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The Youth Minister as Mystic and Martyr

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Recognizing and supporting religious experience in young people

The study of religious experience and young people is a relatively new field of research. It is important to recognize at the outset that it offers a different entry point into the spiritual lives of young people. It contrasts markedly from the approaches proposed by the cognitive studies of faith development based on Piaget's work in the last century. The approach to the study of religious experience is phenomenological; it deals with what happens from the point of view of the individual to whom it is happening. It is therefore an incarnational approach to study and can lead to new insights and ways of working with young people.

The material in this article is not something that the reader can stand apart from with a cool academic objectivity. The material will move and challenge the reader with its immediacy and needs to be approached with what Ninian Smart once described in a lecture as

- sympathetic imagination and a structured empathy.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ For similar comments see *The Phenomenon of Religion* (Ninian Smart, Herder and Herder, 1973).

What is revealed in the material of this study is an expression of spiritual awareness that is not usually allowed into the light. The witnesses often report a reluctance to talk for fear of being thought insane. Yet the experiences they share may have inspired and sustained their life patterns for many years. Simply listening to the number and range of experiences takes the student of religious experience to a level of awareness where faith and experience come together. Giving recognition to these experiences can also take us, as Salesians, back into the world of Don Bosco with new eyes. The area of study encourages a new approach to mysticism and listening and the possibility of evangelization through conversation. It also uncovers the cross at the heart of the process of listening to young people on the journey towards faith.

What follows unfolds in three sections. The first part will look briefly at the development of the study of religious experience. The second part will outline some recent studies of religious experience in childhood and adolescence. Finally there will be a brief reflection on the links between religious experience and some aspects of Salesian spirituality.

1. The Development of Religious Experience

One hundred and three years ago an American, William James, published his Edinburgh lectures on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Religious experience was a term he adopted from the Puritan tradition that had been dominant in North America since the time of the Pilgrim Founders of the United States. The tradition of religious experience traveled with the founders and was expressed as early as the 16th century by William Perkins (1558-1602):

- Herein stands the power and pith of true religion: when a man, by observation and experience in himself, knows the love of God in Christ towards him.⁸⁸

As the relatively new study of psychology developed James was concerned about two things:

- 1. First to defend experience against philosophy as the real backbone of the world's religious life - I mean prayer, guidance and all that sort of thing immediately and privately felt, as against the high and noble and general views of our destiny and the world's meaning.
- 2. Secondly to make the reader or hearer believe, what I myself invincibly do believe: that although all the special manifestations of religion may have been absurd (I mean its creeds and theories) yet the life of it as a whole is mankind's most important function.⁸⁹

When he wanted to define religious experience James used the following as his working definition:

- The feelings, acts and experience of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.

Personal Experience v. Creedal Formulas

The focus is clearly on personal experience and feeling as opposed to creeds and dogma and the philosophical arguments of theists and atheists. James is trying to rescue religious experience from the threat to religion coming from the emerging European School of Psychology which linked religion with neurosis and projection. His work therefore emerges from a tension between personal experience and the more philosophical statements of dogma and creed. It is a tension that most youth ministers will recognize in their work with young people. It is a major theme in these presentations. James recognizes that

⁸⁸ David Hay, *The New SCM Dictionary of Spirituality* (SCM Press 2005), 296.

⁸⁹ *Letter to a Friend* (Letters Atlantic Monthly Press 1920), 127.

personal religious experiences, whilst powerful and energizing for public religion are rarely welcomed as such:

- First hand individual experience of this kind has always appeared as a heretical sort of innovation to those who witness its birth...it has always, at least for a time, driven its subject out into the wilderness where the Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, St. Francis, George Fox and so many others had to go.⁹⁰

Validating Personal Experience

New orthodoxies emerge from these innovative experiences and groups form around them. In time these groups become dry and lifeless until renewed by further personal experience that refines or revalidates the original experience. We will come back to this area later. For now I want to concentrate on the personal experiences that were the focus of James' work and give you a flavor of the experiences he worked on over one hundred years ago.

Let us examine two of the experiences quoted by James. Many of these verbatim reports were collected by a colleague Edwin D. Starbuck. The first comes from a mature married woman who became ill and retired to bed.

- I cannot express it any other way than to say that I did "lie down in the stream of life and let it flow over me." I gave up all fear of impending disease; I was perfectly willing and obedient. There was no intellectual effort, or train of thought. My dominant idea was "behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it even unto me as thou wilt." And a perfect confidence came that all would be well and all **was** well. The creative life was flowing into me every instant, and I felt myself allied with the infinite, in harmony, and full of the peace that passeth understanding. There was no place in my mind for the jarring body. I had no consciousness of time or space or persons; but only of the love and happiness of faith.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 328.

I do not know how long this state lasted, nor when I fell asleep; but when I awoke in the morning, **I was well!**⁹¹

Notice that the woman is passive; there is a changed sense of time and a great difficulty in expressing the experience in a satisfactory way. There is immediacy about the experience and vividness in the perception that marks it out from other experiences. The following report is from Edwin Starbuck's collection which is reported by a middle aged devout Christian in New England.

No words can express the wonderful love that was spread abroad in my heart. I wept aloud with joy and love; and I do not know but I should say I literally bellowed out the unutterable gushings of my heart. These waves came over me, and over me, and over me, one after the other, until, I recollect, I cried out "I shall die if these waves continue to pass over me." I said, "Lord, I cannot bear anymore" and yet I had no fear of death.

How long I continued in this state, with this baptism continuing to roll over me and go through me I do not know. But I know it was late in the evening when a member of my choir—for I was the leader of the choir—came into my office to see me. He found me in this state of loud weeping and said, "Mr. Finney, what ails you? Are you in pain?" I gathered myself up as best I could and replied, "No, but so happy that I cannot live."⁹²

The man involved in this experience is almost overpowered and reports the feeling as being caught up into a flow. The feeling of ecstasy, the timelessness and the tendency to interpret the experience in religious terms is similar to the first experience. One more quotation might be illuminating, this time from M. Ratisbonne, a Jew who later converted to Catholicism as a result of his experience and founded the Ratisbonne institute in Jerusalem.

⁹¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, Longmans, 1945), 119.

⁹² *Ibid.* 250.

