NATIONAL, INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE**

– held on 14-16 July 1993

–at Robert Menzies College,
Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW.

TOPIC OF PAPER:A comparative review of literature on religious experience and some suggested directions for future research, especially among Australian youth.

AUTHOR:Dr Neville Knight

Senior Lecturer, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Monash University
(Caulfield Campus)

NOTE: This paper may not be copied without permission of the author.

ABSTRACT

Religious experience is a very private matter and is a significant part of human experience. Although religious experiences are evidently widespread, little is known about them. Many who have such experiences are not involved in religious institutions.

This paper discusses the extent of religious experience in Britain, the U.S.A. and Australia, relating it to church attendance, age, education, social class and adherence to religious institutions. It concludes that there is a relatively small increase in religious experience with increasing age; religious experience is more common among those with high levels of education from higher classes than those with low levels of education from lower classes; and more common among those adhering to religious institutions than those who do not.

Six typologies are examined in the paper. They provide an interesting variety of ways of categorising and discussing examples of religious experiences from different theoretical viewpoints.

The paper reports Tamminen's findings that children experience God's nearness more often than adolescents; more children than adolescents have religious experiences in 'times of danger'; and the high point for 'God's guidance in moral choices' occurs during middle adolescence.

In respect to the link between religious experience and religious education, Hammond et al argue that an experimental approach, with a basis in phenomenology, offers a promising way of encouraging youth to explore the meaning of experiences regarded as religious.

Some suggested directions for future research include an investigation into whether the religious experiences of Australian youth can be classified in the same way as those in Britain and the U.S.A. Other research questions suggested are: 'What social and personal conditions tend to provide the context for different types of religious experiences?'; 'What are the consequences of such religious experiences for an individual's life-orientation, social viewpoint and involvements in religious and other institutions?'; and 'What implications do such experiences have for religious education programs in schools?'

1.INTRODUCTION

Religious experiences has always been a significant part of human experience. In recent times, in Western societies, this has been masked by popular ideas about secularism. People are reticent to talk about their religious experiences. Hay (1982:158), found that one quarter of those who had religious experiences had never before spoken of them to anyone, even when their religious experiences had deep meaning for them, and had profound effects on their lives. Religious experience is often associated with a search for meaning in life. According to Hannam (1992:52), 'Research in the USA and UK has shown that those who report religious experiences tend to associate them with a discovery of meaning and a sense of moral responsibility for their lives'. Religious experience is more widespread than generally realised. In Britain, Hay (1982:12) found that of young people interviewed between the ages of 16 and 24 years, 29 per cent claimed to have had a religious experience. More recent polls in 1985 and 1986 found that 48 per cent of respondents claimed to have had a religious experience (Hay, 1990:202).

Although religious experiences are evidently widespread, little is known about them. Many who have had such experiences are not involved in religious institutions. In Hay's (1982:126) British study, 56 per cent of those who were aware of or influenced by a power attended church occasionally while 26 per cent never or only rarely ever attended a church. According to Kaldor (1987:33), 'About 30 per cent of Australians claim an awareness of a supernatural power, about half of whom do not translate that experience into regular church attendance'.

In this paper the importance of religious experience is briefly considered. Then follows a discussion of the extent of religious experience in Britain, the U.S.A. and Australia, relating it to church attendance, age, education, social class and adherence to religious institutions.

The next section examines six typologies of religious experience, beginning with some of the ideas of William James and moving on to consider in more detail the approaches of Elkind and Elkind, Stark, Hood, Margolis and Elifson, and Hardy, Hay and Associates.

Religious experience during childhood and youth is the topic of the next section. The significant findings from Tamminen's studies over the period of 1974 to 1986 are outlined and reviewed, with some comments about a study undertaken by Potvin and Sloane.

The final substantive section considers the relationships between religious experience and religious education. It draws particularly on the research of Hay, Harris, Hammond et al, and Robinson and Jackson. The main task of religious education is discussed, and the implications of a phenomenological approach for interpreting religious experience and relating it to religious education programs is examined.

In the final section some concluding comments and suggested directions for future research in the area of religious experience, particularly with Australian youth, are proposed. It is argued that the questions raised in this paper have special relevance to those involved in religious education programs in schools.

2.IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

The basis of every religion rests on the religious experiences of its founders, leaders and adherents through its history. Religious experiences which are regarded as significant are passed on orally at first to other followers and later recorded in a written form. That written record is subject to interpretation and change as a result of further religious experiences, especially that of the religious leaders who have positions of importance among members of the religious community.

Religious experiences, which form the basis of historical religions, are a particular kind of human experience. They are experiences which humans have of the sacred which become publicly expressed in the historical religion. In the words of Hammond et al (1990:10),

The historical religions, endlessly colourful, creative, tangled up with politics and every other dimension of life, are in all cases the public expression of an inner experience of the sacred.

Hammond et al (1990:10) go on to add:

And if the rituals and activities of religion, however vivid, politically significant or aesthetically moving are not an expression of, or response to, the human experience of the sacred, then they are not religious.

3.THE EXTENT OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

(a)Religious Experience and Church Attendance

It is commonly accepted that secularisation has been endemic in Western countries since the 1970's, resulting in a decline in the attendance at churches, especially among youth. But it is not often realised that religious experiences are widespread and apparently not decreasing. The extent of religious experiences in some Western countries has been documented in **TABLE 1** by Hay (1990a:7):

TABLE 1

Table 1: Positive responses to questions about 'religious experience' in 11 national surveys.

