# Chapter 4
# Phenomenological Approaches to Religion and Spirituality

## 4.1 Introduction

At the heart of the spirituality of every person and group, one can find experiences that are both personal and compelling, sometimes life changing in their impact. Because of this, a proper understanding of religion and spirituality must involve the study of experience. Over the past century, scientists and philosophers have been refining the study of **phenomenology**, or the lived experience of human beings, and applying these new techniques and knowledge to the analysis and understanding of our spiritual life. Phenomenology takes us beyond simple functional analyses of religion to look at its substance and the experience of transcendence (Berger, 1974). In this chapter, we will look at what scientists, philosophers, religious studies experts, and mystics have learned about spiritual and religious experience.

### 4.1.1 Definitions and Concepts

#### 4.1.1.1 Consciousness and Subjectivity

Experience can be thought of as a way we gain knowledge, "an intuitive and affective grasping of meanings and values" perceived in the world (Vergote, 1969, p. 27). The primary way that we have this mental experience is through **consciousness**, "*the system, context, or field* within which the different aspects of the mind… including thoughts, feelings, sensations, perceptions, images, memories, and so forth, function in patterned interrelationships" (Metzner, 1989, p. 331). This experience of perception and consciousness is **subjective**, that is, personal to each of us individually. In a famous article entitled "What is it like to be a bat?" the philosopher Thomas Nagel (1974) notes that each of us operates from a single point of view that is always different from that of others, sometimes so completely different that we cannot possibly imagine their experience. While our bodies can be understood from several points of view, e.g., a doctor or a friend who knows us well, subjectivity can only be understood from our own point of view. Consciousness and subjectivity are thus unique phenomena that are not easily studied but cannot be avoided if we wish to understand religious experience.

For our purposes, it is useful to talk about states of conscious experience as lying along two dimensions—differentiation and relationality. At one end of the first dimension is our normal everyday consciousness or **differentiated** experience. In this type of experience, consciousness is directed toward *objects* different or separate from ourselves, the *subject.* In phenomenology, this directedness of thought is known as **intentionality**; it is believed to be a fundamental component of consciousness and an indicator that people are agents who actively construct their world (Vergote, 1998, p. 226). As we direct our attention toward these conscious contents, we take an instrumental or purposive attitude toward them, analyzing and separating them from each other and ourselves using traditional logical thought (Deikman, 2000). These things exist within a field of consciousness that has a **horizon** of awareness involving the presence of *space* and the passage of *time.* In the temporal aspect of consciousness, a "window of simultaneity" is present that allows for the integration of different cognitive components into a "lived present" (Varela, 2001, p. 215). This makes consciousness an ongoing process—a "stream of thought" rather than a static fixed state (James, 1890, pp. 224–290). Just outside of this horizon is a fringe consciousness or **subconsciousness** that we can become aware of, sometimes unexpectedly, lending an air of mysteriousness to the experience (Pratt, 1971, pp. 50–64).

At the opposite end of our first dimension lies **nondifferentiated** experience. In this state, there is a loss of distinction between things or between us as a subject and any other object. Mild versions of this happen often, as when we become wrapped up in a beautiful sunset or piece of music and briefly cease thinking about ourselves. In religious and mystical experience, people frequently report a much more profoundly nondifferentiated state. Some people describe this state as a **pure consciousness experience** (PCE), a raw state of awareness that contains no objects or intentional content at all—just awareness. A state of stillness while engaged in thought or a sense of unity with objects around us may lead to such an experience (Forman, 1998b). Others describe this state as a **monistic experience,** where all things are seen as one and we may become dissolved or absorbed into this great absolute unity (Austin, 2006, p. 343). Since it has no content, it has sometimes been described as an experience of nothingness (Matt, 1990). Mild versions of PCEs probably happen in everyday life, for instance, in unconscious fantasies and dreams, where conventional roles and distinctions become fuzzy (Eigen, 2001) or when we are in a more receptive or intuitive mode of thinking.

A second dimension of consciousness is relationality, the experience we have with another person. At one end of the continuum we perceive events or objects as things without human qualities, while at the other we experience a **relational consciousness** in which we recognize the presence of another person who is connected with us in some way. People are different from objects because we share with them the experience of subjectivity. We can reach joint understandings about things and learn to empathize, approximating their point of view. We also experience a sense of presence that is absent when we relate to an object so that we see them as "who" rather than "what" (Hurlbut & Kalanithi, 2001; cf. Ricoeur, 2007; Arendt, 1998, p. 179). The quality of this experience is known in phenomenology as **intersubjectivity**. Our experience in relationships is a combination of this feeling

of relationship and intersubjectivity with our own sense of subjectivity, difference, and personhood. Thus in relational consciousness there is a tension between subjectivity and intersubjectivity, between myself as a unique person but also as one who relates to others.

Relational consciousness is a normal state of affairs, but it can also become unordinary when a spiritual or religious experience involves this kind of consciousness, such as when a person senses the presence of God or some powerful Other. Some extremely powerful and rare experiences seem to combine aspects of nondifferentiated and relational consciousness in an experience of deep communion with a personal God. Any of these religious experiences involve a loss of isolation from others and the world. Instead, we acquire a different, non-instrumental attitude toward them (Hogan, 2004, p. 140; Deikman, 2000).

Shifts in our state of consciousness or subjective awareness that are perceived to be unusual are referred to as **altered states of consciousness** (ASCs). ASCs can be produced in a variety of ways through alterations in sensation, emotion, or cognition. They can also include changes in time sense, body image, or the meanings we attach to events. The experience may involve a sense of **ineffability** or inability to communicate the full import of the experience to others because of its secret, hidden, or incommunicable quality (Merton, 2008, p. 67; Vergote, 2003). It can also have a **noetic** or illuminative quality, a sense that something fundamental about the nature of reality was learned (Streng, 1978, p. 142). These states can be adaptive (e.g., used for healing) or maladaptive (Ludwig, 1990). When they involve a congruence of our body with both the mind and surrounding environment, these experiences also have an embodied quality to them (Thandeka, 1997).

### 4.1.1.2  Religious and Spiritual Experiences

The generic concept of a religious or spiritual experience is relatively new, as the term is not found in traditional religions. As Bernard McGinn says with reference to mystical experiences, "No Mystics (at least before the present century) believed in or practiced 'mysticism.' They believed in and practiced Christianity (or Judaism, or Islam, or Hinduism)" (McGinn, 1991, p. xvi; cf. p. 252). Nevertheless, psychologists have found the concept of religious experience to be a useful way of talking about features of spirituality that are found in various religious traditions.

*General characteristics.* Religious experiences are extremely diverse and complex (Hardy, 1983, pp. 26–29; Hay, 2001). Sometimes, they involve unusual sensory experiences and other phenomenon (Spilka, Ladd, McIntosh, Milmoe, & Bickel, 1996, pp. 99–100), but on other occasions they simply involve viewing ordinary experiences from a religious perspective. In either case, the experience can be personal and powerful (Saver & Rabin, 1997; Vergote, 1997, pp. 175–180; Moltmann, 1980, p. 9; Atchley, 1997a). Religious experiences can be classified into a number of types. For instance, the sociologist Rodney Stark (1997b) lists the following four types:

- *Confirming*: a feeling of sacredness or a sense of presence
- *Responsive*: an experience of having been seen or helped

- *Ecstatic*: a confirming and responsive feeling of connectedness
- *Revelational*: having received special knowledge from the Divine

*Emotional qualities.* Many religious experiences are accompanied by profound emotional states that can include a sense of desire or yearning (Vergote, 1969, pp. 80–82; 1997, p. 192), emotionally powerful physical experiences such as *glossolalia* or speaking in tongues (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003, pp. 267–268), or a sense of presence that is regenerative and renewing (Davis, 1989, p. 45). These aspects of the experience suggest that religious knowledge—probably like most kinds of knowledge—can have a strong emotional component (Watts & Williams, 1988, p. 75). Hill and Hood (1999) argue that this affective quality is central to the experience and can interact with the person's belief system in powerful ways. For instance, an experience in which we sense that the world is meaningful can transform negative emotions or events into positive ones, and a feeling of trustworthiness of people and the world can provide an affective base for relationships. This idea is congruent with the positive emotions theory of Fredrickson (2001), who argues that positive emotions act to open us up and broaden repertoires of thought and action, building additional personal resources, undoing narrowing negative emotions, and fostering resiliency. Modern accounts of religious experience tend to focus on these emotional aspects rather than other kinds of content (Vergote, 1998, pp. 134–135). While ethical and mystical experiences are different (Robbins, 2005; cf. Levinas, 1969, pp. 201–204), the latter can have profound moral consequences. For instance, the religious experience of Thomas Merton when he was in his 40s provided a sense of solidarity with others that motivated his deep concern for social issues (Mott, 1984, p. 311; Brewi & Brennan, 1988, p. 8; see Box 4.1, Fig 4.1).
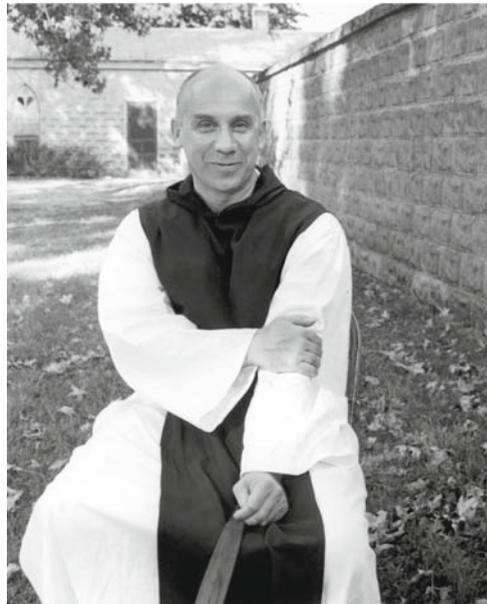


**Fig 4.1** *Thomas Merton.* An adult convert to Christianity, Merton became a Catholic monk and wrote on a wide variety of topics including spirituality, social justice and interreligious dialogue. Photograph of Thomas Merton by Sibylle Akers. Used with permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University

**Box 4.1** Thomas Merton's Louisville Experience

Reported in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966, pp. 156–158).

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. Not that I question the reality of my vocation, or of my monastic life: but the conception of "separation from the world" that we have in the monastery too easily presents itself as a complete illusion: the illusion that by making vows we become a different species of being, pseudoangels, "spiritual men," men of interior life, what have you.

Certainly these traditional values are very real, but their reality is not of an order outside everyday existence in a contingent world, nor does it entitle one to despise the secular: though "out of the world" we are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest. We take a different attitude to all these things, for we belong to God. Yet so does everybody else belong to God. We just happen to be conscious of it and to make a profession out of this consciousness. But does that entitle us to consider ourselves different, or even *better*, than others? The whole idea is preposterous.

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: "Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other men, that I am only a man among others." To think that for sixteen or seventeen years I have been taking seriously this pure illusion that is implicit in so much of our monastic thinking.

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake.

I have the immense joy of being *man,* a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

This changes nothing in the sense and value of my solitude, for it is in fact the function of solitude to make one realize such things with a clarity that would be impossible to anyone completely immersed in the other cares, the other illusions, and all the automatisms of a tightly collective existence. My solitude, however, is not my own, for I see now how much it belongs to themand that I have a responsibility for it on their regard, not just in my own. It is because I am one with them that I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone they are not "they" but my own self. There are no strangers!

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really *are.* If only we could see each other that way all the time, There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other. But this cannot be *seen*, only believed and "understood" by a peculiar gift.

Again, that expression, *le point vierge*, (I cannot translate it) comes in here. At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.