- I entered the church myself to look at it. The church of St. Andrea was poor, small and empty. I believe that I found myself there almost alone. No work of art attracted my attention; and I passed my eyes mechanically over its interior without being arrested by any particular thought. I can only remember an entirely black dog which went trotting around and turning in front of me as I mused. In an instant the dog had vanished, I no longer saw anything. Or more truly I saw...Oh my God, one thing alone. Heavens! How can I speak of it? Oh no! No human words can attain to expressing the inexpressible. Any description however sublime it might be could be but a profanation of the unspeakable truth.⁹³

Notice the same inability to express the experience, the fact that it happened alone and in a church setting. What is not immediately obvious is that this experience transformed Ratisbonne's whole life. His life direction, attitude and beliefs altered for good within a few minutes of this experience⁹⁴. How does that radical change relate to the gradual models of faith development that we have become accustomed to as youth ministers?

More Recent Data

I would like to share more examples of the phenomena of religious experience, but from now onwards they will be from the more recent past, experiences that relate more directly to our times. These experiences are taken from the archives of the religious experience research center with which I have been involved for the last five years. The Center represents a re-awakening of William James' concern for experience and feeling in religion in the early 1970s. Between James time and the 1970s the main interest in religious experience was developmental. Thinkers such as Piaget opened up the idea of

⁹³ Ibid. 220.

⁹⁴ It was after this experience that he chose to embrace the Catholic faith and later established an institute for scriptural study in Jerusalem which is now managed by the Salesian congregation.

progressive development and writers such as Ronald Goldman⁹⁵ considered that readiness for religion came later in the developmental story of the human being.

It was therefore a great surprise when the religious experience research center began to collect experiences to find that they were being reported in very young children. The response was so strong that the center published a book entirely devoted to these experience.⁹⁶ Most of the quotations will come from this source. The first comes from a young woman remembering an experience she had at the age of 16.

I was 16 and always enjoyed solitary walks around my village at home. One evening I set out, by myself, as usual, to walk up the lane towards the woods. I was not feeling particularly happy or particularly sad, just ordinary. I was certainly not "looking" for anything, just going for a walk to be peaceful. It must have been August because the corn was ripe and I only had a summer dress and sandals on. I was almost to the woods when I paused, turned to look at the cornfield, took two or three steps so I was able to touch the ears of corn and watched them swaying in breeze. I looked to the end of the field—it had a hedge then—and beyond that to some tall trees towards the village. The sun was over to my left; it was not in my eyes.

Then...there must be a blank. I will never know for how long, because I was only in my normal conscious mind, with normal faculties when I came out of it. Everywhere, surrounding me was this white, bright, sparkling light, like sun on frosty snow, like a million diamonds, and there was no cornfield, no trees, no sky, this light was everywhere; my ordinary eyes were open, but I was not seeing with them. It can only have lasted a moment I think or I would have fallen over.

The feeling was indescribable; it was blissful, uplifting. I felt open-mouthed wonder. I stood there for a long time, trying in vain for it to come back but I only saw it once. I know in my heart that it is still there—and here—and everywhere around us. I know heaven is within us and

⁹⁵ Ronald Goldman, *Readiness for Religion* (London, Routledge Keegan and Paul, 1970).

⁹⁶ Edward Robinson, *The Original Vision* (Oxford, Religious Experience Research Centre, 1977).

around us. I have had this wonderful experience which brought happiness beyond compare. (4405)⁹⁷

Notice the suddenness of the onset of the experience, the change again in a sense of time and a kind of knowing that emerges from the experience at the end. The fact that it slips away from the person with regret is also worth noting and yet the intensity of the experience remains. The recipient of this experience also notes that she told no one about it. Here is one other account.

The first approach to a spiritual experience I can remember must have taken place when I was five or six years old at the house where I was born and brought up. It was a calm limpid summer morning and the early mist lay in wispy wreaths among the valleys. The dew on the grass seemed to sparkle like iridescent jewels in the sunlight, and the shadows of the houses and trees seemed friendly and protective. In the heart of the child that I was, there suddenly seemed to well up a deep and overwhelming sense of gratitude, a sense of unending peace and security which seemed to be part of the beauty of the morning, the love and the protective and living presence which included all that I had ever loved and yet was something much more.⁹⁸

Here we see a sense of unity, a melting of realities into one living presence and a sense of being connected and absorbed into something greater and more real than that usually available to the senses. The archive of these experiences has been expanding over the last thirty years and an increasing amount of reflection has taken place on their validity and content. More personal reading around these accounts, in William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* will help to fill out the breadth and range of these experiences.

⁹⁷ Some of these extracts have also been published in *Seeing The Invisible*, (London, Maxwell and Tschudin, Arkana, 1990). The numbers cited refer to the reference in the archive of religious experience now housed at the University of Lampeter in Wales.

⁹⁸ Edward Robinson, *The Original Vision* (Oxford, Religious Experience Research Centre, 1977), 33.

The Nature of Religious Experience

It is not easy to describe these experiences because, like many deep and personal moments, they defy language. When we break down the experience into different parts it is something like a dissection of a dead being. It has no life in any single part and is more than the sum of all its parts. What follows is a rather crude, mechanistic description therefore and not an explanation of the phenomena of religious and mystical experience. To understand the whole it is however helpful to recognize the different parts and possibilities within the experience.

Lev Gillette, when asked what religious phenomenon was replied:

...firstly, the awareness of a reality which transcends you: something bigger than yourself, something beyond your own limits. And secondly, although it is transcendent, it must in some way be immanent to yourself. And thirdly, between these two expressions of a supreme reality there is the possibility of a dynamic exchange. You receive something from it and give something to it.⁹⁹

So it is a kind of relationship with something beyond oneself. But there is more to it than just that. It also has effects. I quote Martin Israel on the nature of religious experience:

Religious experience is an experience that transcends the individual and makes them a fuller individual, makes the personality more integrated in terms of understanding ones place in the world...that broadens ones life, and gives a widened awareness and brings a person to thoughts of God.¹⁰⁰

The words, from the archive, of a woman reflecting on her own experience also help to fill out the general view of what these experiences are like.

⁹⁹ Edward Robinson, *This Time Bound Ladder* (Oxford, Religious Experience Research Centre, 1977).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 48.

