

# Reflexive Spirituality and Metanoia in High Modernity

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*This paper explores a significant recent departure in the sociology of religion, the theory of 'reflexive spirituality'. This notion addresses problems of meaninglessness arising from the domination of rationality in modern society, where overarching systems of belief are fractured and fundamental trust and a sense of ontological security are threatened. Reflexive spirituality is a suggestive and fertile conception that suggests many avenues of analysis into contemporary spirituality. However, it also has weaknesses, which this paper addresses, principally by introducing the notion of metanoia and emphasizing the crucial role that it has to play in spiritual experience and the implications this has for the expert-systems within which religion and spirituality are increasingly appropriated in high modernity.*

## Introduction

This paper provides an exposition, critique and reformulation of an interesting recent departure in the sociology of religion, the introduction of the notion of 'reflexive spirituality' to analyze the religious situation under high modernity (Paden, 1992; Roof, 1998, 1999; Besecke, 2001; cf., Miller, 1997; Wuthnow, 1998; Fuller, 2002). Central to that situation, it is believed, is the 'problem of meaninglessness ... attributable in part to the growth of rationality in modern society' (Besecke, 2001:365). This is exacerbated 'under conditions of advanced modernity [where] connections with the past and to overarching systems of belief and practice are fractured [and] fundamental trust and a sense of ontological security, so crucial to maintaining social and religious order', are threatened (Roof, 1999:74-5). These conditions include: 'globalization, [and the] fragmentation of historic traditions, mediated symbols and meaning systems' (80-1). In response, various analytical models have recently been deployed, including several 'new paradigms' (Warner, 1993; Miller, 1997; Stark and Finke, 2000) and the notion of a 'spiritual marketplace' (Roof, 1999). Such work applies various aspects of rational choice theory and notions of individual consumer sovereignty to the 'marketplace' of religious experiences in an attempt to understand contemporary religious behaviour.

The theory of reflexive spirituality takes a similar approach, but the argument developed here seeks to shift the emphasis from rational decision-making in a spiritual marketplace, to transformative knowledge and its relation to the expert-systems that have come to characterize high modernity. Reflexive spirituality is put

forward in a post-traditional world, as 'a way of talking about transcendent meaning without sacrificing a broad-based commitment to the modernist project of a rational society' (Besecke, 2001:366). Although it is not presently as prominent as the rational choice approach of Stark and Finke (2000), for example, it is a theory with various strengths suggesting many avenues of analysis into contemporary spirituality. However, it also has several weaknesses, which need to be addressed if it is to achieve its potential, and it is these issues that this paper seeks to identify and address, principally by introducing and developing the notion of metanoia and emphasizing the crucial role that it has to play in spiritual experience and the implications this has for the expert-systems within which religion and spirituality are increasingly appropriated in high modernity.

## **Reflexive Spirituality**

The notion of reflexive spirituality draws on the reflexive modernization theory (RMT) of Anthony Giddens and his colleagues (eg., Giddens, 1990; Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994), with its focus on the reflexive dimension of high modernity. Although the role of reflexivity in the study of religion has been recognized (Hufford 1999), reflexive spirituality, as such, was initially defined by William Paden (1992:3) as a 'contemplative act of stepping back from one's own perspective and recognizing that it, too, is situated', in the wide range of spiritual possibilities offered by the culture of high modernity. It has since been used to refer to 'a situation encouraging a more deliberate, engaging effort on people's part for their own spiritual formation, both inside and outside religious communities' (Roof, 1999:75). This involves the individual constructing 'a religious world from available images, symbols, moral codes, and doctrines, thereby exercising considerable agency in defining and shaping what is considered to be religiously meaningful', by the individual concerned (75). It is argued that this meaning-construction 'encourages a profound sociological imagination [and] greater agency on the part of the individual in defining and monitoring one's own spiritual life', creating a 'greater self-engagement with religious traditions', and possibly 'transforming the meaning of the religious itself' (75).