*Interpretive framework.* Religious experience involves the attribution of religious meaning to an event (Rizzuto, 1991, p. 47), and thus contemporary Christian theologians and psychologists tend to agree that an experience cannot be religious unless the person has a framework of religious beliefs, symbols, and language by which to interpret it. An individual without such a framework might interpret an experience differently, and use other language to describe it with potentially different meanings. Of course, the presence of such a frame neither guarantees that a situation will be taken religiously nor does it exclude that other interpretations might occur along with religious ones (Sheldrake, 1998, p. 21; Spilka et al., 2003, p. 262; Vergote, 1997, pp. 172–182; 1998, pp. 135–144; van der Lans, 1987). An interesting example of this is the case of the positivist philosopher and atheist A. J. Ayer, who reported an unpleasant near-death

experience during a cardiac arrest. While many people attribute religious or spiritual meanings to such an event, he did not interpret the experience in a religious way, although on some occasions, he did say it weakened his belief that life ends with death (Sabom, 1998, pp. 209–210; Belling, 2004). The presence of an interpretive framework does not necessarily suggest that the experience arises from the beliefs; clearly in many religious traditions, beliefs come from historical experience rather than the reverse (Murphy, 1995). It also does not rule out the possibility that some experiences are more intrinsically religious, as they involve the feeling of an outside force or perception of an ultimate reality, while others (e.g., visions) are more tied to culture and personal interpretation (e.g., Davis, 1989, pp. 30–31). These interpretive frameworks most commonly come from a religious tradition and will govern the importance attached to religious experiences, how they are described, which ones are valued, and how their truth value can be interpreted (Geels, 1996; Wildman & Brothers, 2002). They can have powerful effects; for instance, research has found that religious experience scores are higher in traditions that emphasize them (Hood, 1994).

*Frequency.* Spiritual and religious experiences of the types mentioned above are common. Studies from the 1970s done in the US by Thomas and Cooper (1978) and in Britain by Hay and Morisy (1978) found that about 1/3 of their adult samples reported having religious or spiritual experiences. For some individuals, these experiences are infrequent, while for others they are common (Laski, 1962, p. 43). Both studies found that greater age, higher social class, and more positive levels of psychological well-being were associated with higher frequencies of religious experience. Hay and Morisy found that church attendees were more likely to have experiences but that many religiously active people did not, and that 24% of atheists reported such experiences. Thomas and Cooper found that the types of experiences were quite diverse, including experiences of consolation (12%), psychic or supernatural experiences (12%), and mystical experiences (2%). Religious experience may be even more common in some groups. Christian Smith (2005) found in one study that over half of US adolescents reported one or more religious experiences, and rates among US adult church attendees appear to be even higher, in the 65–75% range (Spilka et al., 1996).

*Associated factors.* Research has identified a number of sensitizing factors that will trigger or increase the chance a person will have a religious experience. These factors include an intrinsic religious orientation (Hood, 1975), availability of a religious language and framework, living in a receptive or stimulating sociocultural context, and older age (Atchley, 1997a,b). Triggers associated with the beginning of an experience include participating in individual spiritual practices or public rituals like prayer and worship (Bartocci, 2004; DeConick, 2001), nature experience (Marechal, 2004, pp. 147–215), creative activity (Averill, 1998) or personal factors like the occurrence of distress or crisis, especially when connected with life marker events like death or birth (Hood, Morris, & Watson, 1989; Spilka et al., 1996; Vergote, 1997, pp. 152–154; Geels, 1996). Expectations of the nature of the experience and perceived desirability are also related to the type of experience and chances of occurrence.

### 4.1.1.3 Mysticism

Mysticism has long been prized in all the world's spiritual and religious traditions (Geels & Belzen, 2003). The term originated in Christianity, where it refers to a reaching out and "non-conceptual knowing of God" accomplished through experiences of union (Vergote, 2003, p. 81) or "some form of immediate contact with the divine presence" (McGinn, 2005, p. 371; cf. Vergote, 1969, pp. 145–146; Merton, 2008, p. 29). Paul Tillich once said that "without a mystical element—namely an experience of the immediate presence of the divine—there is no religion at all" (Tillich, 1963a, pp. 88–89). While there is no commonly agreed upon definition of mysticism among scholars (or among mystics!), a number of characteristics are common to most definitions. William James (1961, pp. 299–300) identified the following as central features of **mystical experience**:

- *Ineffability*: a felt inability to describe the experience
- *Noetic quality*: a sense that something fundamental was learned
- *Transiency*: the experience lasts for a brief period of time
- *Passivity*: a sense that the experience was not under the person's control.

Mystical experiences can be negative (apophatic) or positive (kataphatic) in character, or an interplay of the two (Turner, 1995, p. 271; see Section 3.3.2). They can occur in milder or stronger form but commonly involve an experience of transcendence beyond normal categories. Different kinds of mysticism also vary according to whether they emphasize the noetic or relational aspects of the experience (Leavy, 1995, pp. 359–360; Stoeber, 2001; Stoddart, 2007). The encounter with transcendence that is a central part of mystical experience can lead to the perception of the presence of a powerful Other with whom we can have relationship and communion. Such experiences are often carried back into everyday life, changing and enhancing it (Zizioulas, 2006, pp. 286–291; Freeman, 2003; Taylor, 2003). In the Christian tradition, this has sometimes resulted in a kind of love mysticism centered on the person of individuals like Jesus or Mary (Johnston, 1995).

Mystical experiences are diverse and complex; because of this it is difficult or perhaps impossible to reduce their description to a short list of characteristics. In addition to the classical criteria of William James, other authors see that a **unitive experience**—a sense of union with God or the universe—is a central and distinctive part of mysticism (Vergote, 1998, p. 137). These experiences involve both a perception of an underlying unity and a sense of participation in the unity to such an extent that the self is lost or transformed (Hayes, 1997; Leavy, 1995; Hood, 2001, pp. 3–5, 84–85). Along with this can come a cessation of normal intellectual operations and their replacement with different and intuitive modes of thinking (Gimello, 1978). Medieval Christian mystics like Richard of St. Victor noted that at the highest stages of their mystical journey, things that were encountered were beyond or even against normal reason (Richard of St. Victor, 1979, p. 161). This leads to the recognition and acceptance of the idea that **paradox**—the simultaneous truth of two seemingly incompatible things—is an essential feature of reality (cf. Section 1.2.1). However, mystical experience can occur without this paradoxical quality (Hood, 1975).

A strong affective tone (pleasurable, fearful or serene) and intense realness are also common characteristics. Other perceptual aspects of the experience such as visions are frequent but generally considered to be secondary features and are typically viewed with caution by religious practitioners (Gimello, 1978; Deikman, 1990; Douglas-Klotz, 2001; Meissner, 2003; Veilleux, 1980, p. 356).

A way of life in which mystical states are valued and sought after is known as **mysticism** (Hood, 2001, p. 155; Vergote, 2003). In the Christian context, mysticism involves a deep desire and need to bridge the gap between ourselves and the Divine that transcends us. This desire becomes the driving force for participation in a variety of activities in both individual and communal contexts. In this view, mysticism is not so much a kind of experience but an orientation or way of life (Merton, 2008, p. 3). Writers argue about the extent to which mystical experience can flourish and affect us apart from a way of life and practices that support it.

*The problem of ineffability.* The criterion of ineffability has caused considerable discussion among scholars, especially theologians who tend to see language as vital to religious life (e.g., Tillich, 1957, p. 31). Ninian Smart (1978, p. 19) has rightly pointed out that mystical experiences cannot be *completely* ineffable, because mystics do use language to refer to and even describe their experiences. It is better to talk about degrees and types of ineffability. Some kinds are common and involve the trouble we have sharing any kind of personal experience (Moore, 1978). In mystical experiences, ineffability might include (1) an inability to conceptualize what has happened or (2) an ability to conceptualize it but not communicate it (Tart, 1992, p. 51). Communication problems might be due to a lack of vocabulary and conceptual structures in the person's language and culture; it would be easier for those living in a community with adequate vocabulary and others who had similar experiences (cf. McGinn, 2005, p. 20). However, it is also likely that there are conceptual problems (Bambrough, 1978; cf. Section 3.3.2). These could be due to cognitive or sensory overload from a stimulus too novel, rich, and complex, a likely possibility in a unitive experience, but they could also be related to the nondualistic nature of the experience. A unitive consciousness would involve no differentiation between objects or between subject and object, and since all conceptual structures depend on such differentiation, they would be unable to encompass such an experience (Braud, 2002; Prigge & Kessler, 1990; Masters & Houston, 2000, pp. 270, 297). Music, poetry, or even silence might be better choices than speech in such a situation (Leavy, 1995, pp. 355–357).

Do different religious traditions describe different kinds of religious experiences? This is an important and controversial point. Theistic religions such as Christianity are built around belief in a God who is active in the world but not identical with it. In these groups, the longing to have unity with God and the experience of divine love are the essential traits and driving forces of the mystical life. For these religions, mystical experience is relational in nature (Vergote, 1998, p. 244; 2003; Butler, 2003, p. 143). On the other hand, monistic religions like Buddhism argue that everything is ultimately one, so that there is no God separate from the created order. Many authors (e.g., Underhill, Stace and Smart) argue that monists and theists are having the same experience, just interpreting or representing it differently.

Stoeber (1994) disputes this and argues that they are really significantly different experiences, as monistic states are nondual, strictly impersonal and described in negative terms. Stoeber suggests that monistic experiences provide the foundation for theistic experiences of unity, a view similar to that found in some Hindu writers (e.g., Ramanuja, Sri Aurobindo) and the Christian mystic John Ruysbroeck. In this view, we are first united with the Divine and then are able to become a channel for an active personal encounter (Stoeber, 1994, pp. 18–24, 45–58). On the other hand, some authors in the Christian tradition (e.g., Maximus Confessor) argue that it is in God that things find their unity so that an experience of God is foundational for any kind of unitive experience.

Hood believes that mystical experiences are not inherently important, and certainly some deeply religious figures like C.S. Lewis claim little in the way of mystical experience (Hood, 1997, p. 229; Dorsett, 2004, p. 51). If they occur to someone who eschews spiritual or religious beliefs, they may be set aside as incompatible with the rest of the person's experience. However, those who belong to spiritual or religious traditions that value and describe these experiences are better able to cultivate and incorporate them into their view of the world (Hood, 2001, p. 159). On the other hand, Zinnbauer and his colleagues (1997) found that both religious and spiritual and spiritual but not religious individuals were higher than non-spiritual groups on ratings of mysticism, although the spiritual but not religious group was higher on types of mystical experience less commonly found in the Christian tradition. Little is known about mysticism in this latter group, and therefore more research is needed.

*Related factors.* Personal and situational characteristics related to mystical experience seem to be similar to those reported for other types of religious experience. For instance, religious motivation (see Sections 1.4.6, 9.3.1) appears to be a factor in mysticism. Individuals with high levels of intrinsic motivation—those who seek religion for its own sake—have higher mysticism scores, and when those high in extrinsic motivation do have mystical experiences they tend to not report the experience as religious in nature. Those people who are indiscriminately high in both intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity also have higher mysticism scores (Hood, 1973, 2001). Gender role also appears to be a factor in mysticism, as individuals endorsing a feminine or androgynous sex role orientation report higher levels of mystical experience. Women overall have more frequent and intense mystical experiences, and their religious experiences are more likely to be mystical in nature (Mercer & Durham, 1999; Hood, 2001; Sjoerup, 1997). There is a small but significant trend toward more mystical experiences in older age groups (Lange & Thalbourne, 2007). Situational factors are also sometimes involved (Hood, 1978). Scores on measures of mysticism are generally unrelated to psychopathology (Mehrabian, Stefl, & Mullen, 1997).