Survey	Publication	Nationality	Sample	Percentage
experience	date	size	claiming	

Back & Bourque 1970*USA

(Gallup Polls)(1962)323220.5
(1966)351832
(1967)316841

Greeley1975USA146735
(NORC)

Hay & Moisy1978Britain186536 (H)†
(NOP)31 (G)

Gallup Poll1978USA300031

PRRC‡1978USA306235

Morgan Research1983Australia122844 (H)\$

AHRC/Gallup Poll1985Britain103033
(London)

AHRC/Gallup Poll1985USA152543

Hay & Heald/Gallup1987Britain 985 48

*The 1970 publication refers to Gallup surveys conducted in 1962, 1966 and 1967.

†H = Response to Hardy question; G = response to Greeley question.

‡Princeton Religion Research Center.

\$Morgan Research is the Australian associate of Gallup International.

One interesting observation made by Hay (1990a:6), is that although church attendance is four or five times more frequent in USA than in Britain the difference in proportion of people who say that they have had a religious experience is relatively small, 43 per cent compared to 33 per cent respectively. Hay (1990a:6) concludes:

If reporting of religious experiences were to be a function of the extent to which a population adheres to the religious institutions, then we would expect a much greater positive response rate in the USA relative to that in Britain that we actually find.

In Australia there is a similar pattern of incidence of religious experience to that found in the USA and Britain. The Morgan Research Poll conducted in 1983, found that 44 per cent of Australians claimed that they have had a religious experience (Hay, 1990:7).

Kaldor (1987:30) notes that while only 27 per cent of respondents claimed to attend church at least monthly more claimed to be religious on other indicators. In particular, Kaldor

(1987:33) argued that about 30 per cent of Australians claim an awareness of a supernatural power but about half of them do not translate their experiences into regular church attendance. Whilst for some the connection between church attendance and having a religious experience may be very important, especially if their religious experiences occurred in the context of Christian worship, for others there may be no connection because their religious experiences did not occur in that context.

(b) Religious Experience and Age

In British surveys there is increasing religious experiences reported with increasing age. In 1985, according to the AHRC/Gallup Poll (London) the incidence of religious experience for 16-24 year olds was 25 per cent rising steadily to 34 per cent for respondents in their 50's. In the USA the rise was less pronounced: 36 per cent for 18-29 year olds and 42 per cent for those 50 years or older, although the figure for those in their 30's was 47 per cent. In Australia, the Morgan Research (1983) found the figure for 16-24 year olds to be 42 per cent and for those in the 45-54 year range it was 50 per cent, with a slight decline to 44 per cent for those 55 years and older (Hay, 1990a:8).

Whilst there is generally some increase in reported religious experience with increasing age, the increase is relatively small, and in the case of the USA and Australia there is a slight decline at the upper end of the age range. It is interesting that Australia has a higher overall rate of reported religious experience than either Britain or the USA for nearly all age categories included in the surveys.

(c) Religious Experience and Education

The data relating these two variables is not totally consistent although a careful examination of it reveals a general trend. As level of education increases so too does the incidence of reported religious experience.

In the USA, the AHRC/Gallup (1985) found that 37 per cent of those with 'No high school grades' reported having a religious experience; those with 'High school grades', 39 per cent; those with 'College incomplete', 47 per cent; and those who were 'College graduates', 50 per cent (Hay, 1990a:9).

In Australia, the Morgan Research (1983) found that for those who were educated to 13-14 years, 37 per cent claimed to have had a religious experience. This figure rose to 47 per cent for those who were educated to 15 years, 40 per cent for those who were educated to 16 years, 48 per cent for those who were educated to 17-19 years and 45 per cent for those who were educated to 20+ years (Hay, 1990a:9)

The comparable figures for Britain found by Hay and Morisy (1978) for those who were educated to different levels of education were: 13-14 years, 37 per cent; 15 years, 29 per cent;

16 years, 37 per cent; 17-19 years, 44 per cent and 20+ years, 56 per cent (Hay, 1990a:9). With regard to the British data, Hay (1990a:9) notes that the higher than expected figure for those who were educated to 13-14 years may be connected with the raising of the school learning age in Britain in 1947, 29 years before the survey was taken. By the time of the survey, interviewees would have been middle-aged or older and the effects of age may have masked the effects of reduced years of education.

(d) Religious Experience and Social Class

Level of education attained is usually associated with social class. The more formal education a person receives the more likely it is that person will be in a higher social class. It is therefore to be expected that the pattern of association between religious experience and social class will broadly follow that between religious experience and level of education attained. In fact this is the case. There is an increased reporting of religious experience moving from working-class to middle-class to upper-class sections of society as **TABLE 2** from Hay (1990a:10) shows. The only unexplained anomaly occurs in the Australian Morgan Poll (1983) in respect to the 'unskilled and subsistence' group.

TABLE 2

Table 4: Report of religious experience (percentage frequency) compared with social class for five national surveys

Class	Hay & Morisy Research		Gallup Poll		
	(1978) UK	(1978) USA	(1983) Austr.	(1985) UK	
Upper middle	47	—	—	—	—
Professional/middle	49	39	39	50	44
Lower middle/white collar	41	33	33	42	35
Skilled working	31	31	31	29	29
Unskilled/subsistence	32	29	29	49	28

(e) Religious Experience and Adherence to Religious Institutions

Religious experience is more common in Britain among those who claim adherence to a religious institution than among those who do not. But it is interesting to note that almost a quarter of those who call themselves 'agnostics', 'atheists' or 'don't know' claim to have been aware of 'a presence or power', though what this means to people may vary considerably. **TABLE 3** from Hay (1990a:10) summarises the findings.