This analysis of the manner in which individuals draw upon various religious beliefs, symbols and practices to construct systems of personal spiritual meaning is informed by the tradition of individualistic religiosity in America proceeding from William James through Robert Bellah to Wuthnow, Roof, Stark and Finke, and others. However, in its most recent formulation (Besecke, 2001) it is claimed that the notion of reflexive spirituality is concerned less with the construction of individual meanings per se, and more with the potential of reflexive spirituality as a principle source for the development of a meaningful modernity more generally, that is, it is seen as possessing a broader social rather than only an individualistic emphasis. Nevertheless, in both versions of the concept the key idea remains that of reflexivity, understood as involving a process of detachment or distancing, and of mentally 'stepping back' from one's own perspective to locate it within a range of other valid perspectives. This involves not only reflection but self-confrontation.

Reflexive spirituality is to be understood therefore as the 'intentional, deliberate, self-directed approach to the cultivation of religious meaning':

To be reflexively spiritual ... is to maintain a constant awareness of the ever-increasing variety of religious meanings available in the modern world, and to engage in an intentional but critical assimilation of those meanings into one's own spiritual outlook (Besecke, 2001: 367).

Note that this intentional seeking-out of religious meaning and the associated awareness and assimilation of religious symbols - undertaken either individually or collectively - is principally facilitated by academic and para-academic expert-systems, such as universities, theological colleges and related institutions and networks.

The reformulation of reflexive spirituality to shift its focus from the individual to collective considerations of language, communication, social structure and culture builds upon the work of Giddens and Jurgen Habermas, particularly in an insistence that citizens of Western societies can 'create a meaningful modern culture by coming together and talking with each other about ultimate concerns' (Besecke, 2001: 369). It differs from them, however, by insisting that the realm of religion, in addition to the field of political activity favoured by Giddens and Habermas, provides a viable discursive space within which this dialogue can occur and human self-realization may be pursued. To this end, a contemporary formulation of reflexive spirituality emphasizes four techniques of meaning construction: (1) Metaphorical interpretation of religious texts and practices. (2) The exploration of mysticism as an experiential and empirical validation of spiritual potentialities. (3) Pluralism, through which an eclectic, partial and syncretic appropriation of various religious traditions may be undertaken. (4) Reflexivity itself, understood in the manner described above, but also in terms of a reliance upon the expert-systems that Giddens identifies as characterizing high modernity (cf., Besecke, 2001: 372-5). Implicit in the notion of reflexive spirituality is the recognition that these four techniques are pursued optimally within such expert-systems.

This concept of 'expert-system' needs some explanation, particularly because it is these - in their academic and para-academic form - that are the primary sites of knowledge generation and transmission in the field of religion. Indeed, both this concept and the general notion of reflexive spirituality must be assessed more generally in terms of RMT, from which they have been derived. Reflexive modernization is the term given to key processes within high modernity. These include: (1) The rationalization of the social world that characterizes advanced societies. (2) The detraditionalization of society through which religions and other traditions are challenged, interrogated and increasingly replaced by alternative systems based on instrumental rationality. (3) The related disembedding of individuals and groups previously constrained within traditional social attitudes and relations from their temporal and spatial locales, and their reembedding in broader systems of interaction facilitated by the communications revolution, particularly the Internet. (4) Above all, there is an intensification of reflexivity within high modernity. This reflexivity operates at two levels: (a) At the level of society and culture there is a network of expert-systems that generate and manipulate knowledge

to provide and administer the fundamental infrastructure of a complex social system; one of their primary concerns is with managing the risk inherent in that system and this requires continuous monitoring, feedback and ongoing social intervention. (b) At the level of the individual, RMT is concerned with the life of the person conceived and pursued as a project characterized by great choice but also subjected to ongoing and reflexive self-monitoring, self-interrogation, self-evaluation, self-regulation and self-motivation. At both levels, disembedding and detraditionalization have removed the guidance and constraints provided by previously dominant structures of tradition, especially traditional religious institutions, generating for many a sense that human knowledge lacks ultimate foundations, and leading to chronic uncertainty, a continuous reordering of social life, and an often isolated search for stability and predictability.