Changes in attention seem to be an important part of the mystical experience. Deikman (2000) argues that in normal consciousness our attention is mostly directed to our thoughts, and our perception of the world around us is relatively automatic. He believes that in mystical states this process is reversed, with attention to the perceptual world going through a process of deautomatization. This makes perception

more intense and allows us to become aware of aspects of reality not previously perceived. Studies have found that mysticism is related to the ability to become absorbed or devote total attention to a stimulus, and it has also been connected with higher levels of hypnotizability, which reflect an ability to set aside conventional assumptions about perception or behavior and enter various kinds of trance states (Spanos & Moretti, 1988).

### 4.1.1.4 Anomalous and Drug Experiences

*Psychic and paranormal experiences.* Religious experiences have also been compared with various types of anomalous or unusual states, including parapsychological phenomena such as extrasensory perception (ESP). Studies have shown that reports of these phenomena are about as common as religious experiences and that there is a low positive correlation between frequency of anomalous experience and religiousness or reports of mystical experience. However, among Christians there is no relationship between anomalous experiences, religious affiliation, and belief (Spilka et al., 2003, pp. 312–314; Thalbourne & Hensley, 2001; Thalbourne, 1995, 2004; Thalbourne & French, 1995; Mehrabian et al., 1997). Some religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism suggest that at certain stages of spiritual development a person may gain psychic powers such as the ability to see the future (Rao, 1994; cf. Hollenback, 1996, pp. 135–300), although generally these traditions see the occurrence of psychic phenomenon as peripheral to the central task of spiritual growth. This is a very controversial area of study, in part because it sits uneasily in a naturalistic framework (Griffin, 1997), with many investigators vehemently labeling the study of anomalous states as "pseudoscience" and not worthy of scientific study, while others maintain that there is good scientific evidence for the existence of these states (Utts, 1996; Cardena, Lynn, & Krippner, 2000; Radin, 1997; Beloff, 1993; see Box 4.2). Some studies suggest that dissociative phenomenon like déjà vu or out of body experiences are relatively unrelated to mystical experience (Fox, 1992; Spanos & Moretti, 1988).

*Drug-induced experiences.* Since the time of William James (1997, p. 305) a connection has been noted between religious experiences and ASCs obtained through the use of psychedelic drugs like psilocybin or LSD. Most major religious traditions do not recognize drug-induced states as religious experiences, but there are some points of similarity. The majority of psychedelic drug users report religious imagery during drug-induced ASCs, perhaps from the same biochemical processes that are involved in religious experience during meditation. From the standpoint of self-definition, such experiences might be considered religious (Spilka et al., 2003, p. 286; Masters & Houston, 2000, p. 247–254; Davis, 1989). However, there are also phenomenological differences. In a famous experiment, Pahnke (1966; Pahnke & Richards, 1966) gave psilocybin to some seminary students during a Good Friday service, provoking experiences that he labeled mystical. However, the drug experiences were marked by considerable fear, distress, and self-doubt which are untypical of mystical states, as are the frequent perceptual changes

**Box 4.2**   Near Death Experiences and Mysticism

A near death experiences (NDE) is a type of powerful experience that often has religious or spiritual effects on an individual.

Sobom (1998) gives a striking example of an NDE by a neurosurgery patient. In order to repair a brain aneurism, she underwent an unusual surgery that involved cooling her body and stopping both her heart and brain activity so the blood could be drained from her head during a portion of the operation. Instruments attached to her verified that during portions of the surgery she had no measurable electrical activity in the cortex or brainstem. Nevertheless, she was able to report aspects of the surgery from a vantage point out of her body and had an experience of going down a tunnel to a place of light, where she met and conversed with a number of family members who were deceased. Then she was sent back and returned to her body, which was revived by the surgical team following successful repair of the aneurism.

Experiences such as this are difficult to explain from a reductive materialist point of view. Nevertheless, their interpretation is somewhat dependent upon the worldview of the individual who has the experience. The atheist and positivist philosopher A. J. Ayer had a NDE experience and at one point said that it "slightly weakened" his disbelief in life after death, although he still hoped it would be true (*National Review*, October 14, 1988). He claimed that the experience did not alter his atheist beliefs at all, despite the fact that a witness says Ayer reported meeting a divine Being during his experience.

and occasional psychotic states that go with drug use (Doblin, 1991; Pahnke & Richards, 1966). Linguistic analysis of drug, mystical, and schizophrenic states also reveals significant differences in description. Schizophrenics tend to describe their experience in terms of deviancy and illness, drug users describe perceptual changes like altered space and sensation, while mystics focus on the connection of their experience to daily events and their religious life (Oxman, Rosenberg, Schnurr, Tucker, & Gala, 1988). A largely unexplored area is how drug use (e.g., antidepressants) might interact with meditation in the production of ASCs (Bitner, Hillman, Victor, & Walsh, 2003).

*Creative and other states.* Another experience with parallels to religious experience is the *flow state* described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). This is a condition that occurs during enjoyable and absorbing artistic creative states. The flow experience has characteristics of an altered state like feelings of exhilaration, altered time sense, and a loss of awareness of self. Certainly there are a number of parallels between creative and mystical states, but there are also differences. Flow states typically occur in goal-oriented task situations, and the person may leave the experience with an enhanced sense of personal control, while mystical experiences generally have a more passive quality and end with a feeling that they have been given a gift, rather than gotten something through effort (Raab, 2003; cf. Nixon, 1996). A state

with more similarities to mysticism is the **peak experience** described by Maslow in his study of self-actualizing individuals. In this state of being or *B-cognition*, objects are fully attended to and seen as a whole, independent from their possible usefulness. The experience has a number of features similar to religious and mystical experience, including a quality of timelessness, uniqueness, passivity and receptiveness, and a sense of unity with the world that overcomes polarities. Emotional reactions include "a special flavor of wonder, of awe, of reverence, of humility and surrender before the experience as something great" (Maslow, 1999, p. 98). In its most intense form, this experience appears to be similar to a unitive experience, although the qualities of ineffability and noesis do not seem to be present in the same ways as in a mystical experience. Imagery, visions, and hallucinations can also be an important part of religious experience, although most religious traditions would give these phenomena a subsidiary role (Spilka et al., 2003, pp. 270–277; Merton, 2006, p. 307; Meissner, 2003).

Many authors have speculated about the parallels between religious and psychotic experiences. Those who see parallels point out that religious delusions are found in at least a quarter of psychotic states (Siddle, Haddock, Tarrier, & Faragher, 2002), and that there is no specific form or content difference between spiritual and psychotic experiences, so it is wrong to label one as "illness" and the other as normal (Jackson & Fulford, 1997). Isabel Clarke (2001c) argues that both spiritual and psychotic experiences involve a common process of transition from ordinary to transliminal consciousness but that in psychotic experiences there is a problem returning to normal consciousness, and that this problem is what leads to distress and dysfunction. Other authors argue that while there are points of similarity there are also differences between psychotic and religious experiences (e.g., Marzanski & Bratton, 2002a,b). Psychotic experiences tend to have a more negative or frightening emotional tone and a focus on trivial details, in contrast to the positive and unitive quality of mystical experience (Chadwick, 2001; Davis, 1989; Davies, Griffin, & Vice, 2001). Psychotic experiences—especially when they are frequent—are also often distinguished by the negative effects they have on the person's life, while religious or mystical experiences are more life enhancing as well as acceptable to religious peers (Pierre, 2001; Jackson, 2001; Siddle et al., 2002; Peters, Day, McKenna, & Orbach, 1999; Davis, 1989; Bartocci, 2004; Freeman et al., 2005).

## *4.1.2 Challenges in Studying Religious and Spiritual Experience*

### 4.1.2.1 Methodological Issues

There are a number of methodological problems that bedevil the study of consciousness and of religious experience (Pekala & Cardena, 2000). As we have seen, religious experience is a broad phenomenon so coming up with a definition precise enough for scientific work is difficult. There are also other problems.

*Sources.* The sources of our data on mystical experience have important limitations. Religious studies scholars primarily work with texts written by mystics, while psychologists typically depend upon interviews or questionnaires in their studies. Unfortunately, neither approach allows the investigator direct access to the subjective experience or its cultural and religious context (DeConick, 2001; Moore, 1978, p. 101; Keller, 1978, pp. 77–79, 95; Bender, 2007). Texts are a special problem because they often discuss the author's views on the mystical journey rather than report specific experiences. This is especially true of Hindu mystical documents (Gupta & Lucas, 1995; Moltmann, 1980, p. 55). Working with individuals through interviews or questionnaires has advantages over the textual approach, but it is still generally not possible to study people while they are having a religious experience, because it is impossible to predict when they will occur so that they can be observed or questioned during the experience. Also, much of the psychological research on mysticism has focused on a normal college age or adult population rather than accomplished mystics who perhaps are more appropriate subjects for study (e.g., James, 1997, pp. 22–24).

*Methods.* Mysticism can be thought about from a number of perspectives that involve different conceptual and linguistic frameworks. However, research questionnaires are generally created from a single theoretical framework, which may leave out things of importance (Perovich, 1990, p. 248; DeConick, 2001). For instance, Hood's M scale (Hood, 1975; Hood et al., 1989)—the most widely used psychological measure of mystical experience—conceptualizes mysticism in unitive but non-theistic terms. Does such a test really measure religious experience for a theist? Or does it confuse two phenomena that may be quite different from each other (Zaehner, 1961)? Furthermore, how does one meaningfully quantify a mystical experience, especially when the subject says parts of their experience are beyond description? Qualitative methods like phenomenological investigation may be better suited in this situation, since the person having the experience is in the best position to report what actually happened (Hood, 2002; Davis, 1989, p. 21; Valle, King, & Halling, 1989). However, psychologists only infrequently use these methods in their studies.

### 4.1.2.2  The Problem of Veridicality

*The problem of veridicality.* Scholars outside of theology generally avoid the question of religious truth. However, as Ninian Smart (1978) argues, a real theory of mystical experience must address issues of validity. There are a number of reasons for this, one of which is that people who have religious experiences—especially mystical ones—say that the experience conveys something important about the nature of reality, making its truth value or **veridical** quality an essential part of the experience (Proudfoot, 1985, pp. 174–177). Another reason is that the position researchers take on this issue may affect their theoretical framework and how they interpret the empirical data. Those who reject the veridicality of the experiences, such as Leuba (1925), point to their confused and puzzling character and develop naturalistic explanations often related to dysfunctional biological or psychological processes. Others (e.g., Pratt, 1971, pp. 456–458) accept at least some aspects of

religious experiences as veridical, pointing to the fact that people in many different religious traditions appear to report similar types of experiences. This provides cumulative evidence of veridicality that is difficult to explain reductionistically (Davis, 1989, pp. 174–177, 233–235; Macquarrie, 1982, pp. 216–220). Most transpersonal and some humanistic psychologists take this point of view.

*Religious views.* Major religious traditions generally take a critical realist view toward religious experience, with Buddhism as a possible exception (Marek, 1988). Even those following mystical paths generally insist that not all religious or spiritual experiences are veridical; they admit to mistakes, criticize others, and have tests or checking procedures just like scientists (Moore, 1978, p. 126; Meissner, 2003). An experience is tested against a variety of sources, which include communal views and tradition or foundational theological beliefs, consistency, and especially the moral and spiritual fruits produced by the experience (Ellis, 1998, p. 273; Sheldrake, 1995, p. 60; Davis, 1989, p. 71). Thus, just as religious experience is critical to the religious life and the development of theology, theological beliefs are critical to a sound mystical life. Thomas Merton puts it this way: "There is no theology without mysticism (for it would have no relation to the real life of God in us) and there is no mysticism without theology (because it would be at the mercy of individual and subjective fantasy)" (Merton, 2008, p. 65). Pike (1978, p. 219) finds two tests are primary in the Christian mystical literature: the spiritual effects of the experience and its lack of conflict with scripture, although in practice great mystics like Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) used the compelling truth quality of the experience as their primary guide (Mavrodes, 1978, p. 256). Avoiding extremes in practice can also minimize errors. Attachment to spectacular aspects of religious experience such as visions or revelations, and relying on too much or too little effort and intellectual activity, are also considered to be problematic (Merton, 2008, p. 211).