I can only describe these experiences as the opening of a window, or the lifting of the corner of a curtain. They are always brief, no more than a flash, and the effect, or the glimpse they give of something more real than obvious reality, lasts forever. (4693)

The common words to describe these experiences and used almost interchangeably, although they are not identical, are:

Religious	William James – Experience of what is considered divine
Numinous	Rudolph Otto – a sense of presence
Mystical	Traditional term for a unitive relationship with the transcendent
Peak	Abraham Maslow – Ecstatic transforming experiences
Transcendent	Theological word for the ultimate
Prophetic	William Johnston – Usually including visions or voices

Common Characteristics of Religious Experience

William James picks out four core elements of religious experience:

1. Ineffable
2. Noetic
3. Transient
4. Passive

Ineffable

Language is a huge problem with these experiences. We do not have the vocabulary to capture the impact of these transcendent

moments. Time and time again in the archive you hear people struggling and apologizing and becoming frustrated with the limitations of words to capture experience. Ineffability is true of much human experience; I can try to describe to another person what my relationship with my Father was like, or my first kiss and I will struggle. However, the person who hears my description probably also had an experience of a Father or a first kiss and will be able to draw some conclusions. In the religious experience another dimension seems to come into play. Time, space, length and depth can all seem very different and there is no easy common language that can bridge the gap between speaker and listener. Unless the listener has had a similar kind of experience such reports are met with blank looks and skepticism. The individual often regards these experiences as highly personal, and there is a consequent reluctance to share them with others.

Noetic

Noetic is a word that simply means knowing. In Christian theology it is one of two words that are often used to describe God's word. (The other one is dynamic.) The implication for William James is that these experiences communicate real knowledge, even though that knowledge may be ineffable and difficult to communicate.

Such knowledge is about certainty and conviction that has not come through analysis and proof but through the impact of an experience. A sense of being overwhelmed by a reality bigger and more complete than any individual could ever be. There is certainty here because the experience is self-authenticating. "I know because I have experienced it. I have been to the mountain, I have had a peak experience!"

Transient

These experiences are not controllable. The sense of time in the experience is also different to the sense of time on either side of

the experience. One person who had what seemed like an extended experience “came to,” as she says and noticed that she had been watching a man weigh a batch of Brussels sprouts before the experience and he was still doing so afterwards. There is often reluctance in the person to withdraw from the experience and a deep yearning to glimpse what had been there fleetingly.

Passive

The individual who has a religious or transcendent experience does not control it or initiate it in any way. It often comes as a surprise, in the middle of another activity. The person is often overwhelmed and aware afterwards that something radical has changed. There does not seem to be any way that the recipient can ignore, tone down or turn off the experience as it is happening to them. Usually he or she does not wish to terminate the experience but is caught up into the fascination of the experience. (Rudolph Otto describes this element as *mysterium fascinans*.)¹⁰¹

The Feeling Elements of Religious Experience

As well as the four core elements it is illuminating to gather key feelings associated with these experiences.

Starbuck’s table of feelings,¹⁰² after his research in New England in the 1900s, suggests...

¹⁰¹ Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of The Holy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970), 31.

¹⁰² Alister Hardy, *The Divine Flame* (Oxford, Religious Experience Research Unit, 1966), 92.

Feeling	Female %	Male %
Dependence	27	36
Reverence	25	37
Oneness with God, Christ	27	29
Faith	17	23
Blessedness	13	13
Peace	7	4
Unclassified	14	20
None	5	1

Early UK studies use more contemporary language for the feeling patterns associated with these experiences.

1. Security assurance peace
2. Joy happiness contentment
3. Strength power help energy
4. Guidance direction inspiration
5. Awe wonder reverence
6. Certainty clarity enlightenment
7. Exaltation ecstasy excitement
8. Harmony unity with surroundings
9. Love affection and compassion
10. Yearning desire nostalgia

There were some incidences of darker or more negative experiences that included fear and even horror but these represented less than 2% of the experiences reported.

The Interpretation Problem

The interpretation of these experiences needs careful scrutiny. Claims about them need to take account of the way that language and experience interact in creating awareness in an individual. Look at this example from scripture,¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Quoted by Peter Donovan, *Interpreting Religious Experience* (Oxford, Religious Experience Research Centre, 1979).

Jesus prayed: "Father, glorify your name."

Then a voice came from heaven "I have glorified your name and will continue to make it known."

The crowd standing by heard it and said that it had thundered. Others said an angel had spoken to him. (John 12:28)

In the account of this experience of Jesus two groups of people emerge, apparently instantly, who offer a religious and a natural interpretation of an event they have witnessed. The experience is received into each individual with their own specific mind set, previous experiences and a vocabulary that may or may not predispose them to a religious interpretation of their experience. A familiarity with religion will tend to favor the use of religious language. What is a wonderful aesthetic experience for one person becomes a sense of God's presence for another. What one person sees as a strange coincidence becomes a sign of God's providence. The interpretive framework an individual brings to experience is a vital part of the making of that experience.

A Language Problem

One of the key elements of interpretation available to individuals is the language at their disposal. If language is poor then perception is limited. We need language, to become aware, through inner talk, of what significance an experience carries. A baby, with little or no language can have little awareness of things like shame or responsibility. It is only as these concepts develop that guilt and duty can become part of their experience. In a similar way perhaps, our development of religious language opens up the ability to express experience in religious terms.

There is an interplay between language and experience that makes it impossible to reach an un-interpreted experience. All experience in religious terms is theory laden as can be seen from the quotations from William James. The truth of an

experience will often lie as much in the worldview of the recipient as it does in the impact of the original experience.

In the secular society of today, especially in Europe, the context into which these experiences are received is increasingly skeptical or even hostile to religious interpretation. At best they are seen as subjective, at worst as deluded. The insistence by secular thinkers on evidence, proof, and repeatability to verify truths leaves religious experience at a disadvantage. In the development of modern and post modern society religious experience seems to be a Cinderella. There is a narrowness of view in the purely secular mind that focuses so tightly on reality as measurable that it fails to see the beauty and significance of the religious. Hay and Nye in their study on children's spirituality express it as,

A culturally constructed forgetfulness which allows us to ignore the obvious.¹⁰⁴

The obvious being the huge impact that these experiences have in the life of the individual immediately and over a lifetime. Their significance is stated from an unlikely source in Emile Durkheim, whom some call the Father of Sociology.

Our entire study rests on this postulate that the unanimous sentiment of the believer of all times cannot be purely illusory. We admit that these religious beliefs rest upon a specific experience whose demonstrative value is, in one sense, not one bit inferior to that of scientific experiments, though different from them.¹⁰⁵

Durkheim was not religious and yet recognized a reality in these experiences that our secular culture would only grudgingly grant today. The world in which young people mature today is therefore likely to reduce religious experience to a subjective and private world with less value than the results-driven culture that dominates Europe and North America in particular.

¹⁰⁴ Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of The Child* (London, Fount, 1998), iv.

¹⁰⁵ Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1915.

2. Religious Experience and Youth

This area of experience in young people has not been well studied. The studies around youth and religion have focused more on psychological development models and the changing patterns of religious practice among young people. Few studies have been pursued into the impact of religious experience in young lives and what sense they make of it.

If religion is presented through the seven dimensions proposed by Ninian Smart¹⁰⁶ the absence of knowledge in this area will become clearer.