Within this context, the concept of 'expert-system' directs attention to formal systems of knowledge and expertise that are an essential and pervasive - but also a taken-for-granted and often abstract - dimension of contemporary everyday life. They operate in all fields of human endeavour and have assumed tremendous authority in a society that has witnessed both the subversion of traditional forms of authority and the corresponding rise to domination of specialized forms of knowledge. In the field of religion, academic and para-academic expert-systems are significant here in two key respects: (1) They are increasingly the principle sources and mediators of the knowledge that fuel the processes of religious meaning construction. (2) This increasing reliance upon expert-systems is an indicator of contemporary societies' disembeddedness from religious tradition and the potential for anomie as 'we rely increasingly on experts and knowledge bases far removed from our own immediate worlds of experience' (Roof, 1999:75). Through the application of various scientific methodologies these seek to affirm 'the importance of transcendent meaning for a rationalized society' (Besecke, 2001: 379), while also retaining the overriding commitment to rationality that is taken to characterize high modernity. This complex role generates major tensions that scholars working in these expert-systems are increasingly seeking to address in various ways, determining, for example, whether their ultimate allegiance should be to the scientific study of religion or to theology and the doctrines of specific faiths (eg., McCutcheon, 1997; McCutcheon, 1999; Roof, 1999; Wiebe, 2000; Franzmann, 2002).

### **Critique: Reflexive But Not Transformative**

The notion of reflexive spirituality has significant strengths, both in recognizing the posture of distanciation that characterizes contemporary attitudes towards religion, and in its application of the concept of expert-system to explore the role of religious scholarship in mediating knowledge of religion and spirituality and in shaping contemporary views of spiritual alternatives. Nevertheless, and despite the constructive use of certain aspects of RMT, the work of Habermas and others, the theoretical structure of the notion of reflexive spirituality is not sufficiently comprehensive. In the case of Roof, the emphasis is on the elements derived from Giddens and his colleagues and tends to focus on: (1) The role of expert-systems and the availability of knowledge about religious and spiritual 'options'; and, (2) The

ways in which individuals can draw upon these resources to reflexively construct spiritual identities as part of their spiritual quest. Roof (1999:34) does mention the 'life-transforming' role of the sacred, but there is little exploration of this vital characteristic of religion in the body of his book, which is mainly concerned with the implications of the 'spiritual marketplace' model that he applies. With Besecke the theoretical elaboration that is offered is largely developed in a pragmatic fashion, relating elements of theory to the recorded conversations of members of the adult education program whose participants exemplify the orientation to spirituality being discussed in her work. There is little attempt to explore more fully any deeper meaning that might lie behind the discussions recorded and the views offered. Any spiritual reflexivity that is exercised seems to be of limited effect. In particular, one does not get the impression that these conversations reveal or reflect any substantial changes that occurred in the outlooks or self-understandings of the participants in the program. Rather, one tends to perceive a series of affirmations and confirmations of views and values that were apparently brought to the sessions. For example, one participant, 'John', insists that the 'stories' of the Bible, the Torah and the Qur'an are to be understood only metaphorically (Besecke, 2001: 372). This seems an assertion of theological liberalism in a somewhat dogmatic fashion that would not resonate at all with many Christians or Jews and with few Muslims, for many of whom the Qur'an is itself of uncreated divinity. Moreover, in a case such as this, one would expect that authentic spiritual reflexivity would - above all - relativize one's own relativism and alert one to the implications of such a relativistic perspective for the faith of others, most especially where to do so would be most challenging - ie., in the encounter with claims to exclusivism, absolutism and inerrancy. Additionally, in the many case-studies offered, there is an uncritical valorization of communication (indeed, of simple 'talk', as it is described) as an unproblematic end in itself. Consequently, one is presented with life narratives, anecdotes and routine dialogues about the meaning of religious concepts that differ in no way cognitively to any other informed discussion between parties interested in some field of mutual concern.