While most psychologists adopt a skeptical stance toward religious experience, some have not done so. One of these was William James.

## 4.2  William James and Varieties of Religious Experience

Many historians of psychology (e.g., Boring, 1950, p. 743) have identified William James (see Fig 4.2)as the greatest American psychologist, and he remains the most prominent figure in the American psychological study of religion. A gifted psychologist and philosopher, James was fascinated with religion although his background and beliefs were untraditional (Hollinger, 1997). While he had some personal experiences that might be termed mystical, he did not feel connected to a religious tradition and tended to interpret his experiences as a type of psychic phenomena. His strongest attraction to religion occurred in his struggles with depression, which plagued him throughout his life along with recurrent physical problems. He hoped that the religious temperament, which he saw as opposed to his own melancholic or "sick-souled" temperament, would help him find ways to reject philosophical pessimism. He also hoped that his religious and psychical researches would help support the development of religion (Capps, 1997b, pp. 26–28, 67; Taves, 1999; Hay, 1999).

**Fig 4.2** *William James.*
One of the most important
American psychologists and
philosophers, his work on
religious experience is over a
century old but it remains one
of the best phenomenologi-
cal studies of religion. Photo
courtesy of the National
Library of Medicine
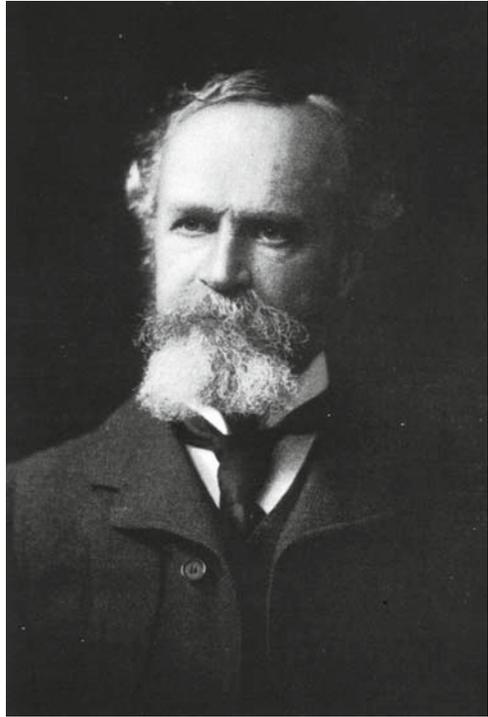


### 4.2.1  Basic Beliefs: Radical Empiricism, Pragmatism and Pure Experience

James thought that all knowledge rested on conscious experiences, and he held a position of **radical empiricism** (1996a), that nothing besides experience should form a datum for psychological investigation. He also believed that **introspection** or personal examination of our own mental states could provide valuable information about the world and ourselves. He rejected a positivist approach to experience that tries to study it by breaking it up and examining its parts (see Sections 2.1.2, 2.4.1). Rather, he took a holistic view that conscious experiences form an indivisible whole between subject and external object, with the connections themselves becoming part of the experiences. This indivisible given experience was self-contained and valid in itself and could not be analyzed in an entirely atomistic manner. He termed this phenomenological state **pure experience** (1996a, pp. 1–91). While experiences have similarities and are interconnected, no one connection runs through everything—the universe is essentially diverse and discontinuity is an essential feature of experience. This ultimate lack of final connection forms the basis of novelty, indeterminism, and freedom, leading to what James called a **pluralistic universe** with many unities rather than a single unity (1996a, p. 90; 1996b, pp. 310–311; 2003, pp. 57–65). He saw reality as a group of many partial stories where different

things work together toward a conclusion, interfacing with each other but having no absolute unity that we can construct in our minds, although all things are aiming toward a final convergence point (2003, pp. 62–70).

Of course, experience at times offers conflicting possibilities of truth. James argued that in these situations one should determine truth by the **pragmatic maxim**, which is to look at "what practical consequences would be different if one side rather than the other were true" (1996a, p. 72). Sometimes, this meant that one must make a commitment to something that cannot be completely established as true by rational and scientific means because its practical consequences are desirable. He thought that religious truths often fell in this category (1897, pp. 11, 56). Pragmatism allowed for the preservation of both religion and "the richest intimacy with the facts" (2003, p. 15), what he called a rich "thick" rather than an abstract and "thin" method (1996b, pp. 308–309). It rejected a priori materialism and the positivist antitheological bias, simply evaluating religion on the basis of its "value for concrete life" such as establishing a basic attitude of trust (1996b, pp. 33, 120; 2003, p. 36).

## *4.2.2 The Varieties of Religious Experience*

James most influential treatment of religion has been his Gifford lectures, which were based in part on material from his 1896 Lowell Institute lectures (Taylor, 1984). These later became the *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James, 1961).

### 4.2.2.1  Approach

The methodology of the *Varieties* reflects the radical empirical stance taken by James and his acceptance of pure experience—including religious experience—as a fundamental datum for investigation. James saw the essence of religion as lying in these experiences rather than in some particular set of beliefs (Brown, 2000, p. 13). His method also reflects his pluralistic philosophy in that he assumed that there would be no single universal model of religious experience that would exactly fit each individual. Accordingly, he used what today would be called a qualitative approach, reviewing individual accounts of religious experiences collected by others and building a narrative that picked out patterns without leaving out the richness of the individual account (Mounce, 1997, pp. 103–104).

### 4.2.2.2  Key Points

*Religion as individual feeling.* Like the liberal Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1999), and many others of the 19th century, James valued passion, energy, and vitality and thought that these feelings lay at the basis of religion. For James, religious feeling was foremost a personal and individual matter. Each

individual had his or her own character structure with a different susceptibility to emotional excitement and associated impulses and inhibitions. In addition, each person had different abilities and needs so that the function of religion was different for everyone, and its pattern did not conform to a particular set of stages. He saw the institutional aspect of religion as problematic and less fundamental than the personal, although he acknowledged that individual religion does not have the richness and complexity of institutional religion. Given his emphasis on feeling and the individual, religion for James became "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (1961, p. 42).

*Types of religious experiences.* The *Varieties* is rich with personal accounts of many kinds of religious experiences. However, two were of particular interest to him. The first is what he called "the reality of the unseen," a sense of a very real but immaterial presence in the world (1961, p. 62). This experience could be brief or habitual, but it had the potential to be profoundly motivating beyond the power of rationality, leading to "belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" (1961, p. 59). The second kind of experience was the mystical experience. Mystical experiences involve a unity consciousness in which one experiences an insight and reconciliation of opposites (see Box 4.1). They are real experiences, a kind of subliminal perception as valid as scientific truth, although we should not necessarily accept them uncritically (Taves, 1999, p. 263).

*Religious types and psychopathology.* James gave the relationship between psychopathology and religion a central place in his theory of religious experience. He noted that many great religious figures were very sensitive and had "abnormal psychic visitations," as well as a conflicted and melancholy inner life (1961, p. 25). He thought that emotionally and attitudinally, people lay on a continuum between two types. The **healthy-minded** were people who had a natural sense of happiness and optimism, believing that things are good and that evil can be overcome. On the other hand, the **sick-souled** person sees life as insecure with real evil as an essential part of things. James believed that the sick-souled individual had a more complete but also more conflicted view of the world, so that they often struggled with melancholia and philosophical pessimism. Religious experience and mystical states could help the sick-souled person, because they have an optimistic quality and help us accept our ultimate dependence on the universe. So in general, James saw religion not as *causing* emotional problems but as a way of *responding* to them. He saw the religious point of view as a sympathetic one wanting intimacy with the universe and struggling against pessimism, while antireligious materialism was aligned with cynicism. He thought that most people at heart were in need of this kind of intimate relationship (1996b, p. 33).

*Conversion and religious transformation.* James felt that individuals, especially the sick-souled, experienced life as a divided self and looked for a way to achieve unification. He saw religion as one way to achieve this inner unity. Those who were able to invest their excitement and "the habitual center of [their] personal energy" into a religious system (1961, p. 165) would experience a religious **conversion**,

a gradual or sudden change which led to a new personal equilibrium and level of spiritual vitality. He thought that some people could never have this type of experience, either due to intellectual reasons such as a commitment to materialism, or because they were incapable of religious sensibility or emotion. James rejected the idea that there is some distinctive feature of the new person after conversion. Those who are healthy-minded or sick-souled will remain that way, but the latter would now have more resources to combat their essential pessimism.

*The value of religion.* James evaluated the value of religion using his pragmatic maxim. Along with the "luminousness" and philosophical reasonableness of ideas (1961, p. 33), he thought we should judge religion on the basis of its practical effect. James believed that the key impact of religion on the individual lay in the development of **saintliness**, a condition that occurs when our personal energy becomes centered on the spiritual. For James, saintliness has practical consequences that could be found in all religions, such as sacrifice and self-surrender, patience and fortitude, and purity of spirit and increasing charity (Higgins-D'Alessandro & Cecero, 2003). However, his view of the value of saintliness was deeply influenced by his pluralistic philosophy and individualism. While he approved of the characteristics of saintliness like purity, charity, and feelings of harmony, he thought one should not be too saintly. He thought that spiritual excitement needed to be balanced by other things, or it will become excessive, interfering with our mission and vocation in life.

### 4.2.3  Influence and Critique

The views of James on religion and his phenomenological method were very influential and helped open the area to later investigation. His description of sick-souled mysticism found in figures like Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Kierkegaard influenced 20th-century theologians like Niebuhr and Tillich and has influenced virtually all psychological treatments of the topic of religious experience (Edie, 1987, p. vii; Browning, 1980, pp. 249, 262). James' method mirrored the dialectical quality of his philosophy; it developed a central vision but retained flexibility, allowing conflicting ideas to remain unresolved and in tension with each other. This approach anticipates modern hermeneutic thought (e.g., James, 2003, pp. 3–5; Leary, 2003; Seigfried, 1990, pp. 198–199; see Sections 1.6.2, 6.3.2). However, many aspects of James' approach to psychology and religious experience were displaced as positivism and behaviorism became dominant in psychology. His work has been criticized on a number of fronts (Wulff, 1997, pp. 499–502). Some significant points that recur in the literature include the following:

1. James drew selectively from religious traditions, mostly focusing on Protestant Christianity and leaving out altogether some major religious groups like classical Buddhism (Stace, 1960a, p. 43).
2. While James attempted to portray individuals in a rich descriptive manner, his descriptions decontextualized them from religious institutions, which is not how religious experience functions for most people (Gale, 1999, p. 265; Taylor, 2002,

p. 23). Capps (1997b, pp. 25–26) argues that virtually every account cited by James supports the view that there is no purely individual, decontextualized religious experience.

3. Some believe James overemphasized the role of feeling in religion. For instance, Vergote (1997, pp. 135–139; cf. Belzen, 1999) complains that identifying religious experiences as a type of emotional intensity is simplistic and expands the definition of religion too much, making it difficult to justify what is meant by "religious."

4. James' philosophical presuppositions and agenda have also been criticized. It is interesting to note that he viewed himself as collecting data without any *a priori* system (1961, p. 261) and just letting experience speak for itself, when it is quite obvious that his definitions, views of empiricism, and pluralism all had a large impact on his work. Contemporaries like Leuba also criticized his religious agenda and attacked James for attempting to use reports of religious experience to support the idea of a spiritual reality beyond that of the psychological or rational (James, 1996a, p. 274).