Belief	Doctrinal	Philosophy/ cognitive
Ritual	Liturgical	Practical
Experience	Spiritual	Feeling/ affective/ emotional
Myth	Narrative	Story Telling
Ethics	Moral	Legal
Community	Social	Institutional
Art	Material	Aesthetic

These dimensions are focal points. They are not totally separate but overlap and are present to some extent in every religious event. In Britain extensive studies have taken place on how young people manage the doctrinal and ethical aspects of religion. Some studies have investigated the liturgical and social aspects of religion in youth but very few studies have explored the more personal mythology, and aesthetic, spiritual experience of youth in relation to religion. There is a gap in our awareness at the level of study but we cannot afford to have a gap in our awareness in face-to-face ministry with young people. In a dominantly secular culture where there is a strong threat to the religious worldview there is a tendency to focus on what is

¹⁰⁶ Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred* (London, Fontana, 1997).

certain, fixed and logical in religious living. The debates therefore about doctrine, ethics, community and liturgy seem safe ground. The engine of religion however is the experiential dimension. Without emotion religion becomes empty and cold and fails to draw individuals into relationship with either God or their neighbor. Unless the personal story of an individual is drawn into a wider pattern of meaning the inner landscape which is inhabited becomes isolated and meaningless. Experience and story are the Cinderellas of religion for young people in a secular society. The value of inner experience and the significance of the personal story can only be rescued from the ashes of secularism by the renewal of religion.

The Ministry Mystic

In working with young people the youth minister needs to become a mystic. One who is familiar with the movement of God in his or her life. One who can resonate with the confusion that the experience of God can bring in a religious experience. In working with the young, ministers to youth need to be aware of their own story unfolding as a journey into God and as a mystery to be held and cherished before it is dissected and reduced to an unwhole analysis. The antennae of a youth minister need to be sensitized to the presence of God as it echoes in the words of adolescents. In the midst of ordinary conversations a youth minister needs to be aware that it is the Lord breaking open the bread of life in another person's words and experience. The good news for young people today needs to meet them at the point of their greatest hunger which is in the area of personal meaning and belonging.

In becoming a mystic the youth minister needs to engage again with his or her spiritual experience and become familiar with his or her inner landscape. The youth minister needs to find time to be still and touch the deeper rhythms of the spirit and recognize the energy and peace that flows from this intimate holy ground within. In moving out to young people the youth minister becomes a contemplative in action, absorbed in

busyness and yet with one hand holding tight to the presence of God the Father. Being in touch with that presence is not just a personal support for the youth minister but a vital aspect of a mystical dimension of the presence of God unfolding minute by minute in the lives of all people. Awareness is the antidote to the culturally constructed forgetfulness of the spiritual reality in which we all live and move and have our being.

The youth minister however has a special responsibility to raise awareness appropriately of this dimension of human experience in a culture that quickly moulds youth into its dominant mindset. The faith journey used to begin in family, moved to church and school and then out to witness to faith in a world where it would be challenged. Today the challenge comes early and it comes into our own homes through a mass media world. Education is increasingly secular in Europe and examines religion as a cultural and comparative study rather than a personal lived experience of a school community. The preparation, nurture and formative experiences of the past have been eroded and the personal experience dimension is weakened and mistrusted. The youth minister needs to nurture the personal experience of God and build the young persons confidence in the inner journey if the young are to become the church of the next generation.

Religious Experience of Children and Young People

One of the surprises emerging from the study of religious experience in Britain was the number of people who reported significant experiences in childhood. It was a surprise because according to some experts in child development the religious sense only emerged in later childhood.¹⁰⁷ This observation emerged from reflection on Piaget's stages of development especially in thinking and seemed to leave children locked into

¹⁰⁷ Ronald Goldman, *Readiness for Religion* (London, Routledge Keegan Paul, 1965). Often misquoted, but he focused his study around the limitations of children in formal religious education.

an immaturity that left them largely unaware of religious experience.

The emergence of children as a major theme arose because children as young as five could experience and later recall apparently spiritual states in purposive terms. This challenged the developmental models of childhood in use at that time. The publication of these accounts in *The Original Vision*, 1977, led to a re-thinking of the spiritual experience of the child and a broadening of research beyond the limits of developmental psychology. *The Spirit of the Child* is, in part, a response to this broadening of the debate about awareness and the limitations of cognitive psychology in education.

Relational Consciousness

Hay and Nye who conducted this study into the religious experience of children were both involved in psychology and religious studies.¹⁰⁸ Yet Nye points out that we have very little knowledge about the way that children deal with the area of religious experience.¹⁰⁹ Here is one quotation that emerged verbatim and unprompted from a six-year-old boy.

I see God with my mind and in my eyes, sometimes I feel I am in a place with God, in heaven and I'm talking to him...there's room for us all in God, he's everything that's around us, he's in that microphone, he's that book, he's even...he sticks! Like paint, he's everything, he's all around us in side our heart.

Manifested is an immaturity at the level of the concept of God. It shows the absorption of adult language about a male God and heaven. But there is more. Nye detected a step change in awareness when the boy spoke in this way. There was increased energy in the sense of awe and an awareness that this area was somehow different in quality than other aspects of life. In

¹⁰⁸ David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of The Child* (London, Fount), 1998.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 58.

recognizing this step change in awareness Hay and Nye felt that they had gained one foothold in the understanding of the way religious experience might emerge in the life of children. This is an awareness that comes before language has developed to express or conceal an experience of God immediately felt.

This study therefore breaks new ground. It is listening for an experience of God in the lives of children. It is a study that also reflects on the language used and the feel of the listener. The surveys, conducted over a period of time, were recorded, analyzed and reflected upon. The reactions of the interviewers, their notes and feelings were also recorded alongside those of the child to create a more holistic view of the conversation. It is this sensitivity to detail that allowed for the emergence of a category of awareness in children that they termed Relational Consciousness. The two aspects of this category Nye describes thus:

1. An unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness relative to other passages for that child and,
2. This was often in the context of how the child related to things, especially people, including themselves and God.¹¹⁰

There is a strong correlation between these two aspects (82%) occurring together in the conversation. Nye also points out that this category also emerged when explicit religious language was absent but implicitly spiritual material was being dealt with. The two parts of the core category are not to be understood in a narrow sense.¹¹¹ Consciousness, for example, implies a reflective consciousness or perhaps meta-cognition that allows the child to be aware of himself or herself and his or her mental activity even while immersed in it. This consciousness of being aware seems to open up a wider definition of relational, involving a consciousness of self in relation to others, self, God and the

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 237.