If it is limited to this level of discussion, reflexive spirituality risks being cognitively equivalent to 'reflexive motor-mechanics' or 'reflexive software development', ie., it has only an instrumental or technical interest in knowledge that must be contrasted to the emancipatory cognitive interest identified by Habermas as intrinsic to the critical and reflexive attitude towards knowledge that he proposes. As Thomas McCarthy (1978: 88) says of this aspect of Habermas's thought: 'It is only in comprehending the emancipatory interest behind critical reflective knowledge ... that the correlation of knowledge and human interest in general can be adequately grasped.' A notion of reflexivity that leaves subjects unchallenged and in the same cognitive state of rest as they began is quite inconsistent with the transformative and emancipatory principle that lies behind Habermas's conception.

Indeed, this issue must be taken further, because even the sophisticated theories of Habermas or Giddens do not fully encompass the often profoundly *transformative* noetic qualities associated with spiritual experience (as opposed to the more purely cognitive experiences associated with the study of religions, per se, that might be

pursued within expert-systems such as universities). And yet it is precisely this dimension of transformation that must be emphasized as the central defining characteristic of that experience qua spiritual experience, and that, indeed, provides the rationale for its pursuit through reflexive spirituality or by any other means.

Central to this present paper, therefore is the reassertion of the central role within authentic spirituality of experiences of transformative *metanoia*, which will be defined below and shown to be present in prominent traditions of spirituality. The lack of sufficient emphasis on this type of transformative knowledge in the work of Roof, Wuthnow, Besecke and others arises from a widespread application of a common form of social analysis. This involves an immanentist form of *reflexive* reason that approaches religion principally along the 'horizontal' axis of comparison and contextualization, locating spiritualities within the horizon of social and historical reality. While extremely valuable, this approach should be complemented by the application of a *critical* reason that more fully explores the 'vertical' axis of spirituality that is experienced by exponents of spiritual inquiry as both penetrating and transcending that reality, and that makes it possible to approach the *roots* or *ground* of spiritual experience and not just its socio-historical *context*. We will return to this point in the conclusion of this paper.

### **Reflexivity: Its Intellectual Trajectory**

The existence of this particular form of knowledge, of transformative *metanoia*, raises important questions for the concept of reflexivity and the theory developed around it. Giddens introduced the notion of reflexivity into his theoretical program in *New Rules of Sociological Method* (1976), deriving it from theorists like Mead, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Gadamer. These placed a great emphasis on language, interpretation and understanding as key elements in the reflective stance. However, the notion of a reflexive sociology was also developed in considerable detail in Alvin Gouldner's study of *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1971), which was prescient in its reflective analysis of the expert-system of sociology. Amongst the many aspects of the project that Gouldner (1971:495) proposed, was the goal of transformation of the scholar:

Reflexive Sociology ... is characterized ... by the relationship it establishes between being a sociologist and being a person, between the role and the person performing it. A Reflexive Sociology embodies a critique of the conventional conception of segregated scholarly roles and has a vision of an alternative. It aims at transforming the sociologist's relation to his work.

Present here is recognition that sociology is an expert-system and that reflexivity produces transforming knowledge, ie., knowledge that is transformative upon the person who is generating or encountering it. These are key ideas that fed (in somewhat diluted form) into Giddens's analysis and subsequently into the notion of reflexive spirituality. One of the effects of the present analysis is to re-emphasize and even radicalize this notion of transformative knowledge with respect to the study of religion and spirituality.