## 4.3  Perennial and Universal Views

While James believed in a pluralistic universe, he also talked about a core in religious experience that cuts across personal and religious backgrounds. The idea that there is a shared body of universally true and valid knowledge in all religious traditions and experiences throughout history is called the **perennial philosophy** (Schuon, 1984, 2007). While philosophers such as Leibniz had used the term since the 18th century, it was popularized in the 20th century by Aldous Huxley (2004), who characterized the philosophy as holding the following positions:

1. The ultimate goal of life is "liberation and enlightenment." This is achieved by developing one's spiritual life through coming to a unitive personal knowledge and harmonious relation with the "spiritual Ground of things" (2004, pp. 65, 76–79). This condition is a higher state of development beyond the ordinary (Shapiro & Walsh, 2003).

2. Salvation is not found in material possessions or social progress, but through an inner journey that leads us to the Ground. This journey demands an attitude of selflessness, purity of heart, and trust toward others and the world. It also requires participation in spiritual disciplines and practices that help us to die to ourselves and eliminate the "self-regarding ego" that separates us from the Ground. Progress in the journey reflects back upon our lives in a reciprocal manner, leading to the development of charity, humility, and peacefulness. Religions are ideally a means to these ends, although each religion overlays the perennial philosophy with unnecessary beliefs and practices.

3. The Absolute or God we seek in salvation is timeless and more real than the world as we observe it in our daily life. It is ineffable in terms of normal rational

thought but contrary to Kant can be "directly experienced and realized" (2004, p. 21) especially in experiences of union.

4. This Absolute Ground has a personal, loving quality, and gives spiritual grace to help us achieve our final end and return to the Ground. The Ground can sometimes be found among us in incarnations or **avatars** and can be seen in divinized human beings who have followed a contemplative path.

Perennialists vary according to whether they believe there are one or several cores to religious experience. They also disagree about the extent to which religious tradition plays a role in these experiences (Parsons, 1999, pp. 110–115). Often, they express their belief saying that all traditions share a similar aim in terms of mystical experience but provide unique paths to the same summit (e.g., Hayes, 1997; Coomaraswamy, 2007; Stoddart, 2007). This view is particularly evident among scholars influenced by Hinduism and to a lesser extent by Islamic thought. Some perennialists such as the *traditionalist school* headed by Frithjof Schuon argue that religious traditions are of inherent value because they contain within them a core of universal truths and practices that assist believers in connecting themselves to what is Real. Writers in this version of perennialism value the **exoteric** outer forms of religion as possessing symbolic power, as well as the more universal **esoteric** inner truth gained through immediate experience of the transcendent. The former provides a means for the average person to relate to transcendence, while the latter is a path for an elite few (Schuon, 1984; Minnaar, 2007; Cutsinger, 2002; cf. al-'Arabi, 1980, pp. 131–132, 279–282; Shah-Kazemi, 2006, p. 250). Psychoanalytic approaches to mysticism have been strongly influenced by the perceived legitimacy and value of mystical ways of knowing and have tended to respond to and follow perennialist views of religious experience (Parsons, 1999, pp. 109–115). Most transpersonal psychologists hold to some degree the main tenants of the perennial philosophy. However, Funk (1994) identifies a number of differences of opinion among transpersonal thinkers, including the following:

- The validity of postmodern constructionism (see Section 6.3.1) that has challenged the idea of the universality of experience
- How various states of consciousness are to be ordered in relation to each other
- The relationship of personal material to transpersonal material
- How the highest level of development or consciousness should be conceptualized

### *4.3.1  Plotinus*

The work of Plotinus (ca. 204–270) is cited by many scholars as one of the early expositions of the perennial philosophy. He is important in the Christian tradition because his mystical and philosophical work the *Enneads* influenced Augustine and the apophatic writings of other early Christian writers (Majercik, 1995; Hadot, Davidson, & Wissing, 1990; Hadot, 1993; Davidson, 1990). His writings present a vision of the spiritual seeker as one who escapes from the world to seek union with the Divine (Hadot, 1986a).

*Connectedness of all things.* Plotinus (1991) believed that higher reality beyond the realm of matter consisted of three *Primals* or fundamental principles upon which everything is based. The highest is a primal simple unity or One. From this One comes two other primals, the Logos or Intellectual Principle and the World Soul that gives form to matter and reason to life. Our reason is a reflection of this Logos. Matter is distant from higher reality but is also related to it and because of this is not evil. Evil instead is an absence or a falling short of the Good that lies at the heart of existence.

*Approaching the One.* Some people are able to approach the One from which we have descended. They have the inborn "nature of a lover" and a philosophical temperament (1991, p. 258), as well as courage for the task and the ability to undertake the moral discipline necessary to purify and free the soul from the passions. Our love and yearning for the One are based on a recognition of kinship and the Universal Love of the One for us. The seeker begins the path through a contemplation of external beauty, but must go beyond this, withdrawing within to contemplate the beauty of the soul and eventually to the source of its loveliness. The journey involves a retreat within oneself that also results in self-knowledge and self-awareness, and because of our essential nature with the One, "to find ourselves is to know our source" (1991, p. 544). As we progress, our souls become like a mirror, reflecting this ultimate good and beauty.

*The experience of Union.* The experience of Union with the One is a vision that cannot be produced by our own effort; we can only prepare ourselves and then wait for it. In absorbed contemplation there is an ineffable vision of light beyond all statements, knowing and objective thought, so that we join with the One in nondifferentiated unity. This is a state of utter simplicity, rest, and stillness without passion, desire, or movement; the self disappears and there is no diversity. We are able to experience this vision because we have something of the supreme principle within us. The experience cannot be described in a positive manner: "if we are led to think positively of The One, name and thing, there would be more truth in silence" (1991, p. 398).

## 4.3.2  von Hugel, Pathology, and Religious Experience

The idea of a universal core to religious experience dominated psychological and religious treatments of the topic during the first half of the 20th century. These early works were also concerned about the relationship between religious experience or mysticism and psychopathology. One of the most interesting early treatments of this was the study of the Christian mystic Catherine of Genoa (1447–1510) by the German lay Catholic scholar Friedrich von Hugel (1852–1925).

### 4.3.2.1  von Hugel on Mysticism in Catherine of Genoa

Von Hugel (1999) thought there were 3 elements of religion: (1) the *institutional and historical* involving tradition, sense and memory, a child's way of getting religion;

(2) the *synthetic-philosophical* using reasoned argument as in formal theological discussions, appropriate for youth; and (3) the *mystical and experimental*, involving feelings states and appropriate for the mature adult. Von Hugel thought that all three are necessary and present in religious traditions like Christianity and that religious crises occur as people pass from one stage to the next (cf. Pratt, 1971). These stages also interact in complex and important ways. He did not believe that there was a "specifically distinct, self-sufficing, purely Mystical mode of apprehending Reality" (1999, p. 283) because the non-mystical always contains a mystical component and vice versa. While true mystics are rare, they offer much because regardless of their religious tradition they point to the presence of the Infinite. However, each individual mystic is different and will possess God differently, focusing more on the relationship with God or God's oneness, experiencing different stages, as well as sudden or gradual modes of progression.

Von Hugel thought that the mystical life went beyond mere mystical experiences to involve the deepest activity of the soul. He believed the key to the spiritual life of the true mystic is their ability to maintain a complex balance between different opposing tendencies, such as initiative and passivity or love and contemplation. In a lack of balance, passivity could become **quietism**, a fanatical concentration on the inner life to the exclusion of the important normal means and duties of human and religious life, such as prayer, religious practice, and moral action.

### 4.3.2.2 Psychopathology and Mysticism

Catherine of Genoa struggled with depression and experienced unusual ecstatic and physical states during her life. Like James, Von Hugel saw her depression as a nervous disorder that was present before her conversion and unrelated to her spiritual life, except as she used it as a catalyst for growth. Von Hugel thought that ecstatic states, including visions or other physical symptoms, were not a pathological condition but were related to a sensitiveness that was part of her temperament and a necessary preexisting affinity for mysticism. Whether they became a positive or destructive influence depended on the ability of the person to filter these experiences and make use of them in constructive ways. Part of Catherine's uniqueness was her ability to judge between healthy and morbid states and use them in ways that promoted positive spiritual growth and ethical fruits. Von Hugel thought that without her strong intelligence, and the institutional support she received from the Church, her temperament would have ruined her or at least made her ineffective.

While some contemporary authors have argued for a more pathological view of some or all aspects of mystical experience (e.g., Frenken, 2000; Kennedy & Drebing, 2002), most empirical work has found that higher scores on mystical and religious experience are related to better subjective well-being (Byrd, Lear, & Schwenka, 2000), higher scores on ego development tests (Hood, 2001, p. 9), as well as higher levels of life satisfaction, life purpose, and religious satisfaction, although it accounts for a relatively modest 10–15% of the variance (Poloma & Pendleton, 1989, 1990). Mystical experiences can also serve as a primary catalyst for spiritual growth (Atchley, 1997a).

While religious experience may not be an expression of pathology, pathology might make religious experience problematic. Hagglund (2001) notes that the sense of timelessness in a unity experience could provoke fear of death or disintegration and loss of self, especially in a person with emotional problems. Mystical experiences could also feed narcissism, or seekers could mistake their pathology for higher states of consciousness (Hunt, 2003; Engler, 1984). Pathology might also be a factor in certain specific types of experience, such as diabolical experiences (Spanos & Moretti, 1988). Motivational changes coming from the experience might lead to loss of interest in old activities and giving up things to pursue new priorities so that the post-mystical life may include important losses as well as gains (Baumeister & Exline, 2002).

### 4.3.3  Rudolf Otto

During the early to mid-20th century, German scholars studying religion developed a descriptive tradition that made a number of contributions to the study of mysticism (Wulff, 1997). The most well-known works in this tradition are those of Rudolf Otto (1869–1937; see Fig 4.3) and Friedrich Heiler (1892–1967; see Section 13.4.2).



**Fig 4.3** *Rudolf Otto.* One of the first scholars to study both Christian and non-Christian religious experience, Otto elaborated a number of key concepts that have been influential in psychology, anthropology and religious studies. Photo courtesy of Universitatsbibliothek Marburg

Otto grew up in a strict evangelical Lutheran home. He traveled widely and was deeply influenced by other religions and points of view—he had his first reported spiritual experience when visiting the Sphinx in Egypt (Almond, 1984, pp. 10–25). Although he had periods of depression, he was a prolific scholar and published a number of works, the most important of which were the *Idea of the Holy* and *Mysticism East and West*, a detailed study of the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1327/8) and the nondualist Hindu writer Sankara.

### 4.3.3.1 The Idea of the Holy

Otto (1950) believed that the religious life has both rational and nonrational aspects. On a rational level we can think about a God who has purposes, morality, and rational qualities, and develop reasoned systems of description about the Divine. However, we also experience a God who is transcendent and beyond normal rationality. Both of these are necessary and support the religious life in different ways. Because of transcendence, we think about God in a different way than other things. Otto believed that each of us had the capacity to develop the **holy** as a "category of interpretation and valuation peculiar to the sphere of religion" (1950, p. 5). Because this category was a unique interpenetration of rational and nonrational he considered it to be *sui generis*, a category that exists on its own and is irreducible to any other. The holy thus has an *a priori* and universal nature, functioning like a Kantian category that allows us to make sense out of the world (Belzen, 1999; see Section 2.2.3). Religion happens when the mind recognizes and attributes holiness to something using this category (Almond, 1984, p. 57).

The **numinous** is the nonrational component of the Holy that is experienced when a religious "object" activates it. Otto identified 3 elements of the numinous (1950, pp 10–36; Hunt, 2003, pp. 16–17):

1. A feeling of creatureliness or nothingness in contrast to "that which is supreme above all creatures" (1950, p. 10).
2. A feeling of *mysterium tremendum*, which includes a sense of mystery, "that which is hidden and esoteric, that which is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and familiar" (1950, p. 13), combined with a sense of religious awe or dread, a feeling of an overpowering and consuming presence with great power (cf. Keltner & Haidt, 2003).
3. A feeling of fascination and yearning that can lead to a search for something beyond; thus the experience has a special value that is intrinsic to it. Everyone has the capacity to develop this although not all do.