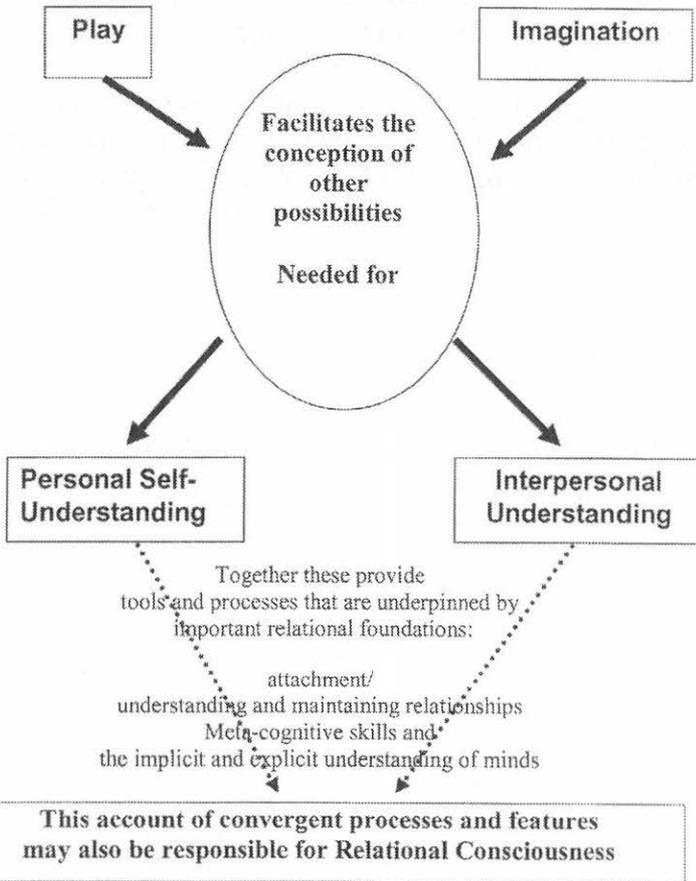
¹¹¹ Ibid. 238.

world. When the children spoke of relationship with this deeper level of awareness the quality of the conversation changed, according to Nye. It indicated an awareness of a special sense within the child that went beyond the normal every day perspective and moved toward a mystical, moral, religious and aesthetic experience.

In Figure One, Nye attempts to explore the roots of relational consciousness as it emerges in the work of Harris (Harris 1989) and suggests a key role for imagination and play as facilitators of personal and inter-personal understanding.

Figure One

The converging components of the development of consciousness (Nye 1998)



The emergence of this pattern in the experience of children is intriguing because it challenges the more cognitive models of development in which language, socialization and religious development play an important role. The core category of relational consciousness may anticipate language and the concrete and formal operations that are sometimes seen as necessary in religious understanding. There are links in Nye's

research to emerging theories of mind which may confirm many parents' suspicion that their children already know at six years of age far more than they can ever say. Freddie, aged six, speaks:

The earth is so good, but sometimes somebody feels really sad, and like on Snow White, you know, Grumpy like, he feels sad and grumpfull...Some times I get really grumpy at school and then I thought about how life could be and how happy I could be if I started to try and not be grumpy no more.¹¹²

The language is again confused and yet eloquent. There is an awareness that the goodness of life and his inner mood may feel at odds. The awareness of self seems to shift from 3rd to 1st person. There is the effect of imagination, thinking about how life could be if he could only change his mood. The interplay of a sense of self, imagination, relationship and mood are at work here even in muddled language. Even in these two sentences some learning and growth is happening. In the friendly exchange between the researcher and Freddie an awareness is emerging that has implications for where Freddie sees himself in relation to a world and to himself as distinct from his own moods.

If Nye is correct about relational consciousness, it has far-reaching implications for the development of spiritual education. If children have a relational consciousness that is a basic patterning of experience which precedes language and is highly personal, then the focus of religious education may need to change. There may be a need to move toward a more child-centered approach to spirituality, to listen more and to encourage self-dialogue and the development of imagination, play and personal narratives in education.

¹¹² Ibid. 117.

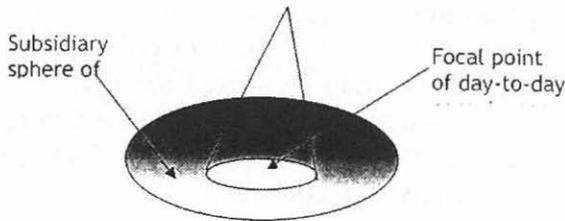
Learning Models Underlying this Research

In trying to understand what is happening in the development of a child's religious experience Hay and Nye draw inspiration from two thinkers; Michael Polanyi and L. S. Vygotsky.

Polanyi and Making Connections

Polanyi appeals to common experience of knowing that you can know someone but be unable to remember the name or suddenly finding that you can ride a bike after hours of practice. In meeting reality, Polanyi argues that people have a focal point for their attention and a sense of a subsidiary environment around that focal point. The experience of focusing operates on multiple levels, it is not just flat, two-dimensional. Instead it opens up a wide range of unpredictable possibilities by moving the focus point into the more general subsidiary area. Hay and Nye argue that it is this more vague and subsidiary intuitive knowing that is put at risk by some narrowly cognitive approaches to education based on secular and perhaps reductionist thinking of our present culture. (Hay and Nye 1998, 24).

Figure Two



What can be lost is the unique personal dimension of knowledge, the delight in making connections by moving the focal point and attending to different and apparently unrelated elements of one's inner world. (see figure two above). The

ability to reflect and to pattern ones own experience on a wider canvas than that provided by what is rational and testable seems vital to the full development of the person. The provision of education that only deals with the focal point and not with the area of imagination and feeling seems to be destructive of a healthy religious and spiritual life. Polanyi reminds us as youth ministers to listen beyond words to the connections young people make, the leaps in conversation topics, the depth, the warmth and the intensity with which ordinary conversation is woven. In this theory it would appear that in general conversation we are already doing spiritual work by the way we reverence and provide space for imagination, silence, wonder and awareness.

Vygotsky and Social Interaction

Vygotsky was a Russian psychologist who worked in the 1920s and 1930s. His work was never translated until the late 1950s and even in Russia his permission to publish and to teach was always under threat from the then Stalinist government. Unlike Piaget and Pavlov, Vygotsky took a wider view of learning and avoided the mechanistic and behavioral views of his time.