TABLE 3

Table 5: Report of religious experience (percentage frequency) in Britain, according to claimed religious adherence (Hay and Morisy, 1978)

Anglicans	33
Non-conformists	44
Roman Catholics	41
Other Christians	68
Jewish	39
Other non-Christians	60
Agnostics	23
Atheists	24
Don't know	23

In Hay and Morisy's (1978:260) survey, about 64 per cent of respondents did not regularly attend a place of worship except for weddings or funerals. Of these, 26 per cent reported having had a religious experience. Of the remaining 36 per cent who did attend a place of worship occasionally, implying some commitment to a religious institution, 56 per cent reported having had a religious experience.

Unfortunately, this data is now rather old and no comparable data is available for the USA or Australia. Nevertheless, there is a surprisingly high proportion of respondents with no adherence to a religious institution who reported having what could be regarded as a religious experience at some time in their life.

4. AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF SOME TYPOLOGIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

(a) William James

Early this century in the USA, William James produced his book, *The Variety of Religious Experience*. He presented numerous examples of religious experience, and focused particularly on conversion. He was also interested in mystical religious experiences and identified four main characteristics of such experiences: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity (James, 1985:380-382). Elsewhere, he distinguished between institutional and personal religion. Institutional religion involves the formal aspects of church life and its central aim is 'winning the favour of the Gods', whereas personal religion involves the 'inner dispositions of man', whose 'individual conscience, helplessness, (and) incompleteness form the center of interest' (James, 1985:29). He further limited personal religion to 'feelings, acts and experiences of individuals in their solitude so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider to be divine' (James, 1985:31).

(b) Elkind and Elkind

During the 1960's and 1970's, religious experience became a focus of attention for scholars in the USA and Britain. In the USA, some researchers, e.g. David and Sally Elkind (1962:102), used James' understanding of religious experiences as a starting point and argued that religious experience is a relationship between the individual and God. Two main categories of religious experiences are identified: recurrent experiences which serve to maintain and strengthen the relationship, and acute experiences which are largely fortuitous and serve to test the strength of the relationship. They developed a typology which consisted of six types of recurrent religious experiences: Church, solitary, anxiety and fear, worry, prayer and moral action; and five types of acute religious experiences: appreciation, meditation, lamentation, initiation and revelation.

Whilst Elkind and Elkind's work has been recognised by some writers, e.g. Burger and Allen (1973:262), their typology does not seem to have been taken up and tested by others. It is a

useful typology as far as it goes, but by limiting religious experience to the personal relationship of an individual with God it could be argued that some forms of religious experience will be excluded from consideration.

(c)Stark

One of the most significant pieces of research carried out in the USA during this period was that by Rodney Stark. His studies included the use of a mail questionnaire survey of 3000 subjects concerning their religious experiences. Stark (1965a:97-116) and Glock and Stark (1965:39-66) proposed a taxonomy of religious experience. In a later article, Stark (1965b:19), summarises the four general types of religious experience being proposed:

- 1.The Confirming Type: The human actor simply notes (feels, senses, etc.) the existence or presence of the supernatural actor, but the supernatural is not perceived specifically acknowledging the human actor.
- 2.The Responsive Type: Mutual presence is acknowledged, the supernatural actor is believed to specifically note (respond to) the presence of the human actor.
- 3.The Ecstatic Type: The awareness of mutual presence is replaced by an affective relationship akin to love or friendship.
- 4.The Revelational Type: The human actor perceives himself as becoming a confidant of and/or a fellow participant in action with the supernatural actor.

According to Stark (1965b:19), the primary feature of this conceptual scheme is order. The typology assumes that religious experience is a systematically progressive phenomenon. The development is likened to the pattern which occurs with normal interpersonal relationships which 'build up along a continuum of increasing intimacy' (Stark, 1965b:19). Consider the following examples given by Stark (1965a) of different types of religious experience:

1.Confirming

I took the 4.30 am time at our church for World Day of Prayer. I was about to step up to the altar, and it was as if I was walking on Holy Ground. I had to back up and walk around it. That Hour of Prayer was one of the most wonderful and meaningful I have ever experienced (Stark, 1965a:100).

2.Responsive

During church one Sunday I had a most wonderful feeling that God was there before me and acknowledged especially me (Stark, 1965a:101).

3.Ecstatic

The healing power of Jesus Christ was like a tremendous bolt of electricity passing through (Stark, 1965a:106).

4.Revelational

Stark (1965a:107-112) does not give an example of this type but says that voices from the supernatural agency would be described as 'revelational' if they imparted '*confidential information about the future, divine nature or plans*' (Stark, 1965a:108).

Stark (1965b:19) maintains that three consequences follow from his developmental theory of religious experiences. Firstly, the relative frequency with which the various types occur must decrease from the less to the more intimate types. Secondly, those who have experienced the more intimate types should have first undergone the less intimate. Thirdly, the relative frequency of the types should decrease within the experience of the individuals.

Stark (1965b:19) acknowledged that his data was not able to confirm all the three consequences. However, in support of the first consequence, Stark (1965b:21) presented some data which showed that 45 per cent of Protestants and 43 percent of Catholics were sure they had experienced a feeling of the divine presence, compared with 37 per cent of Protestants and 26 per cent of Catholics who reported having a responsive (salvational) experience and 16 per cent of Protestants and 23 per cent, a responsive (sanctioning) experience.

Stark (1965b:22) also found that 81 per cent of those who were sure they had had a responsive (salvational) experience also reported having a confirming experience, but only 66 per cent of those who reported a confirming experience also reported having a responsive (salvational) experience. These latter findings provide some partial support for the second of Stark's consequences.