### 4.3.3.2 Otto Mysticism East and West

Otto believed that there were universal mystical impulses that were reflected in similarities in descriptions of spiritual experience between different religious traditions.

For instance, he saw many similarities between the Hindu writer Sankara and the Christian preacher Meister Eckhart in their view of religious life as a way of salvation that develops an experience of the ultimate Being. However, he rejected the idea of a mysticism "independent of circumstances and conditions" (1932, p. 139) and saw essential diversity in various expressions of mystical experience. For instance, he distinguished between a "cool" quietistic and monistic mysticism of writers like Sankara that emphasized transcendence and union and a dynamic "hot" mysticism of Eckhart and Ramanuja that focused on a personal and loving relationship with God as a necessary part of unitive experience.

### 4.3.3.3  Evaluation

Otto's work has had a lasting impact on the psychology and religion dialogue, particularly through the conceptual structures and vocabulary of the numinous that he created. He has also influenced many important figures such as Paul Tillich. However, a number of criticisms have also been voiced.

1. The data he cites in his work is much more supportive of religious diversity than unity, suggesting he really started with the idea rather than finding it in his research (Almond, 1984, pp. 63, 85; cf. Vergote, 1998, pp. 169–171).
2. He neglects some important religious or cultural traditions and settings like Theravada Buddhism that do not fit easily within his framework (Smart, 1996, p. 29; Vergote, 1997, pp. 142–144).
3. Otto focuses on the content rather than the process of religious understanding, making it difficult to understand the symbolic quality of religious concepts and thinking (Vergote, 1998, p. 67).
4. While he claimed to combine rational and nonrational elements, in fact the nonrational dominates the theory and his combination of the two is problematic (Almond, 1984, pp. 26–27).

Like Kant, Otto was concerned about the protection of religion from scientific skepticism. His construction of an *a priori, sui generis* category of the holy was a way of separating religion from scientific naturalism, demonstrating that there is something special about religion that cannot be explained by reducing it to natural categories (Almond, 1984, pp. 54, 91–95). This is an important position that is currently being challenged by some evolutionary theorists (see Section 6.2.3).

### *4.3.4  W. T. Stace*

One of the most important taxonomies of religious experience in the perennial tradition is that of W. T. Stace (1886–1967). He considered mysticism to be a new kind of consciousness whose central characteristic is "an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things" (1960a, p. 14; cf. 1960b). Like James and the perennialists, Stace saw

mystical experiences in various religious traditions as essentially similar (Hood, 2003). He did not see mysticism as a necessarily religious phenomenon, although a description of it in theistic terms as "union with God" is appropriate given the qualities of the experience (1960a, pp. 23–25). He argued that unity mysticism could be broken into two main types of experience. In the **extrovertive** type, the mystic senses unity in the world and a sacredness that is living and present in all things, as in some kinds of nature mystical experiences. **Introvertive** mysticism involves a unitary state of consciousness that is contentless and independent of time sense, a state of pure consciousness and loss of self as in the Void of Buddhism. Both types are universal and lead to a perception of a One or ultimate Unity, which then may be interpreted in theistic or other terms based on the culture and beliefs of the mystic. Either type of experience could include feelings of bliss or joy, holiness, or sacredness, although extrovertive experiences are generally spontaneous, and introvertive ones are acquired through effort. Stace argued that while mystics tend to assume that both kinds of experiences are the same, in reality the extrovertive is an incomplete version of the introvertive and thus should be placed on a lower level. Studies have suggested that the extrovertive type of mysticism is the most common, although within a given religious tradition, the pattern of types of experiences may be affected by cultural background (Lazar, 2004). Intensive introvertive experiences appear to be rather rare, although they are more important in the history of mysticism (Masters & Houston, 2000, p. 307; Gimello, 1978).

Stace's theory has been the target of critique. Some object to the fact that he (along with Zaehner) gives priority to certain kinds of experiences, while scholars like Smart prefer to avoid rankings (Davis, 1989, pp. 188–189). Others (e.g., Watts & Williams, 1988, p. 19) argue that in practice there is no clear distinction between introvertive and extrovertive experience and that it is better to talk in terms of pure experience and interpretive factors. However, the most sustained critique has been from constructionist thought, to which we now turn.

## 4.4  Constructivism and Responses

Versions of the perennial philosophy lay behind much of the psychological research on religious experience through the end of the 1960s. However, this viewpoint was open to criticism from a couple of theoretical perspectives. First, from a Kantian perspective, all experience of reality is essential subjective, mediated by categories of reason, and thus a universal experience that is independent of a person's beliefs or cognitive structures is impossible. Kant himself thought that mysticism was a kind of fanaticism and false (Perovich, 1990, pp. 241–243). Second, anthropologists and culture specialists note wide differences between religions in different cultures: Christianity is not the same as Buddhism, and a vision of the Virgin Mary is not the same as one of Amida Buddha. It seemed obvious from the data that a person's beliefs and culture formed an essential part of their religious experience, a position known as **constructionism** or constructivism.

### 4.4.1  Sunden and Role Theory

One of the first theories to look at religious experience from a social perspective was developed by the Swedish psychologist Hjalmar Sunden (1908–1987). He was interested in answering the question, how is it psychologically possible for religion to happen? Rejecting Otto's framework and the idea of an *a priori* category of religious experience, Sunden developed **role theory**, a model that attempted to understand the perception of religious experience from the viewpoint of the social conditions of its production (Kallstad, 1987; Holm, 1995, 1997; Belzen, 1995).

Sunden defines *role* as a sum or group of cultural patterns that act to pattern perception (Stifoss-Hanssen, 1995). In his view, roles are learned from the social environment and create expectations about how others will act. The reference frame of a role provides patterns for giving meaning to perception. In the Christian religious situation, these roles are learned in part from reading stories in the Bible. As we hear these narratives, we take the role of Biblical figures that have particular defined relationships with God. We assume that God will act in a similar manner toward us, for example as a helping partner, and we structure our experiences according to these role assumptions. Learning of these latent roles and adopting them helps us feel connected to people of the past and prepares us for the possibility of religious experience (Wikstrom, 1987; Kallstad, 1987). Sunden opposed trends in modern philosophy, theology, and society that worked to demythologize and take away stories, as these provide the primary cultural resource from which we learn our roles (Belzen, 1995).

Sunden believed that religious experiences occur when a stimulus triggers the activation of latent learned roles, for instance, when old mechanical patterns are not sufficient to cope with a situation. When this occurs, a religious frame of reference is adopted, and we take a dual role of both the figure from the Biblical tradition and also that of God. Suddenly, we see things from God's perspective and perceive the world differently, creating a "phase-shift" and a new experience. Sunden's model is thus very focused on perception. While it is relational it also has a passive quality, although he did comment on active role-taking techniques like the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius (Wulff, 1997, p. 144; Kallstad, 1987; see Section 13.3.4). His theory differs from other constructivist theories that discuss role from a narrative point of view, as these tend to focus on action and emplotment rather than role (van der Lans, 1987; Belzen, 1995),

### 4.4.2  The Basic Constructivist Position

One of the first people to articulate an argument against the perennialist position from a Kantian and constructionist perspective was Steven Katz, who argued that there are no pure and unmediated experiences. In his view, "all experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex, epistemological ways" (Katz, 1978, p. 26). Katz attacked the idea of Stace that

it is possible to separate an experience from its interpretation. Rather, he argued that interpretation is an inseparable part of the experience, shaping it and the form of its report in every way, although he did not indicate how that process might work or how religious experience might have a reciprocal effect on interpretive structures (Almond, 1990; Franklin, 1990). According to this position, religious experience in different traditions such as Hinduism and Christianity will be inherently different. He used the example of Buddhism to point out that the tradition has a preexisting understanding that describes what is being sought and the experiential characteristics of what will be found, and that it was bizarre to suppose that these were somehow separate from the actual Buddhist mystical experience. He also attacked the idea of a set of common characteristics for religious experience (e.g., ineffability, noesis), arguing that these are just an outgrowth from the presuppositions of the investigator and were generally so broad as to be meaningless. He rejected the perennial philosophy and argued for pluralism of mystical experience, accusing the perennialists like Stace, Smart, or James of being overly reductionistic and overlooking evidence for differences (cf. Proudfoot, 1985).

While the difference between an experience that is interpreted and an experience that includes interpretation seems trivial, it has significant implications for scholars like Katz. For instance, he argued that since all parts of experience are dependent on context, "no veridical propositions can be generated on the basis of mystical experience" (Katz, 1978, p. 22). This does not mean that these experiences are not true—just that they cannot provide evidence about the ultimate nature of reality, a point of view shared with Buddhism (Lax, 1996). He also argued that since all experience is interpreted and conditioned by the person, a state of pure consciousness is impossible. Exercises like yoga that attempted to decondition consciousness were actually just substituting one form of contextual conditioning for another (Woodhouse, 1990).

### 4.4.3  Objections to Constructivism

Although the constructivist position was the dominant one within religious studies during the latter part of the 20th century, it has been strongly challenged, and a number of scholars are attempting to move beyond it while retaining its insights (Herman, 2000; White, 2000). One response to Katz was led by Robert Forman (1998a). He argued that an important variety of mystical awareness was the Pure Consciousness Event (PCE) "a wakeful though contentless (nonintentional) consciousness" (1990a, p. 8). In his view, a PCE is a form of Stace's unitive introvertive mysticism, and that like other ways of knowing it uncovers something that is already present rather than construct it. Forman pointed out that mystics from many traditions such as Buddhism and even Christianity report PCEs (cf. Bernhardt, 1990; Griffiths, 1990). Forman used the example of Eckhart as a Christian mystic who like Paul in the New Testament had PCEs something like Stace's introvertive experience. These PCEs occurred n defiance of their own religious traditions and thus could not have

been constructions (1990b, pp. 108–111). The existence of PCEs with no content that could be influenced by cultural or religious interpretation refuted constructivist claims that experience depended solely upon culture or belief.

Other authors have brought up additional objections to the position of Katz. Almond (1990), for instance, pointed out that while the arguments of Katz suggest a *correlation* between context and experience, this does not mean that experience is *entirely produced* by context. In fact, we know that religious creativity and novelty exist because mystics have gone beyond their tradition, sometimes even transforming it. Just because context is involved it does not mean that there are no cross-cultural experiences. Rothberg (1990) attacked the supposed neutrality of the constructivist position, arguing that Katz simply introduces his own set of biases. The constructivist position is based on an implicit rejection of the tradition it is trying to study by invalidating any truth claims and denying the possibility of pure consciousness—a prime tenant of those traditions (Rothberg, 1990; Prigge & Kessler, 1990).

Empirical findings have also challenged extreme constructivist positions like that of Katz. For instance, Ralph Hood has confirmed and replicated in some cross-cultural research the extrovertive-introvertive structure of mystical experience described by Stace. He has also found a religious interpretation factor separate from these that seems partly related to the numinous quality of some mystical experiences (Hood, 1975; Hood et al., 1989; Hood, 2001, p. 34; Hood & Williamson, 2000; Hood, 2003; Hood et al., 2001; Lazar & Kravetz, 2005a, b). These findings challenge the idea that mystical experiences are entirely dependent upon culture or tradition as claimed by Katz. Hood also argues that the existence of a separate interpretive factor supports the idea that spiritual and religious mysticism can be thought of independently from religion, although individuals who separate the two are the exception rather than the rule (Hood, 2003).