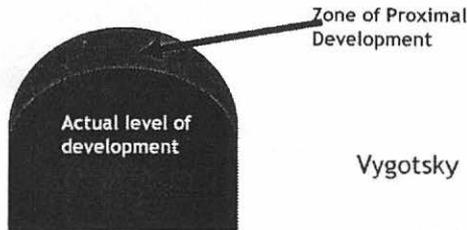
A human being is not a sack of skin filled with reflexes and the brain is not a hotel for a set of conditioned reflexes accidentally stopping by.¹¹³

Instead Vygotsky argued that consciousness is central to the learning process and that human beings are subject to an interplay between culture and biology. He saw learning as an amalgam of perception, speech and action happening in the context of a particular culture. Learning therefore happens in a social context and that social setting provides structures, experiences and language that create a kind of scaffolding for learning. The development of the child's mind and

¹¹³Vygotsky, quoted by Jorvasky, *Russian Psychology* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1989).

consciousness is in some ways a reflection of the culture in which they learn.

One of the key ideas proposed by Vygotsky is the zone of proximal development. In this model the child develops with the help of others. Learning is not simply an individual or private and cognitive process but instead people learn from one another.



The task of growth in a child is achieved by identifying small activities and challenges that take the person just beyond their present level of awareness. Allowing the child to work with others, exchange ideas, use imagination to explore, test and refine solutions builds confidence and allows a more relational mind to emerge. Language is drawn in as it is needed to describe and explain the child's own thinking and awareness. Vygotsky was convinced that the human mind extended beyond the skin to a social context and that included things like language, symbols, narratives, works of art, maps and models. For Vygotsky a stable community with clear symbols, language and structured learning experiences was the best way to develop children.

Reflecting on these thinkers and their own research material, collected from 6-10 year old children in Britain, Hay and Nye developed a view of the inner world of children, a geography of their inner landscape.

The Spiritual Landscape and Adolescents

For Hay and Nye the spiritual landscape appears to be made up of at least three elements

- Awareness sensing,
- Mystery sensing,
- Value sensing.

Awareness sensing

Hay and Nye describe this as an awareness of being aware (1998 60)—a heightened rather than a vague state of experiencing oneself as experiencing something. For many adolescents this awareness may well take place in social settings. Shyness and embarrassment can be the expression of a deeper level of self-awareness. Being aware that you are dressed differently or have made an inappropriate remark seems to trigger not only an awareness of embarrassment but also at times an awareness of being aware of being embarrassed. This added awareness represents a shift of focus from the social interaction to the inner here-and-now awareness of an interior state. The heightened awareness may help the adolescent connect into a spiritual landscape and raise some of the ultimate questions about meaning and identity proposed by the psychological models just reviewed.

The ability to be transfixed by a moment, caught up in an awareness of what Margaret Donaldson (1992) terms “point mode” rather than “line mode,” probably happens differently or less often in adolescence compared with younger children. This may happen partly because there is less and less totally new experience to capture the adolescent awareness and partly because the tendency to classify and analyze engages more often and more quickly as educational experience grows. However, parents and teachers will witness to the fact that for many teenagers time can seem to stop and the outer world can fade from awareness for long periods. When a teenager emerges from a bedroom after two hours to be asked what he or she is doing, the answer may well be “nothing.” He or she may feel that only a short time had passed and be surprised. The ability to slip into reveries and daydreams may well be linked to the task of resolving the kind of dilemmas outlined by Erikson’s model of

attempt to stay in touch with the awe and wonder of an earlier age?¹¹⁵

Value Sensing

The final aspect of inner geography identified by Hay and Nye involved sensing value. The measure of value for a person is often the degree of feeling with which he or she invests a value. Hay and Nye identify three key values that mark out the spiritual terrain

- ultimate goodness,
- meaning,
- delight and despair.

How might these emerge in adolescence? It is here that the parental figures of power may cast a long shadow over the spiritual landscape of the adolescent. The ability to trust the road of life as meaningful may emerge from the kind of consistency and safety established with parents in early childhood. In adolescence, according to Erickson, there is a revisiting of the dilemma to trust or not to trust in a way that takes in a wider view of life. The struggle for autonomy over against parents is well documented by most commentators on adolescence and part of that struggle is to build a meaning map that is distinctive. The mature young adult will be one who has at some level rejected and then adapted what has been received in childhood rather than one that has simply accepted what has been handed down and perhaps remained a child in doing so.

Therefore the family battles about clothes, staying out late, doing family chores and so on may be storms in the spiritual landscape of the adolescent. One teenager who in his Saturday job, when asked to wear an identifying badge, refused point blank to compromise his identity. He did not want to be seen as an employee or have his personal identity displayed to

¹¹⁵ The reader may want to refer to Pruyser on the subject of transitional objects, like teddy bears in children's development.

strangers and with strong feelings, and language to match, left the job and the money in an attempt to save his integrity. Such dilemmas suggest the existence of an adolescent spiritual dimension as well as the more familiar psychological interpretations of adaptation to adult roles. The sense of selfhood and the boundaries of intimacy explored in adolescence may not be simply social constructs but emotive links to a direct sense of being alive, even if that means being in despair or delight for unusually long periods.

The dimension of meaning can emerge in a critical tone about the world as the adolescent sees it. Recognizing the limitations of adults and their own growing autonomy, adolescents can be drawn towards idealistic action and heroic sacrifice. My own experience working with adolescent volunteers in a residential setting suggests that there can be a strong spiritual dimension in commitment to issues such as animal rights and environmental protection. One such volunteer, working in a Somalia feeding program refused to give food to the armed rebels who came into his station and paid with his life. Such sacrifice and heroism stands as a contrast to the media images of selfish and disruptive adolescence with which the many western cultures are fed on a daily basis. The sense of adolescent commitment and vocation focuses on the need to make a difference and measure themselves against a reality of which they have been critical. The depth of feeling involved in such idealism suggests that it may have deeper and perhaps spiritual roots in self-awareness. The readiness to sacrifice suggests an awareness of transcendent values and a faith in life itself. These are not rational acts; bold and apparently hopeless gestures may indicate an inner struggle to grasp ultimate values that appear to have been abandoned by older adults. The adolescent, of course, delights in rubbing salt into the wounds of adult compromises by such bold gestures of idealism.

This experience of working with adolescents therefore suggests that in seeking out relational consciousness the youth minister will encounter a familiar landscape. The most important

task may well be to attend especially to the mood and depth of feeling moving through the content of conversation.

Personal Research into Adolescence and Relational Consciousness and Its Implications

Very little study has taken place in this area. I examined relational consciousness in adolescence using the same methodology adopted by Hay and Nye. The following spectrum of concerns emerged for adolescents.