Burger and Allen (1973:256) raise three questions about Stark's taxonomy:

Are Stark's logically derived types perceived by others as distinct? Are there differences between population sub groups in the perception of types of religious experience? Can accounts conforming to Stark's definition of religious experience but not drawn from his own survey be satisfactorily classified into his taxonomy?

To find answers to these questions Burger and Allen conducted a survey of two groups of fifty male volunteers from a private Catholic college and a Catholic seminary. Respondents were asked to rate the similarity between examples of Stark's types of religious experience. Burger and Allen (1973:262) concluded that 'Stark's types are perceived as distinct but the degree of

distinctness depends upon the characteristics of the perceiver (knowledge of and/or interest in religion) and the method used to assess distinctness (similarity judgements or semantic differential ratings along a single dimension).¹ They concluded further that 'the non-Stark anecdotes represent combinations of the Stark types', and that the 'extent to which types of religious experiences are differentiated or how they are differentiated may vary with such variables as formal religious application and depth of religious enrolment' (Burger and Allen, 1973:262).

(d)Hood

Hood (1970) developed his approach to examining religious experience by first analysing the various examples which William James (1985) gives of religious experience. Specifically, Hood (1970:286), constructed an operational measure of different types of religious experience based on responses to accounts of religious experience selected from those reported by William James. Hood (1970:286) examined the relationship between religious orientation, based on a distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, and reports of religious experience. He found that intrinsically oriented persons who live for their religion are more likely to report having religious experiences than are extrinsically oriented persons who use their religion for personal gain (Hood, 1970:289). A few years later, Hood (1973, 1975) went beyond the typology stage to develop a mystical experience scale, classifying religious experiences as mystical or non mystical.

(e) Margolis and Elifson

Another typology of religious experience was developed by Margolis and Elifson (1979:61-67). Their study was based on a content analysis of 69 reported religious experiences obtained from interviews with 45 volunteers who claimed they had had such experiences. Four main types were classified, with each type being expressed in several different ways. The four types identified by Margolis and Elifson (1979:65,66) were:

1. Transcendental experience (Security, increased relatedness to God or the universe, feelings of peace, a new reality, feelings of ecstasy or joy, feelings of unity or oneness, out-of-the-body experience).
2. Vertigo experience (Listening to music, drugs, out-of-the-body, loss of control, initial negative reaction, visions or voices).
3. Life-change experience (Non-specific change in internal state (feeling oriented), unity or oneness, talking to a friend, non-specific change in internal state (cognitively oriented), attending a church service or religious retreat).
4. Visionary experience (Experience of a divine presence, visions or voices, a dream, experience of love, experience of ecstasy or joy).

It was noted by Margolis and Elifson (1979:66,67) that there were some similarities between their typology and previous typologies, which they argued provides a degree of external validation for their typology. The fact that more than one type emerged from the factor analysis of their data supported the view that religious experience is multidimensional.

(f) Hardy, Hay and Associates

In Britain, the impetus for the study of religious experience in the late 1960's came from Sir Alister Hardy, formerly Professor of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy at Oxford University. According to Hay (1982:11), Hardy advocated the use of modern surveying techniques to explore the nature and frequency of reports of religious experience in Great Britain. Hardy established the Religious Experience Research Unit at Oxford and became its first director. Hay (1982:11) acknowledges that much of his own research was funded by the Unit, including the survey on which his book, *Exploring Inner Space*, is based.

During the 1970's and 1980's there were numerous reports on religious experience research in Britain, much of it undertaken by Hay and his associates (Hay and Morisy, 1978; Hay 1979a and b; Hay, 1982; Hay and Morisy, 1985; Hay, 1988). Of particular relevance to this discussion is the typology developed by Hay and Morisy (1985:216-220). They distinguished seven types of religious experiences:

1. Presence of or help from God

The main characteristic of this type is an immediate perception of God's presence.

It was memorial Sunday (in the church). I just felt the whole thing fitted together. There was a hush, a sense of God... I felt the overall guidance of God in pulling the threads of these lives together... I think it's all to do with God. I believe it's my encounter with God (Hay and Morisy, 1985:216).

2. Assistance via prayer

This type focuses on God's intervention through prayer, particularly at a time of crisis.

When my husband had been told not to have too much hope (of daughter's recovery) I spent most of the day on my knees, praying. I felt this presence and I knew she'd be all right (Hay and Morisy, 1985:217).

3. Intervention or control by a presence not identified as God

On this type, respondents were unable or unwilling to name the presence or power intervening in their lives.

I once had a lump in my neck. My mother thought I had cancer. She took me to a faith healer. I felt, while he was working, the presence of something else, and I felt detached from myself (Hay and Morisy, 1985:218).

4. Presence of, or help from, the deceased

This was an unexpected group of experiences of contact with a deceased friend or relative.

When I got to the boat I felt the presence of my mother. It gave me a saintly feeling, it's hard to explain... to me it was very real... almost as if she were at my shoulder all the time, as if I was walking on air, a wonderful experience (Hay and Morisy, 1985:219).

5. Premonitions

These experiences usually induce feelings of disturbance and agitation rather than peace.

We arranged to meet after work... he didn't turn up and I knew there was something wrong... something troubling me. I decided to go round for him and I was told he'd died that morning (Hay and Morisy, 1985:219).

6. Meaningful patterning of events

In this type of experience, respondents saw the operation of a supernatural power in a sequence of events.

When you look back it's the feeling that you were being influenced in some way... could be a series of coincidences but it was real enough at the time... I do believe a life force is running through the whole of the universe to which you can attune yourself (Hay and Morisy, 1985:219).