As Giddens (1976:33ff.) explains, these developments were also fundamentally informed by the ethnomethodology pioneered by Harold Garfinkel (1967), which sees reality itself as a reflexive social construction that is peculiarly open to social-scientific interrogation undertaken in a radical, and intellectually penetrative fashion. Garfinkel argued that participation in everyday realities presupposes that the actors possess a systematic if implicit knowledge of the methods or rules of interaction whose observance constitutes their ongoing existence. It is these methods that are the central focus of ethnomethodological analysis. For example, the full nature of constructed realities can be revealed through breaching experiments that fracture the taken-for-grantedness of everyday activities and reveal their implicit rule-governed nature. Social realities are both fragile and permeable. They are fragile in that their taken-for-grantedness can be fractured, either unintentionally by an actor who does not know or observe the relevant rules; or intentionally by the ethnomethodologist who intervenes to cause such a fracture to deliberately lay bare the rules governing the behaviour(s) concerned. They are permeable in that people live in a plurality of social realities constructed in this fashion and tend to move back and forth between them, as the occasion arises; again the reflexive nature of these realities becomes apparent when factors intervene to restrict or distort this movement. Once again these are insights that are fundamental for the notion of reflexive spirituality as they describe social order as a highly provisional realm within which people can move between realities constituted upon commitments (amongst others) of a religious and spiritual nature.

Of similar interest is Giddens's treatment of the 'double hermeneutic', the ongoing and mutually transformative two-way interaction between 'ordinary' members of society and social scientists, which constructs the worlds that are perceived and experienced by both. This relates to Giddens's anti-foundationalist theory of structuration, his 'social ontology' that attempted to show how social reality is produced and reproduced by human beings and how this gives privileged access to social phenomena through the application of the double hermeneutic. (As we shall see later, this perspective makes it very difficult for Giddens to find a location for transcendental notions of spirituality within his theoretical system.) In *The Constitution of Society* (1984), Giddens extended this idea to include processes of reflexive self-organization, where the 'self' includes corporate entities that respond to changes in their operating environment by intervening and altering that environment on an ongoing basis. After the publication of Ulrich Beck's study of *The Risk Society* (1986) Giddens developed his theory even further. In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Giddens (1990:38) conceded that 'all forms of social life are partly constituted by actors' knowledge of them'. However, reflexive self-regulation was limited in traditional societies, and only became a significant and indeed defining feature of society in the present period of high modernity. We now witness 'wholesale reflexivity - which of course includes reflection upon the nature of reflection itself' (39). This gives a special status to the expert-systems of the social sciences, which 'are actually more deeply implicated in modernity than is natural science' (40) because of their capacity to reflect upon and guide major interventions in social life.

Giddens modified his terminology in *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991) and *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992) when he introduced the notion of 'institutional reflexivity' so that 'the reflexive project of the self' could be used to refer specifically to the individual self and no longer to corporate entities. Consequently, it 'is institutional, because it is a basic structuring element of social activity in modern settings. It is reflexive in the sense that terms introduced to describe social life routinely enter and transform it ... because they become part of the frames of action which individuals or groups adopt' (1992:28). Giddens (29) used sexuality as an example of this phenomenon in the field of human intimacy, arguing that the double hermeneutic of social-scientific investigation in the area 'signals, and contributes to, an accelerating reflexivity on the level of ordinary, everyday sexual practices.' Spirituality is another area of intimate human life and Giddens's argument can be extended there, suggesting (as Besecke (2001) does) that the various expert-systems of religious scholarship signal and contribute to an accelerating reflexivity at the level of ordinary, everyday spiritual experience. In operating in this fashion, contemporary spirituality is conforming to the dynamics that Giddens has identified as characterizing high modernity in general.