## 4.4.4  Moderate Positions

The debate between perennialists and constructivists shows up the weaknesses and unnecessary reductionism in both positions. It suggests that extreme positions are more about ideology and interpretation than facts (Watts, 2002a, p. 93; Shah-Kazemi, 2006, pp. 229–252). Perennialists have good evidence for the presence of a type of universal mystical experience, but any such account is obviously incomplete without taking constructionist concerns about interpretive structures into account. Likewise, constructivist thought has problems in that it is unable to account for common experiences or explain exactly how cultural interpretive structures function in relation to experience. Christian and Buddhist mysticism may include common experiences but each gets it's meaning from within its own cultural and religious frame of reference (Vergote, 1997, p. 300; e.g., Eugene, 1997). What is needed is a theory that can bridge the two positions. The phenomenology of William James includes both universal and individual features of religious experience, but his theory has some weaknesses as well (Stoeber, 1994, p. 8; Godby, 2002).

An alternative is the intersubjective theory of Mary Frohlich (1993), which is built upon the work of the Catholic theologian Bernard Lonergan. Frohlich begins with the phenomenon of **intersubjectivity** as an experience that unites subjectivity and social context. It is a kind of implicit consciousness and awareness that functions as the background or ground of our intentional, discriminating consciousness, a horizon within which things are experienced. We cannot examine it directly because to do so brings up our normal discriminating consciousness, drowning it out. It has no content and cannot be described, only talked about using apophatic language. This sense of implicit awareness of self and other persons as subjects is what we share with each other. It is a sense of presence. As the experience becomes more intense it helps us transcend ourselves, understand and reach out to others, thus leading to communion. Frohlich believes that a mystical experience represents the far limit of this consciousness. In mysticism, our typical mental life is stilled, and we experience directly the full measure of the implicit, intersubjective consciousness that is at the base of our own awareness and our bonds with others. It is an awareness of communion, a unity experience and state of intersubjectivity that has the potential to produce transformation, shifting the horizon within which we view the world, and increasing both autonomy and communality. In theistic traditions, this unity is experienced as both personal and active; it is the place where we meet God.

Another theoretical approach that offers a bridge between perennialism and constructivism is found in cognitive psychology. From a cognitive processing perspective, constructivism is simply an observation that the organization and interpretation of experience is dependent upon mental processes, beliefs, and attitudes. For instance, Hill (1997) has noted that attitudes affect both the accessibility of experience, the degree of control an individual may have over the experience, and how it is evaluated. Cognitive systems of belief or **schemata**, and **attributions** or explanations we make about events, may have parallel effects (cf. McIntosh, 1997; Ozorak, 1997; Proudfoot & Shaver, 1997; Spilka, Shaver, & Kirkpatrick, 1997). Sunden's role theory has a similar view—that our perception of things influences the meaning they have for us and their effect on our lives (Wikstrom, 1987). However, little has been done to develop cognitive processing models for understanding mystical or religious experience.

## 4.5   Conversion

The study of conversion experiences has a long history in psychology, probably because of its importance historically in the US among Protestant Christians. **Conversion** is still a phenomenon of great importance today: One third of US adolescents and adults report being born-again Christians or having a conversion experience (Benson, Donahue, & Erickson, 1989; Roof, 1993). It is an emotional experience of awakening, perhaps triggered by an awareness of the reality and nature (love) of God, or our place and purpose in the universe, leading to an act of

will and commitment. As a result, there is an "emergence of the self from 'the prison of I-hood'" and senses of liberation/victory and nearness as well as love toward God. This may occur abruptly or develop over time. As a result of the experience, a rereading of one's past can occur (Vergote, 1969, pp. 218–223).

### 4.5.1  Classical Research: Edwin Starbuck

The first textbook in the psychology of religion was written by Edwin Starbuck (1915), a graduate student of James and Hall who compiled results of hundreds of autobiographical interviews about conversion experiences written in response to a list of questions. Although his findings are over a century old, and were drawn from what today would be an atypical sample of cases from Protestant Christian revivals (Woody, 2003), some ideas emerged from the work that are still widely held by scholars.

1. For most people, conversion is a positive life event, which typically results in substantial moral and psychological changes in the individual, although conversion is just the beginning of a process that carries on into later life. The positive nature of the change in contemporary samples has been documented by Zinnbauer and Pargament (1998), who found that those who had conversion experiences or became more religious without conversion had greater improvement in overall sense of self-confidence, identity, spirituality, and identification with the sacred than those who did not change. Factors related to personality also seem to change, especially behavior, attitudes, goals, identity and one's sense of meaning and purpose rather than basic temperament (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). At least some elements of this process are probably not unique to religious change, as models of change developed in psychotherapy research have also been found relevant to religious conversion (e.g., Bockian, Glenwick, & Bernstein, 2005).

2. Conversion usually happens in adolescence, the "great formative period" in religious life (Starbuck, 1915, p. 195) when we transition from childhood to adulthood both physically and psychologically and engage in a larger picture of life, a fact that is still true today (Spilka et al., 2003, p, 347). Conversions do not come out of nowhere but are the end result of a process. In Starbuck's samples, the peak period for conversion was mid-teens. Women reported more emotional storm and stress prior to conversion, men more intellectual doubt.

3. Parental and family environment had a significant impact on conversion. For instance, about 1/3 of the conversion experiences in Starbuck's sample reported gradual acceptance rather than sudden conversion, and this was associated with warm parental religiosity and training. The importance of family environment in the development of religious belief has been replicated in numerous contemporary studies (see Section 8.1).

4. Conversion occurred for a variety of reasons that varied by temperament, but emotion was of fundamental importance. The most common case was an individual who was struggling with a sense of estrangement from God, helplessness, and

depression. Feelings of sadness, anxiety, or helplessness were reported by well over half of the subjects. These negative emotions greatly decreased after the experience. Conversion related to an active struggle for a better life was less common. In contemporary samples, the frequency of people who convert because they are looking for peace and stability remains much higher than those looking for answers to truth questions (Ullman, 1989), and conversion has been found to be consistently related to objective or subjective measures of stress or crisis.

## 4.5.2   Types and Motifs of Conversion

Late 20th century researches on conversion attempted to expand on the temperamental differences found by Starbuck and identify different types of conversion. Lofland and Skonovd (1981) identified six types of conversion motifs, which they believed varied in a number of ways including involvement of social pressure, temporal duration, type and level of affective arousal, and whether participation or belief came first. The types have been identified in both Christian and Islamic convert groups (Kose & Loewenthal, 2000):

1. *Intellectual*: involving extensive research prior to participation; it is relatively uncommon but increasing in frequency because of increased privatization of religion
2. *Mystical*: less prevalent, a sudden experience with high affective arousal, e.g., Paul on Damascus road; this type was the focus of James and Starbuck
3. *Experimental*: more prevalent recently, active exploration to see whether the religion might be personally beneficial; a lower level of affective arousal than others
4. *Affectional*: motivated by the person's experience of love from a group or individual in the group
5. *Revivalist*: meetings with emotional arousal and crowd conformity effects; less common now in industrialized societies and rare in Islam
6. *Coercive*: involving high social pressure, arousal and negative emotions as in pressure to join a cult; it occurs rarely.

The other prominent theory of conversion types is that of Rambo (1995), who has developed a holistic model of conversion as a change process that includes multiple determinants such as cultural, social, group, personal, psychological, and experiential factors. Like many contemporary theories of conversion, Rambo emphasizes the relational, contextual, and active nature of the person and group in the conversion process. He identified 5 types of conversion: (1) *Tradition transition*, e.g., Christian to Islam; (2) *institution transition* e.g., changing denominations; (3) *gaining an affiliation*; (4) *abandoning previously held beliefs or religious affiliation*; and (5) *intensification or revitalization* of a previous commitment.

Like Lofland and Sconovd, Rambo believes that conversion types and processes change during different periods of history. He also argues that conversion was

neither just sudden or gradual, but occurred in a series of interactive and cumulative stages including (1) surrounding *context*, (2) crisis or *catalyst* such as stress or a religious experience, (3) *quest* or active search, (4) *encounter* with a group or individual, (5) *interaction*, including personal relationships and communal rituals, (6) *commitment*, and finally (7) *consequences.* Rambo's model has been tested, for instance, by Kahn and Greene (2004) who factor analyzed a conversion experience questionnaire and found that the dimensions corresponded to the different phases of conversion in the model.

Paloutzian (2005) has recently attempted to develop a meaning system analysis of conversion that would apply to both spiritual and religious change and describe some of the underlying psychological processes in Rambo's model. A **meaning system** is a structure that makes sense out of the world by integrating ideals, feeling, behavior, and motives or ultimate concerns. In this theory, conversion or spiritual change begins when life discrepancies and doubts—limit experiences—force people to construct a new meaning system, which then leads to changes in things connected to the meaning system. Since the components of the system are interconnected, a change in the system will lead to potential changes in all the parts, thus causing the startling shifts that can be seen as a result of conversion experiences. The model has some potential problems, as it assumes that religious and spiritual transformations work by a common psychological process, despite the fact that different religious meaning systems have unique features. It also tends to focus on crisis factors, making it more difficult to understand gradual conversion that may take place over a longer period of time (cf. Gooren, 2007).

## 4.6  Religious Perspectives

All major religious traditions give religious experience an important role. The traditions that have had the greatest impact in the dialogue with psychology on these issues have been Zen Buddhism and Christianity.

### 4.6.1  Zen Enlightenment and Nontheistic Religious Experience

All schools of Buddhism give religious experience a central focus, beginning with the enlightenment experience of the Buddha. In Zen Buddhism (see Section 3.2.4), this enlightenment experience is called **satori**. It involves leaving behind our normal state of consciousness to experience a condition of nonduality (Dumoulin, 1979, pp. 15–21). Different schools within Zen interpret the experience and the process of coming to it differently. They also differ from other schools of Buddhism like Pure Land, which is much more widely practiced than traditional monastic Zen in contemporary East Asia (Unno, 2002).

### 4.6.1.1 The Soto Perspective

In the Soto school of Zen founded by Dogen (1200–1253), the emphasis in experience is on a slow gradual finding of the Buddha nature that is already within the person and can provide the basis for our awakening and realization of freedom. In this view, an enlightenment experience is not a dramatic event that changes our being; it is simply a point when we become aware of our true nature, what is already there. The practice of techniques such as meditation does not produce Buddha nature; however, it can provide the occasion for our mental awakening and realization of its presence. Since it is already present, the experience of awakening can have an effortless quality. Rather than an experience of dramatic insight or exultation, it is an experience of cosmic consciousness and non-differentiation ("nothingness") as opposed to the more personalistic experience common in Christianity. However, for Dogen, the experience is religious in nature because it is connected with religious practice, and religious structures provide important help in providing necessary stability for practice and the experience. Since the enlightenment experience is impermanent like everything else, practice is necessary after satori to help us continue to realize our spirituality and our Buddha nature. In keeping with a nondualistic way of looking at the world, practice and attainment are not really separate. This differs from forms of Buddhism like Pure Land, which believe that some power beyond us is necessary for our realization (Dumoulin, 1979; Abe, 1992a).

### 4.6.1.2 The Rinzai Perspective

The Rinzai school of Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768) and D. T. Suzuki (1870–1960) uses more active techniques to break down distinctions and move the person toward an enlightenment experience (Dumoulin, 1979; Suzuki, 2002, pp. 4–124; 1955, pp. 81–82). Like the Soto school, Rinzai practitioners believe that religious problems cannot be solved by deep thinking or reasoning but require a personal experience and a practical approach. However, a definite enlightenment experience is more central in Rinzai Zen than in the Soto school. In Rinzai practice, the first step in the process is to awaken one's consciousness of spiritual issues through active techniques like riddles or **koans** that make us aware of the paradoxes and contradictions in life. The koans shake our confidence in ordinary views of the world, producing a state of Great Doubt that becomes acute as time passes (Gunn, 2000, p. 41). Eventually this drives the person into an active and creative state of satori or pure experience: "the mind seeing itself as reflected in itself" an "act of self-identification, a state of suchness" only possible "when the mind is devoid of all its possible contents except itself" (Suzuki, 2002, p. 23). The experience is more than just a feeling as it also has a noetic quality that one has learned something fundamental. The experience influences our attitude on many levels including moral, spiritual, and metaphysical outlook. It moves us beyond dualistic thinking and can trigger reorganization of the personality.