7. Miscellaneous

This group includes 'deja vu', peak and spooky experiences.

One man felt exalted, 'when singing praise to God in church'.

The frequency of occurrence of these types of religious experiences is indicated in **TABLE 4** (Hay and Morisy, 1985:217).

TABLE 4

Table 1: Types of religious experiences reported by respondents

N.		Percent	
Presence of or help from God	30	28	
Assistance via prayer	10	9	
Intervention or control by a presence not identified as God	14	13	
Presence of or help from the deceased	23	22	
Premonitions	11	10	
Meaningful patterning of events	11	10	
Miscellaneous (Deja vu, peak experiences, etc.)	8	8	
	<hr/>	<hr/>	
	107	100	

Hay and Morisy (1985:221) note that the first two types correspond with Glock and Stark's 'confirming experiences'. They are the experiences which are most often claimed to have significantly changed a person's outlook on life. The unexpectedly huge proportion of experiences with a deceased person is seen by Hay and Morisy (1985:222) to be influenced by folk theology. It is also noted by Hay and Morisy (1985:224) that religious experiences often occur during times of crisis and are much more frequent than had previously been realised. They conclude that 'to chart the decline of the Western religious institutions as the one true indicator of secularisation may be to misrepresent what is going on', and their findings suggest that 'religious interpretations of human experience are by no means disappearing' (Hay and Morisy, 1985:224).

5. RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE DURING CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

Early this century it was argued that religious experiences occurred more commonly among youth than children. This view developed around studies of conversion experiences rather than a broader understanding of religious experience (Tamminen, 1991:38,39). Over the period 1974 to 1986, Tamminen conducted research into the religious experiences of school-aged children in Finland. He argued that religious experiences implies 'nearness to God' and his key questions revolved around this theme. Tamminen (1991:43) found in his 1986 study that 19 per cent of children (9-10 years), compared with 10 per cent of younger

adolescents (12-13 years) and 4 per cent of older adolescents (15-16 years) experienced God's nearness very often. The findings for those who had no experience of God's nearness were: 32 per cent (9-10 years); 34 per cent (12-13 years); and 59 per cent (15-16 years). Clearly with increasing age during adolescence there is a decline in reported religious experience.

It is not clear how Tamminen's findings on religious experience during adolescence may be reconciled with those of Hay. In a qualitative study of religious experience amongst a group of post-graduate students, Hay (1979:167), found that most respondents said that their religious experiences had first occurred during mid adolescence (not childhood). The fact that Hay's questions were highly open-ended whereas Tamminen's were structured in the form of a survey makes the two sets of findings difficult to compare. Furthermore, Hay was asking post-graduate students to recall their experiences going back many years. It is quite possible that had they been asked to explain some human experiences at aged 10-12 years they may have interpreted them in religious terms. However, when they were older they may have re-interpreted those same experiences in secular terms.

A study by Potvin and Sloane (1985), on the relationship between parental control, age and religious practice, throws some light on why reported religious experience seems to decline during adolescence. Most of the adolescents in that study show a decline in religious practice with increasing age and this is paralleled by a similar decline in religious experience over this period. Potvin and Sloane (1985:12) conclude: 'at the younger ages high parental control and high religious practice are associated with high religious experience but at later ages high parental control and high religious practice are associated with low religious experience. In other words, parental control may facilitate both religious practice and religious experience among early adolescents but have the opposite effect among older adolescents.'

One valuable aspect of Tamminen's study is his investigation into the situations in which religious experience occurs. Tamminen (1991:61) identifies eight categories of situations which include times of danger or difficulties (36 per cent), success, happy guidance (20 per cent), life in general (14 per cent) and moral choices (15 per cent). The findings for 'times of danger' were 63 per cent for the children (9-10 years), compared with 25 per cent for younger adolescents (13-14 years) and 22 per cent for older adolescents (15-16 years). God's guidance in 'moral choices' was particularly evident amongst the children (9-10 years) where a finding of 12 per cent was recorded, and in early adolescence (13-14 years) where the figure reached 29 per cent, but dropped back to 5 per cent for older adolescents (15-16 years).

An instructive part of Tamminen's study is his examination of gender differences in relation to religious experience. Tamminen (1991:63) concludes:

There was a clear difference between *girls and boys* both in the number of religious experiences and in the evaluation of various situations as possible occasions for religious experiences: The girls experienced God's nearness and guidance more often than the boys did. They also were more positive about the possibility of experiencing God's presence in different situations than the boys were.

Some differences were also found by Tamminen (1991:63) in the categories of situations in which religious experiences most frequently occurred. Girls mentioned encounters with death, prayer and church activities more often than boys, whereas boys referred to escaping danger, difficulties, and situations at home, more than girls.

Tamminen did not examine different types of religious experience in his study. Asking questions about whether respondents experience 'God's nearness' does not enable them to say anything about how they experience God's presence, the type of religious experience they had, whether their religious experience is more or less intense, or what consequences that religious experience has on their lives. In the earlier words of Elkind and Elkind (1962:111), 'might it not be the case that the varieties of religious experience change with age, or at least that their relative frequency of occurrence varies at different age levels?' In fact, Elkind and Elkind (1962:111) concluded that the frequency of different types of religious experience did vary considerably from childhood to adolescence. This suggests that Tamminen's study would be further enhanced if he could take account of this in any future research.

6. RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

One of the great difficulties faced by religious educators of youth is the confusion which exists in what is meant by 'religion', 'institutional religion' and 'religious experience'. Young people often have a negative reaction to 'religious people' and 'institutional religion', and the decline in their involvement in religious institutional life, as evidenced by patterns of church attendance in Australia has been well documented (Kaldor, 1987:146-171).

The decline in institutional religious life is not necessarily paralleled by a similar decline in religious experience, which for Hay (1977:158), 'has two main strands, the *numinous* (meaning a primary awareness of the holy) and the *mystical* (meaning an intuitive awareness that all things are one'. According to Hay (1977:158), his own research 'turned up a considerable body of people reporting religious experience who had no formal links with any religious institution', and he argued that 'a young person should explore what it means to be a religious person rather than simply a member of a religious institution.'

On the bases of his own research, Hay (1977:160) concluded, 'I think it can no longer be taken for granted that religious experience is alien to most of the young people one is likely to meet in the classroom, even, as we have seen, well down into the primary school'. The independent research conducted by Tamminen (1991:39-45) over the period 1974 to 1986 produced findings which support this assertion.

Hay (1977:160) found that the most common situation in which people reported numinous or spiritual religious experience is when they are alone or in silence. Many reported that the experience was very private and went to the core of their existence. It was observed by Hay (1977:160) that because of the private nature of religious experience, and the fact that

language is often inadequate to express the nature of such experiences, a teacher requires great sensitivity in assisting children to explore the meaning of their own religious experiences.

Only then is there some chance `that the "sacred" will not be crushed out of reality or even memory through the influence of a reductionist explanatory system which at best is second hand' (Hay, 1977:160).

In an interesting paper, Harris (1987a:94) decries the way in which religious experience is seen as different from other human experience, as experience of `the other world', a view he believes is strongly influenced by Rudolf Otto. Harris seeks a different position to that of Otto who places a rift between religious experience and everyday life. Harris (1987a:97) believes that `Otto's split between the divine and the human, between religious experience and "ordinary" experience will not let us relax.' What is important, argues Harris (1987a:100), is to ask people about the experiences which have had religious significance to them. This approach has implications for religious education. Harris (1987a:100), concludes:

The task of religious education now is to insist on the absolute necessity of people stopping and reflecting on experience. We must get off the tread-mill of ceaseless activity. We must stop bolting down experiences and digest - otherwise there will be no growth.

In order to develop this approach to religious education, Harris (1987a:101) argues that teachers need to be supportive listeners and this is most likely to occur in the context of `community', for example, in school camps. In such situations, the antistructure element will often mean students are listened to, treated seriously and not ignored, especially when they are sharing personal experiences which may have religious significance for them.

In an experiential approach to teaching religious education, Hammond et al (1990:6), argue that one of their main objectives is `to help pupils to become aware that their own way of seeing the world is only one among many possible perspectives; thus assisting the development of the skills of empathy'. This approach is based on phenomenology which seeks to `bracket out' preconceptions about reality in favour of an unbiased investigation, as far as that is possible, of the subjective experiences of others. In this process we take people's inner intentions seriously as we enter our own and others' personal worlds. If we are not aware of the intentions of religious people the public expressions of their faith are likely to seem remote and meaningless (Hammond et al, 1990:6).

An implication of this approach for religious education is that teachers need to become more self-aware, and also appreciate what the world looks and feels like to their students whose experience of life is not the same as their own. In the words of Hammond et al (1990:7):

To understand how somebody else experiences the world, we have to take their inner experience seriously, and that involves an awareness that we have an inner experience of our own.

This empathic understanding comes about through a development of the ability to really

listen to others, and reflect on what they are really saying. According to Hammond et al (1990:11):

Religious education must perform two tasks if it is to face the question of the religious believer's intention squarely. First, it must honestly present religion for what it claims to be - the response of human beings to what they experience as the sacred. Secondly, religious educators must help pupils to open their personal awareness to those aspects of ordinary human experience which religious people take particularly seriously.

The approach being proposed by Hammond et al strikes a resonance with that suggested by Harris who was critical of Otto's views because they drove a wedge between religious experience and everyday life. Harris wanted teachers to be supportive listeners and to reflect on what their students say. Although Harris did not express his ideas in strictly phenomenological terms the outcomes he sought are consistent with those of Hammond et al. Both are seeking a change in orientation of religious education and in the methodology used by teachers. Both want religious education programs grounded in the human experience of the students to ensure that they are effective and meaningful to all involved, Robinson and Jackson (1987:73) take this theme a little further by raising the question of 'how far any teaching that has as its aim the growth of religious or spiritual awareness can take root in the minds of young people unless it continually relates to the experiences and preoccupations which during this period of their lives mean most to them'. Robinson and Jackson (1987:73) conclude by suggesting that Religious Education teachers should 'be more ready to explore frontier zones in which religion and life meet'.

7.CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND SUGGESTED DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH, ESPECIALLY AMONG AUSTRALIAN YOUTH.

(a)Concluding Comments

This paper began by considering the significance of religious experience to humanity, both currently and in the historical developments of religious life. It discusses the extent of religious experience in Britain, the USA, and Australia, relating it to church attendance, age, education, social class and adherence to religious institutions. It concluded that:

- 1.religious experience is far more widespread than commonly believed;
- 2.there is a relatively small increase in incidence of religious experience with increasing age;
- 3.religious experiences are more common among those who have reached higher levels of education than lower levels;
- 4.religious experiences are more frequently reported by those from middle and upper social

classes than those from the lower social classes;

5. religious experiences are more common among those who claim an adherence to a religious institution than those who do not, although in Britain almost a quarter of those who call themselves 'agnostics', 'atheists' or 'don't know' claim to have been aware of a 'presence or power'.