Spirituality also confronts the effects of the processes of disembedding and detraditionalization which generate a sense that human knowledge and belief ultimately lack foundations, leading to chronic uncertainty and a desire for stability, certainty and predictability. As a post-empiricist but not a postmodernist, Giddens does not concede that this incipient anomie of high modernity must lead to some form of nihilism but rather sees it as requiring dialogue and political involvement. Indeed, radicalized modernity 'regards coordinated political engagement as both possible and necessary, on a global level as well as locally' (Giddens, 1990: 150). Although Giddens does not discuss the area of spirituality, this type of engagement might take the form of ongoing and comprehensive inquiry and dialogue between the world's religions, as for example Hans Kung (1987) and many other participants in expert-systems of religious scholarship have undertaken, and as we see approximated in the examples of reflexive spirituality specifically cited by Roof and Besecke, but found also in the research of Wuthnow and Fuller (2002), amongst others.

This type of interfaith inquiry and dialogue may be explored in the context of the larger picture of global development that Giddens's theory involves - what he calls 'models of utopian realism ... whose very propagation might help them be realized' (1990:154). Giddens believes that 'life politics' involving the politics of human self-actualization may tend to supplant the increasingly moribund class politics that have characterized much of modernity. This will involve social movements rather more than existing political parties, as the latter represent the institutional structures that impede rather than facilitate progress. However, this 'self-actualization' is of a purely secular and immanent kind that will be realized through politics rather than spirituality. In a useful summary of Giddens's thought (Bryant and Jary, 2001:31), this analysis is represented by various progressive shifts in the areas of communication, allocation of wealth, governance and military power. However, only a few of these shifts relate even slightly to the place of religion in

the contemporary world. These few include a movement from 'ontological insecurity/loss of tradition', to 'new forms of active trust, eg., transformations of intimacy', and to 'dialogical resolutions of issues and a new dialogic politics'; and another shift from 'fundamentalist reworkings of traditions' to 'human rights' to 'cosmopolitan democracy'. Overall, these shifts may be subsumed under the secularization model that informs Giddens's perspective.

Despite the opportunities to integrate religion into his model of social change, it is notable that these are the only areas in this summary of Giddens's worldview that make even a tangential reference to religion or spirituality and it is clear that Giddens sees his utopian end-state of human self-realization in entirely immanent terms of unrestrained and effective dialogue, communication and democracy, with little or no recognition of any potential place for spirituality or a sense of transcendence. Giddens simply takes the decline of religion for granted. Indeed, he (1990:96) has explicitly summarized his views as follows:

The declining impact of religion and tradition has been so frequently discussed in the literature of the social sciences that we can deal with [it] quite briefly ... Most of the situations of modern social life are manifestly incompatible with religion as a pervasive influence upon day-to-day life. Religious cosmology is supplanted by reflexively organized knowledge, governed by empirical observation and logical thought, and focused upon material technology and socially applied codes. Religion and tradition were always closely linked, and the latter is even more thoroughly undermined than the former by the reflexivity of modern social life, which stands in direct opposition to it.

Giddens's cursory analysis of religion in the contemporary world is perplexing, especially given that his theories of detraditionalization and disembedding apply best to those societies where religion has had a central role. It appears explicable perhaps in terms of three factors. Firstly, the United Kingdom and Europe have been largely secularized, certainly in comparison with the USA, encouraging Giddens's apparent view that religion is irredeemably a feature of the human past with no future in his 'realist utopia'. As Mestrovic (1998:96) remarks, Giddens 'assumes that religion is a matter of self-conscious identification and "activity" pertaining to a church, and, in that sense, religion is indeed declining.' Secondly, there is the role played by Giddens's rationalism and his realist epistemology based on his social ontology of structuration theory. These render methodologically invisible to him the ultimate referents of religious experience (be this conceived in terms of God, Allah, Nirvana, the Tao, the Numinous, etc.). As Mestrovic's remarks indicate, analytically he can only see the 'this-sidedness' of religious experience (eg., its behavioural, social, institutional, and discursive manifestations), which does indeed frequently manifest itself in precisely those forms of traditional behaviour that his larger theory of reflexive modernization condemns to supersession. Thirdly, the admittance of a realm of transcendence into theories of social analysis creates considerable difficulties, especially for RMT that places such heavy emphasis on the capacity of reason and reflexivity to reveal the inner workings of the social world. The possibility that human beings could stand in a primary relationship with a

transcendent or numinous realm that lies beyond that world introduces a zone of apparently non-rational opacity into this type of analysis that threatens the fundamental rationalistic premises upon which it stands.