### 4.6.1.3  Points of Contact

The Zen experience has similarities to other types of mystical experience. For instance, Suzuki saw parallels between Zen experience and the writings of the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, who described the mystic experience as a transformative awareness of our identity with God, the Ground of existence (McGinn, 2005, p. 183). According to Eckhart, the experience involves an absorption or sinking into God. It is a stillness and state of self-annihilation, where we find a monistic point from which we see both finite and infinite, creature and God (e.g., Eckhart, 1981, pp. 183–184; 1986, pp. 265–267). Like Dogen, Eckhart speaks of the experience as an awareness of an already existing state of affairs rather than the creation of something new. Suzuki also saw that the intent of Zen practice had parallels with the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius (see Section 13.3.4). Certainly the Zen experience has parallels with the PCE, and its transiency, ineffability, and noetic qualities place it as a type of mystical experience. However, Suzuki rejected a number of key Christian teachings and was unclear about whether Christian mysticism described the same kind of process and experience as Zen. He felt that terms like "union" when used by Christian mystics imply a difference between us and God and thus are ultimately dualistic and contrary to Zen thought. He also acknowledges that Eckhart—and certainly other Christian mystics—have experiences that are much more personalistic, while the Zen experience is more metaphysical. Eckhart and other Christian mystics generally argue that changes in conscious state are peripheral and not central to the spiritual journey. Eckhart also maintains a sense of transcendence and an emphasis on rationality that is not apparent in many Zen writings (McGinn, 2001, pp. 57–64; e.g., Eckhart, 1981, p. 164; 1986, p. 333). Suzuki attributed this to cultural constraints (Suzuki, 1949, pp. 263–286; 1996, p. 199; 1999, pp. 106–295; 2002, pp. 80, 95; cf. Smart, 1996, p. 49). These discussions highlight the fact that Christian mysticism is based on communion, while maintaining our uniqueness and particularity, rather than a monistic absorption into God or creation. It is primarily a relational phenomenon rather than an experience of consciousness (Zizioulas, 2006, pp. 292–306).

Erich Fromm (see Section 1.4.4) was deeply influenced by Suzuki, and the two men worked to find parallels between Zen thought and psychoanalysis (Fader, 1986; Fromm, 1986). Fromm saw monotheistic religion as dead, but Zen Buddhism was of interest because it could provide the rationality and personal independence of the monotheistic outlook, while giving meaningful answers to the questions of life (Suzuki, Fromm, & DeMartino, 1960). In terms of specific parallels between Zen and psychoanalysis, Fromm pointed out that both emphasize knowledge and grasping the truth of things as they are as a way to transformation or transcendence. They both see the need to go beyond intellectual knowledge and conscious thought to a more experiential awareness. In Fromm's psychological language, satori was a state of complete attunement to reality that enlarges our consciousness and leads to a character transformation in which self-centeredness is left behind. Both he and Suzuki saw a parallel between the Zen experience of new perceptions about reality, and the psychoanalytic process of things emerging into awareness from the

unconscious. However, they also acknowledged substantial differences. Suzuki admitted that in Zen the unconscious or "no mind" is not a psychological category but a metaphysical one—it is ultimate reality perceived apart from discrimination (Suzuki, 1996, pp. 185–191). Fromm acknowledged that the two fields used different methods—meditation and koan practice versus psychoanalysis—and also admitted that the goals of Zen were more radical. So, while Fromm and Suzuki saw Zen and psychoanalysis as congenial, their work highlights important differences between the two ways of thought.

The comparisons that Suzuki and Fromm made between Zen, psychoanalysis, and Christianity are potentially problematic due to their limited understanding of both Zen and Christianity. Fromm acknowledged that his understanding of Zen was incomplete (Fader, 1986), and many contemporary scholars have criticized Suzuki's understanding of Zen as deficient. He is often thought to have painted Zen in an oversimplified and anti-intellectual way tailored to suit Western interests at the time he wrote (Keenan, 2007; cf. Suzuki, 1986a,b; 1999, p. 285). It is also true that Suzuki primarily presented Rinzai Zen to his readers so that the important works of others like Dogen and the Soto school were neglected (Abe, 1986). In particular, he argued strongly for the suddenness of enlightenment, neglecting the rich developmental tradition found in Soto thought (1949, pp. 363–364; 1999, p. 104).

### 4.6.2 Jonathan Edwards and the Religious Affections

The famous early American theologian Jonathan Edwards (see Fig 4.4) articulates a Christian point of view on religious experience. For Edwards, the question of religious experience was "What is the nature of true religion? And wherein do lie the distinguishing notes of that virtue and holiness that is acceptable in the sight of
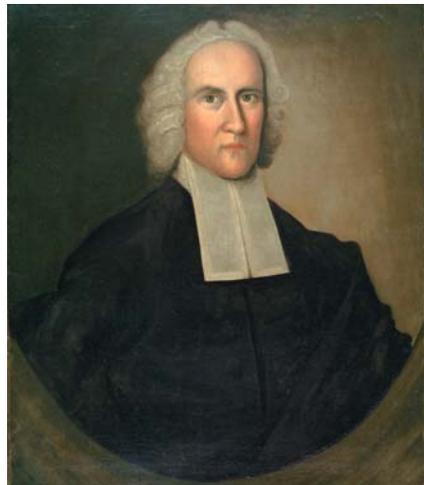


**Fig 4.4** *Jonathan Edwards.* Thought by many to be the most important American theologian, Edwards wrote extensively about religious experience and its role in the Christian life. Printed by permission of the Jonathan Edwards Center, Yale University

God?" (2004, p. 15). The conclusion of his work was that "True Religion, in great part, consists in Holy Affections" (2004, p. 23). While this sounds like Edwards is building an emotional view of religion similar to Von Hugel or Otto, Edwards had a much broader view of religious experience. For Edwards, affections were vigorous exercises of our heart (2004, pp. 24–25) that involve all aspects of the person including body and spirit, feeling, and action. In this anti-dualistic view, action must be motivated by emotion, and true affections will be more than feelings but also have an active component.

### 4.6.2.1  Detecting True and False Affections

While Edwards believed that true religion requires affections, he did not believe that all affections are true religion, and that learning to distinguish "the wheat and the chaff" (2004, p. 50) was vital to the Christian life. Edwards approached the topic by comparing the experience of the spiritual and natural person. The *spiritual person* is the one who believes in Christ and is a recipient of the Spirit of God with whom they have an inner relation that is special and personal. Along with this comes a special knowledge or understanding and the ability to judge, as well as special virtues like meekness. This is in opposition to the carnal or *natural person*, who is prideful, self-righteous, and trusts in his or her own wisdom. The spiritual person is not the creation of a new psychological nature but "a new foundation laid in the nature of the soul" that allows us to use our abilities in different ways and inclines us toward different kinds of actions (2004, p. 134).

Edwards did not think that all religious experiences were necessarily genuine; it was the source of the affections that ultimately determined their value. Natural people can have religious affections just like the spiritual person. However, the experience of the natural person lacks a spiritual sense and is really just a reflection of mental or physical weakness, as in the experience of melancholy. Nor is a sense of assurance a good guide, because the prideful natural person can be blinded by hypocrisy and lack of self judgment, while the true saint may be plagued with doubts which can only be overcome through action and pressing on in one's spiritual life and development. Edwards was thus acutely aware of the human ability to create illusion and self-justification.

What are the positive characteristics of truly religious affections? Edwards thought that first of all they have to do with the motives we bring to the experience. He said: "The primary ground of gracious affections is the transcendently excellent and amiable nature of divine things as they are in themselves and not any conceived relation they bear to self or self interest" (2004, p. 165). One should seek the Divine for its own sake and qualities, and the experience of a transcendent God will help us develop a sense of humility and a softening of the heart that would assist us in our moral progress. People with holy affections feel that grace and power are given to them from the outside. They have an attitude of humility toward their experience.

Second, Edwards found the mark of genuine religious affections in their effects. Occasionally affections might bring about dramatic events, but most of its effects

were practical changes in the life of the person. These might include a decrease in confusion and the development of spiritual understanding or moral changes in the person's conduct and the production of different desires. He thus rejected any kind of a division between Christian religious experience and practice. It was the effect rather than the manner of its coming that determined whether an affection was a genuine experience. These outer effects could and should be judged by the community, but the inner experience could only be judged by the persons themselves, and was often best done in retrospect when they could see the long-term impact of the experience. Others should not attempt this, as we do not have the wisdom to judge others.

### 4.6.2.2 Conversion

Edwards saw conversion as an affective and moral experience, a great and universal change turning the individual from sin to God and holiness. The affective quality of the experience was important but variable. Conversion could be preceded by intensely negative feelings of wretchedness and awareness of personal evil but not always. Post-experience changes and feelings of comfort and joy were common but not necessarily evidence of conversion, and the absence of these stages is not a sign that a genuine conversion has not taken place. What is important is not the order of doing but "the spiritual and divine nature of the work *done*, and effect *wrought*" (2004, p. 91). In particular, one needed to look not at transient effects but the spirit and temper of the person over the long term.

## 4.7 Conclusion

**Key issue**: *Any detailed and accurate understanding of religious experience will find both universal and tradition-specific characteristics.*

The perennialist-constructivist debate continues to divide scholars seeking to expand our understanding of religious experience. Psychologists have often taken a modernist or perennialist view of the topic, seeing these experiences as the working out of universal natural law. In this view, Christian and Buddhist religious experiences are the same in all their important characteristics. Religious studies scholars, on the other hand, have been profoundly influenced by the postmodern critique, and in recent years have followed the constructionist position and attempted to understand religious experience within its surround of culture and belief. The idea of universal natural laws of religious experience or even comparisons between different cultural groups can become nonsensical in this point of view. Fortunately, there is movement toward a middle position that would allow psychologists, religious studies scholars, and theologians to have a more constructive dialogue. As we saw in Chapter 3, all religious traditions are not alike and there are many indications

that the modernist position leaves out important aspects of the story. However, extreme constructivism assumes that different religious traditions and cultures are completely isolated from each other. Many scholars have pointed out that this is simply not the case. While it is true that culture and belief affect our interpretation of events, it is possible to enter into a sensitive investigation of the experiences of others and to have a dialogue with them about common concerns.

Another issue related to the perennialist view of religion is the extent to which religion or spirituality is universal in nature. If religious experience is an essential part of authentic religion, then religion is not universal, as some people will never have a "religious" experience. Different individuals seem to have different levels of ability to perceive and think in religious ways (Watts & Williams, 1988, p. 5), suggesting that for some religion is not a "natural" way of being. However, if spirituality is thought of as a relationship to transcendence or immanence, then presumably these relationships are ontological—built into the world—and while they may be ignored they cannot be escaped.

A final issue has to do with the limits of phenomenology. Psychologists have always been keenly aware of the limits and disadvantages of the phenomenological method. It is difficult for people to accurately report their experience and for others to understand it. This issue is also important from a theological perspective, because if God or the object of religion is truly beyond description, the knowledge we gain from analysis of accounts of our experience of the divine will always be incomplete. Yet to the extent that God can be thought of as real and active in the world, description is possible and tells us valuable things about the nature of the Divine (Mensch, 2005).