Six typologies of religious experience, starting with some ideas of William James and moving to more recent contributions, particular those of Stark in the USA, and Hardy, Hay and Associates in Britain, were outlined and discussed. There is some overlap between the different typologies but they provide an interesting variety of ways of categorising and discussing an array of examples of religious experience from different theoretical viewpoints.

The important research of Tamminen in Finland over the period 1974 to 1986 provides the focus for considering religious experience during childhood and youth. For Tamminen (1991:39,40), religious experience implies 'nearness to God'. Tamminen (1991:43), found that quite a high percentage (19 per cent) of children, aged 9-10 experienced God's nearness very often, and this percentage steadily decreased during adolescents, aged 15-16 years. It was noted that Hay (1979b:167), found that most of the post graduate students he surveyed claimed their religious experiences had first occurred during mid adolescence rather than childhood. It was suggested that this apparent discrepancy could be accounted for if earlier religious experiences during childhood had been reinterpreted by respondents at a later stage during adolescence or early adulthood.

A valuable aspect of Tamminen's study is his investigation into the situations in which religious experience occurs. Tamminen (1991:61) identifies eight categories of situations. A very high proportion (63 per cent) of children, aged 9-10 years, had their religious experiences in 'times of danger' and this reduced to 22 per cent for older adolescents, 15-16 years. God's guidance in 'moral choices' was specially prominent in early adolescence (13-14 years) when 29 per cent claimed to have had such an experience in the kind of situation. Overall, Tamminen found that girls experienced God's nearness more often than boys did. Some gender differences in the types of situations religious experience occurred were noted.

The link between religious experience and religious education was examined in the last section. The research of Hay (1979b) and Tamminen (1991) in particular shows that religious experience is quite common among youth and it is argued by Harris (1987a) and Hammond et al (1990) that, in the context of religious education, young people should be encouraged to explore the meaning of their own human experiences, especially those to which they attach religious significance. Such an experiential approach to teaching religious education has a phenomenological basis. Teachers using this approach need to be sensitive to their students' personal needs as they listen and reflect on what they are saying, and be understanding of their difficulties when they are exploring those areas of experience where religion and life meet.

(b) Suggested Directions for Future Research, Especially Among Australian Youth

In Australia, there has been little research undertaken on religious experience, especially among youth. If the pattern of religious experience among Australian youth is similar to that found in Britain by Hay (1979b) and Tamminen (1991) this phenomenon should not be ignored. Some suggested research questions which could be investigated are:

1. What is the nature of religious experience? Can different types be identified? Hay (1990c:202) has identified the following major types through his research in Britain: patterning of events, awareness of the presence of God, awareness of receiving help in answer to prayer, awareness of a guiding presence not called God, awareness of the presence of the dead, awareness of a sacred presence in nature, awareness of an evil presence, experiencing that all things are 'One'. Future research could investigate if religious experiences among Australian young people can be classified in similar ways, and whether there are other types of experiences.
2. What social and personal conditions tend to provide the context for different types of religious experiences? Previous research on the nature of faith among church attenders (Hughes and Blombery, 1990) has shown that different patterns of religiosity are found in different social settings. The nature of patterns of religious belief is related to the factors including the nature and extent of education, location in rural or urban environment, as well as religious and denominational background. Hay (1982:145) has noted that in just over half of the cases reported, there were specific personal conditions at the time of religious experiences, such as distress at impending death of the individual or a close relative, severe damage to the body or loss of livelihood. Future research could consider whether the different types of experiences are related to general social conditions or to personal factors at the time of the experiences.
3. What are the consequences of such religious experiences for an individual's life-orientation, social viewpoints and involvement in religious and other institutions? What implications do such experiences have for religious education programs in schools? According to Hay (1982), religious experiences were often described as vivid, intense, and life-changing. He also found that 61 per cent of interviewees reported that their experiences produced a dramatic change in their states of mind, as evidenced by feelings of peace, restoration, happiness, elation and awe (Hay, 1982:146). In the longer term, many people reported that it affected their beliefs about the world and about religion. It made people more optimistic, gave them a different perspective on life, and encouraged moral behaviour (Hay, 1982:153). Future research could examine the reported short-term and long-term consequences of religious experiences.

If religious experience is found to be a significant part of life for many young Australians, the directions for the future research proposed above will help to promote awareness of this

dimension of human experience. If these experiences are, in fact, life changing, give meaning to people, and encourage moral behaviour, their suppression is to the detriment of the whole society.