Category		Experiences of young people	
Sense of otherness	From death reflecting on death	Weirdness	Out of time/ timeless A form of knowing
	From own inner awareness	Peacefulness Solitariness	Fascination Value
	From specific unaccountable experiences	Wonder Reluctant to share	Passive
Sense of self	As unique	Intensity Struggle	Explorative Defensive
	As changing and learning	Reflection Experimental	Vulnerability Wondering
	As vulnerable	Tacit	
Sense of reality	As adventure and challenge to be met	Testing Energizing/hopeful Risky/Threatening	Discovery Demanding Adaptation Challenging integrity
	As a search for pattern	Shared Emotionally engaging Confusing	Inevitable/fated Trustworthy Untrustworthy
	As a search for belonging/intimacy	Hit and miss/lucky and unlucky	

A Sense of Otherness

The young people in the study showed a strong motivation to explore mystery wherever they found it. Coincidences, unexplained phenomena and major life questions appeared regularly in each interview. They were wrapped up in issues

such as dealing with death, thinking about their own death, watching horror movies and dealing with their feelings about major disasters. One interviewee reported a classic near death experience where she met a person who reassured her and sent her back. She spoke about this haltingly and only after debating with herself whether to trust the researcher with the weird experience she had to share. The sense of otherness also came from observing themselves, how their feelings ebbed and flowed in intensity and direction. One was amazed at how confident he felt in a public setting and wondered where that came from, it was an aspect of himself that he was only just aware of and learning to trust but it was quite mysterious, as if he were watching someone else acting confidently. The otherness and mystery also came from unaccountable events. One interviewee wondered how his grandmother knew that his uncle had died before she heard the news by telephone. He knew that this could not happen by all the rules of life he had learnt, and yet it had. He could not work out in his mind what the significance of this might be.

In all of these exchanges around the theme of otherness the key word seemed to be “weird” accompanied by a shaking of the head. The confusion that is expressed echoes the sense of mystery described by Hay and Nye. It also expresses the frustration young people feel in giving a proper place to this otherness in their life. A secular worldview tends to reduce these areas of experience, laden with emotion and energy, to a peripheral sideshow in a person’s life. In Britain the strength of secular feeling drives these experiences deep underground to feed a privatized solitary spirituality that may never be expressed. Yet a number of interviewees reported numinous experiences and recognized their value despite the hesitation with which they reported them. One student said that she was caught up into a contemplative moment triggered by a sunset. All her worries left her and she described herself as being ‘with the sun.’ Pausing after a deep and eloquent description she added ‘then I woke up.’ It was as if she had dismissed the

significance of this moment in her own mind as just a kind of daydreaming.

The young people interviewed all had a lively sense of otherness in their experience and yet were slow to trust it or give it space in their lives. Sharing it with others seemed even more risky. The interviewees thought that if their friends knew about their inner world they would think they were weird or crazy, so they said little. Yet here in the sense of otherness is one of the key aspects of God's presence in our lives. Not far away but deep within us, intimate and yet challenging. The awareness of the otherness of God, the *mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans*¹¹⁶ is close to the roots of spirituality. How do youth ministers give this awareness a safe space to emerge and be affirmed?

The Sense of Self

The sense of self emerged as a significant focus of awareness. There was a distinction between "me" and "my life" in four of the interviews. The sense that they were more than the things they did was very clear. They were aware of their inner world but there was a struggle to connect the inner world and the outer world and a worry or reluctance about trying to put the inner world into words. The tendency to become silent or hesitate often preceded a disclosure of some significant story or awareness that gave them a sense of uniqueness. The sense of wonder about themselves often emerged from the memory of an earlier time. The undeniable change in their mind and body over time seemed to fascinate them but the sense of continuity of their present sense of self with that same self remembered as a child filled them with wonder. The unique and changing self was a strong focus in all the conversations and emerged in talk of dreams, risks and exploration. Making mistakes and learning from them was seen as a way of life. Failure could clarify and focus their sense of self as much as success. They were also

¹¹⁶ Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of The Holy*.

aware of their smallness at times and the largeness of the world. The experience of crowds of people and wondering about how they would fit in and belong with so many others in a competitive society worried and fascinated some of the interviewees.

One of the tasks of a youth minister nurturing the religious experience of young people must be to affirm and strengthen the sacredness of the self and the journey without creating a self obsessed spirituality. Listening for gifts, affirming insights, respecting silence and learning through failure as well as success all take on a spiritual dimension in the light of this study. The vocational accompaniment of the youth minister can aid the emerging spiritual sense and help the young person find their soul. "Give me souls," Don Bosco said, "nothing else matters." Perhaps we can recover that Salesian motto in the light of current research.

The Sense of Reality

The young people in the study all saw life as an adventure to be launched into. Some saw that as part of a shared experience, close to family and pushing the boundaries little by little. Others saw it as a complete break and liberation to travel, establish new relationship patterns and find challenges that were unknown. The degree of risk varied but the direction into life was the same. The energy of vision and the confidence that they could manage whatever happened seemed at odds with the vulnerability they also expressed about their sense of self. There is a pushing out to engage with life and a search for a pattern, an unspoken set of guidelines that come from within but work in the world around them. It was clear that for some the network of friendship and a desire for intimacy were central to their adventure. For others specific achievement and changing the world seemed a more primary focus of their encounter with life. The luck factor seemed to be important in facing the world. Two of the interviewees, commenting on the 9/11 attack suggested that those who had died in the attack had been unlucky to be in

the wrong place at the wrong time. They found it difficult to make any moral judgment on the tragedy beyond saying that these things happen. It is as if they did not want their view of the world as an adventure to be clouded with too much negativity. It is important to add that the young people, eloquent as they were, did not mention intimate relationships or learning about sexuality. Almost certainly this area was screened out in their conversations with a middle age celibate cleric!

3. A Salesian Reflection on Religious Experience

The religious experience of founders of major spiritual traditions is an expression of their own inner spiritual experience. Those of us who follow in Don Bosco's footsteps are called precisely through a recognition that similar patterns of religious experience are at work in our own lives. We are called through gifts and also through our wounds to make sense of life in relationship to the service of young people in need. Therefore there will be tangible links between our story as individuals and the story of Don Bosco's own foundation experience.

Don Bosco and Religious Experience

In the experience of John Bosco we see an acute awareness of this inner life in young people. His ability to see into the inner life of Magone, Savio, Cagliero and Rua and read the signs of holiness and vocation is evidence of a grasp of a spiritual landscape just beneath the surface. The quiet word in the ear and the careful timing of encouragement indicate a man who was aware of the spiritual as a lived experience for everyone. His own childhood hunger to grasp the significance of homilies and remember them by heart speaks of an early urgency to find a pattern in which his own turbulent childhood experience might take on a deeper spiritual meaning.