Ultimately, despite the considerable influence of Giddens's notion of reflexivity in other areas of sociology it is limited in important ways when it is applied to the study of spirituality - indeed, as we saw above, Giddens believes that reflexivity is directly opposed to religion and tradition. Consequently, if RMT is to be more generally applied to the study of contemporary religion then these theoretical limitations must be overcome. In particular, the application of the notion of 'reflexive spirituality' must be made conditional upon the incorporation into its theoretical articulation of an adequate comprehension of the role played by the transforming power of a noetic encounter with the transcendent realm(s) to which religion and spirituality invariably orientate themselves. The next section of this paper seeks to accomplish this task by emphasizing the unavoidably metanoic dimensions of any encounter with such realms.

## **Spirituality and Metanoia**

Because of its secular bias and immanentist logic, RMT fails fully to comprehend how one of the principle characteristics of religions involves various forms of spiritual transformation, often traumatic and usually possessing a distinct reflexive and cognitive dimension - ie., noesis. This theoretical weakness tends to be carried over into the presentations of reflexive spirituality discussed above. Consequently, as noted earlier we tend to look in vain for this transformative dynamic in many of these accounts - reflexive spirituality tends to be presented there as cognitively equivalent to processes of reflection in technical and instrumental pursuits where the objective is improved performance and there is little sense of self-confrontation and transcendence. Moreover, where this dimension is mentioned it is usually subordinated to the overall narratives of the persons concerned. For example, in his application of RMT, Roof (1999:167) discusses the significance of narrative construction as a force for transforming selves and institutions within the pursuit of a reflexive spirituality, rather than exploring the potential for transformation of an irruption into a person's life narrative of a manifestation of the numinous. In Wuthnow (1998:117), a character does undergo a transformative event that is noted as 'an important turning point in her spiritual journey', but the discussion moves immediately onto unsophisticated musings about the gender identity and personhood of God (eg., 'Why can't God just be some supreme power, not necessarily a person, just something that sort of is in everything?'(117)), and the Catholic Church's positions on social issues, etc.. The focus is very much on the agency and initiative of the subject and how she goes about constructing a preferred spiritual identity that accommodates her existing political and lifestyle commitments, rather than on how the subject herself may be profoundly transformed and all her commitments revised by a profound spiritual encounter and the associated noesis.

Because individual agency, life narratives and their construction are given priority in this material there is little recognition that these may be exploded in an

unpredictable and even unwanted fashion by an irruption of spiritual experience, or that such an experience may be sought after, not as an element within a life narrative but as a life-transforming event, akin perhaps to the 'extraordinary experiences' addressed by Young and Goulet (1994) and others. In other words, there is little substantial discussion of any *metanoia* associated with the experiences and exchanges described, despite the fact that recognition of the centrality of this phenomenon should lie at the core of any adequate theory of reflexive spirituality. The term 'metanoia' is utilized here because it is a comparatively neutral concept with a major presence in Jewish, Greek and Christian religion but with applications in all traditions. The root Greek term for metanoia is commonly rendered as 'repentance' but means literally 'change of mind' or conversion, entailing some form of intellectual metamorphosis (ie., a transformation of *noûs*, mind or spirit). In both senses it signifies a reversal of thought and a turning towards God or the divine or the numinous that issues in a transformation of the individual's whole being. Descriptions of this phenomenon from the mainstream of various religions are reviewed in this section to illustrate its centrality in authentic spiritual experience and to identify how it might be related to notions of reflexive spirituality.