The identification of the nature, conditions and consequences of religious experiences among Australian young people will be of great value to teachers and youth workers, and to all those interested in the effects of religious experiences on the values, commitments and lifestyles of youth, particularly those involved in religious and moral education. In a pluralistic society, religious education is being increasingly built around a phenomenological approach to religion (Harris, 1987b; Hammond et al, 1990) which is based in experience which cuts across religious and denominational boundaries of identity and institution affiliation. Hay's research has contributed significantly to the recent development of religious education curricula in Britain (Hammond et al, 1990). The proposed research would provide data which will show if such an approach, based on religious experience, is warranted in Australia. It would also provide important data on which such an approach could be based.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Burger, G.K. and Allen J., 'Perceived Dimensions of Religious Experience', *Sociological Analysis*, 34:4, Winter 1973, pp.255-264.
- Elkind, D., and Elkind, S., 'Varieties of Religious Experience in Young Adolescents', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2, 1962, pp.102-112.
- Feltey, K.M. and Poloma, M.M., 'From Sex Differences to Gender Role Beliefs: Exploring Effects on Six Dimensions of Religiosity', *Sex Roles*, 25:314, 1991, pp.181-193.
- Glock, C.Y. and Stark, R., *Religion and Society in Tension*. Rand McNally, Chicago, 1965.
- Hammond, J., et al, *New Methods in R.E. Teaching: An Experiential Approach*. Oliver and Boyd, Essex, 1990.
- Hannan, P., 'Spirituality in the Material World', *Youth Studies Australia*, 11:2, Winter 1992, pp.52-53.
- Harris, H.V.C., 'Religious Experience and Religious Education: Theories and Practice'. In Rossitor, G.M. and Stewart, D.M. (eds.) *Education and Care of Youth*. Christian Brothers Province Resource Group, Sydney, 1987b.
- Harris, H.V.C., 'Theories, Experience and Religious Education', Papers from the National Education Conference Marking the Centenary of the Christian Brothers in New South Wales, 1987a, pp.94-102.
- Hay, D., 'It's All Right Jack: I'm Fireproof', *New Society*, 57:982, 10 September 1981, pp.426-427.
- Hay, D., 'Asking Questions About Religious Experience', *Religion*, 18, July 1988, pp.217-229.
- Hay, D. and Morisy, A., 'Reports of Ecstatic, Paranormal, or Religious Experience in Great Britain and the United States – A Comparison of Trends', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 17:3, September 1978, pp.255-268.
- Hay, D., 'The Spiritual Experiences of the British', *New Society*, 48:862, 12 April 1979a, pp.72-74.
- Hay, D., 'Religious Experience Amongst A Group of Post-Graduate Students – A Qualitative Study', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 18:2, June 1979b, pp.164-182.
- Hay, D., 'Religious Experience and Education', *Learning for Living*, 15:4, Summer 1977, pp.156-161.

- Hay, D. and Morisy, A., 'Secular Society, Religious Meanings: A Contemporary Paradox', *Review of Religious Research*, 26:3, March 1985, pp.213-226.
- Hay, D., 'Religious Experience in Modern Britain'. In Hammond, J. et al, *New Methods in R.E. Teaching: An Experiential Approach*. Oliver and Boyd, Essex, 1990c, pp.202-206.
- Hay, D., *Exploring Inner Space*. Penguin, London, 1982.
- Hay, D., 'The Bearing of Empirical Studies of Religious Experience on Education', *Research Papers in Education*, 5:1, 1990a, pp.3-28.
- Hay, D., *Religious Experience Today: Studying the Facts*. Mowbray, London, 1990b.
- Hoge, D.R. and Smith, E.I., 'Normative and Non-Normative Religious Experience Among High School Youth', *Sociological Analysis*, 43:1, Spring 1982, pp.69-81.
- Hood, R.W., 'Religious Orientation and the Report of Religious Experience', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 9:4, Winter 1970, pp.285-291.
- Hood, R.W., 'The Construction and Preliminary Validation of a Measure of Reported Mystical Experience', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 14:1, March 1975, pp.29-41.
- Hood, R.W., 'Religious Orientation and the Experience of Transcendence', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 12:4, December 1973, pp.441-448.
- Hughes, P. and Blombery, T. *Patterns of Faith in Australian Churches*, Christian Research Association, Melbourne, 1990.
- James, W., *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Edited with an Introduction by M.E. Marty, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985.
- Kaldor, P., *Who Goes Where? Who Doesn't Care?*. Lancer, Homebush West, 1987.
- Klingberg, G.A., 'A Study of Religious Experience in Children From Nine to Thirteen Years of Age', *Religious Education*, 54, 1959, pp.211-216.
- Margolis, R.D. and Elifson, K.W., 'A Typology of Religious Experience', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 18:1, March 1979, pp.61-67.
- Neitz, M.J. and Spickard, J.V., 'Steps Towards a Sociology of Religious Experience: The Theories of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Alfred Schutz', *Sociological Analysis*, 51:1, Spring 1990, pp.15-31.
- Potvin, R.H. and Sloane, D.M., 'Parental Control, Age and Religious Practice', *Review of*

Religious Research, 27:1, September 1985, pp.3-14.

Robinson, E., *The Original Vision: A Study of the Religious Experience of Childhood*. The Alister Hardy Research Centre, Oxford, 1977.

Robinson, E. and Jackson, M., *Religion and Values at Sixteen Plus*, Alister Hardy Research Centre, Oxford, 1987.

Rosengrant, J., 'The Impact of Set and Setting on Religious Experience in Nature', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 15:4, December 1976, pp.301-310.

Spickard, J.V., 'Experiencing Religious Rituals: A Schutzian Analysis of Navajo Ceremonies', *Sociological Analysis*, 52:2, Summer 1991, pp.191-204.

Stark, R., 'A Taxonomy of Religious Experience', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 5, 1965a, pp.97-116.

Stark, R. and Glock, C.Y., *American Piety: The Nature of Religious Commitment*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1968.

Stark, R., 'Social Contexts and Religious Experience', *Review of Religious Research*, 7, 1965b, pp.17-28.

Stone, D., 'New Religious Consciousness and Personal Religious Experience', *Sociological Analysis*, 39:2, Summer 1978, pp.123-134.

Straus, R.A., 'The Social Psychology of Religious Experience: A Naturalistic Approach', *Sociological Analysis*, 42:1, Spring 1981, pp.57-67.

Tamminen, K., *Religious Development in Childhood and Youth: An Empirical Study*, Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, Helsinki, 1991.

Wach, J., *Sociology of Religion*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1971.

Yinger, J.M., *The Scientific Study of Religion*. Macmillan, New York, 1970.