Mystical experience in Don Bosco's ministry is seen most clearly in his dreams, especially his dream at the age of nine years. The appearance of male and female figures in

dreams, the images of wild and destructive energies and their resolution led to deep connections between his own story and the gospel story in his own culture. Without this kind of religious experience, and the value John Bosco gave to it, the energy and vision for much of his life would never have become so sharply focused.

In his study on religious experience Greeley¹¹⁷ identifies some triggers of religious experience. His first four are listed below with their incidence of reporting as specific setting in which religious experience took place.

Listening to Music	49%
Personal Prayer	48%
Nature and Beauty	45%
Quiet reflection alone	42%

Don Bosco's Own Religious Experience

In the early experience of John Bosco's time alone, tending animals, working in the fields and walking to church or school would have been natural spaces where prayer, nature, beauty and quiet reflection would have been abundant. In his mature years Don Bosco created such nature and walking moments, scattered with prayer on excursions into the countryside from Turin, perhaps hoping to recreate something of the religious experience which had shaped his own vocation.

It is interesting to note that Greeley identifies music as one of the triggers of religious experience: something that can move us into the more reflective and imaginative world that is the gateway to the spiritual. Don Bosco was aware of the potential of music to bring the spiritual to awareness. For active Salesians music is often seen as a way of increasing participation and celebration. Perhaps Don Bosco also had an

¹¹⁷ A. M. Greeley, *The Sociology of The Paranormal* (London, Sage, 1975).

awareness that music, exuberant or quiet, could create a mood and a setting in which a young person might experience God.

When Don Bosco's approach to young people is described the fourfold model of the oratory is often presented

Home	<i>Belonging</i>
School	<i>Learning</i>
Playground	<i>Celebrating</i>
Church	<i>Contemplating</i>

The words in bold type are the actual structures that Don Bosco built in Turin. The activities they housed and valued are listed in my own words in italics. They represent an early and intuitive grasp of the holistic nature of religious experience in the mind of Don Bosco. He was able to see God at work in young people in the exuberance and energy of the schoolyard as much as in the quiet contemplation and singing of the chapel. The tension of relationships that marked his own childhood experience forced Don Bosco to look for a deeper sense of belonging he discovered in Gospel faith. In working on the quality of relationships among young people Don Bosco was shepherding that same link with the spiritual and not simply socializing troubled youth. Finally, the learning environment was also holistic and not confined to the schoolroom. Learning in the oratory model included not only schooling but also reflection on experience, celebration, a quiet word in the ear, drama, music, reassurance, praise friendships and stillness.

Running through all of the oratory experience was the assurance of the presence of God in everything. Through brief arrow prayers, through scripture painted on walls, symbols, gestures and statues the experience of an inner spiritual world was affirmed and valued. There is little doubt that Don Bosco was centered on the experience of a spiritual presence constantly. He was aware of that potential, and the ways it might be damaged, in each young person he met. For that reason the image of the good shepherd, with its readiness for self sacrifice,

searching, patience and delicacy, is well suited to describe the task of guiding and developing religious experience in young people.

Keeping the Conversation Going

My experience in researching religious experience among adolescents reinforces much of Don Bosco's own optimism about young people. Talking spiritually with young people in perhaps one of the most secularized societies in the world might have been regarded as a difficult task. In fact all those interviewed were able to express significant religious experiences without any prompting or the use of overtly religious language. In listening to each young person a story emerged and a unique way of relating to that story. Hay and Nye called this unique aspect a kind of spiritual signature that emerges with more and more conversation.

The ability of young people to touch the spiritual and express it without using the language of religion is a double-edged sword. At its best this unique expression captures an experience which is deep and authentic and interprets it in the persons own words. However, without religious links, it remains an isolated experience, open to misinterpretation and does not easily engage with the wider community. The faith story of the church provides a context and a community in which the inner religious experience finds recognition, reinforcement and a sense of belonging in shared action and celebration.

Staying With the Young Person

The journey from a young person's inner religious experience to a visible participation in church may never be completed. The task of the Salesian youth minister is to walk with them and be a bridge between the religious experience of young people and the religious experience of the church. The first might be expressed in dreams, anger and vague joy; the second in scripture, gathering and sacraments. It can be an uncomfortable place to

be, caught between the experience and the language of youth on the one hand and the dogmas and traditions of an institution.

As it was for Don Bosco so it is for the youth minister. The space between young people and the church is the place where they will suffer frustration and misunderstanding. The faith expressions of youth will be seen as irreverent or irrelevant by many members of an adult church. In contrast the faith expression of many adults will be seen as empty and hypocritical by many young people. It is youth ministers who have to form the bridge that links these two worlds and lay down their lives as a witness to the gospel in the lives of the young and within the church. In that sense Don Bosco and youth ministers become martyrs for the faith on a daily basis and continue to stand in that ambiguous, uncomfortable space where a new generation of believers is taking shape.

The Need for Mystic Ministry

In a similar way, youth ministers, shepherding religious experience among the young, need to be mystics. They need to be constantly in touch with that inner spiritual landscape in themselves if they are to be sensitive to it in the lives of young people. Being a mystic does not mean being detached, on the contrary it implies focus and grasping reality with an earthy immediacy. Evelyn Underhill captures the challenge of practical mysticism:

The education to the mystical sense begins with self simplification...leading to two experiences: union with the flux of life and union with the whole.¹¹⁸

For the Salesian youth minister therefore mysticism is an invitation to roll up one's sleeves and get involved in the flux and flow of life. But it is also an invitation to listen for the oneness that joins all activity and stillness into unity. The key

¹¹⁸ Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (Columbus, Ohio, Ariel Press, 1986), 51.

skill is listening: Listening that is turned inwards to the youth ministers own experience, recognizing the spiritual movements and inspiration of each moment. Listening turned outwards towards young people for the signs of the spirit in the moods, energy and frustrations of their lives. It is in recognizing the oneness of the Spirit that is at work within and without that gives the youth minister the strength and the wisdom to stay in that ambiguous adolescent space where the strands of a new spirit are emerging for the church.

Religious experience, and particularly relational consciousness, is a largely untapped but rich vein of reflection for Salesian study. It allows the Salesian charism to be opened up in a new way and perhaps make it more available in secularized cultures in particular. Religious experience and the research methods it has developed open new doors of return to founders of different congregations and distil into a new context the wisdom they offer. Above all the study of religious experience underlines the importance of listening as an act of faith that leads to mysticism and martyrdom.