It should be understood that this specific demonstration is the limited objective of this section and that it does not attempt to offer a comprehensive survey of spiritual experiences and there is little space here to engage with contemporary literature in this area. However, even if it were possible, such a survey would not serve our present purposes as well as the following review of exemplary illustrations from the mainstream of the world's religious traditions and movements, which are chosen precisely because they emphasize how central metanoia is to these traditions - being associated with their founders and subsequent key figures and movements that have retained their currency over centuries. Also, although it invokes relevant mystical phenomena, the discussion here is not limited to these. Indeed, it is not primarily concerned with the mystical, per se, but with the noetic and transformative dimensions of metanoia, which are present in mystical states but also in other forms of spiritual experience, from all religions and denominations.

It is these noetic and transformative dimensions that are the issues of most relevance to the present discussion of the role and meaning of reflexive spirituality for two reasons: (1) Because it is these that distinguish it so fundamentally from other forms of reflexivity that lie at the centre of RMT and its application in contemporary social analysis. (2) Because these noetic and transformative dimensions present specific challenges and opportunities for the expert-systems of religious knowledge-construction concerned.

We will begin with the classic work of William James (1985 [1902]:189), which provides an excellent general description of the phenomenon of metanoia and how it produces a noetic transformation:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.

In the case of mysticism, these are 'states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain' (380-1). Indeed, central to this type of experience is its cognitive - or, more precisely, the higher reflexive, *meta*-cognitive - dimension. John White (1972: xv) emphasizes this in his introduction to a survey to the phenomenon:

In the highest state of consciousness there is no difference between the content of consciousness and consciousness itself. ... It amounts to the eye seeing itself, to thought turning itself inside out and thinking about thinking. Enlightenment is the reflexive act wherein the mind understands itself, including that very experience of understanding.

This intense and iterative noetic reflexivity has been especially prominent in negative theology, Hinduism and Buddhism. Indeed, possibly the earliest recorded and greatest of metanoic moments was the Buddha's Enlightenment, entailing knowledge of the tragic situation of humanity and of the path that would lead to salvation; he also came to the knowledge that he himself had achieved that liberation and that he must impart his teachings in the form of the Four Noble truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Subsequently many people within the Buddhist tradition achieved some form of Enlightenment. For example, in the later Zen tradition, Enlightenment is understood as 'seeing through to your own essential nature, and this at the same time means seeing through to the essential nature of the cosmos and of all things' (Dumoulin, 1979:152)

There are various general studies of metanoic phenomena. After an extensive survey, F.C.Happold (1970:52) observes that it involves 'some sort of experience which is of sufficient intensity to lead to an expansion of normal consciousness and perception, so that there comes to [the individual] a new vision of reality which dominates his life and thought. He must experience some sort of "conversion".' The temporal dimension of this is debated. Happold believes this 'may be gradual, almost imperceptible, or sudden and violent' (52), while Evelyn Underhill (1990 [1910]:178), in her similarly comprehensive survey, emphasizes the ineffability and suddenness of metanoia associated with mystical awakening:

There are no words in which this realization can be described. It is of so actual a nature that in comparison the normal world of past perception seems but twilight at the best. Consciousness has suddenly changed its rhythm and a new aspect of the universe rushes in. ... The onset of this new consciousness seems to the self so sudden, so clearly imposed from without rather than developed from within, as to have a supernatural character.

Metanoia involves 'a disturbance of the equilibrium of the self, which results in the shifting of the field of consciousness from lower to higher levels ... the consequent remaking of the field of consciousness, an alteration in the self's attitude to the world' and 'a passion for the Absolute which is to constitute [the mystic's] distinctive character' (Underhill, 1990 [1910]:176-7). In another pioneering encyclopedic work of great significance for the Counter-Culture, New Age and

environmental movements, Richard Bucke (1969 [1901]) described in terms of 'learning' and 'knowing' the metanoia that led him to formulate his influential conception of 'cosmic consciousness', which he then attempted to document through an exhaustive study of the world's religions. Bucke described his metanoic experience as involving 'an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe ... he learned more within the few seconds during which the illumination lasted than in previous months or even years of study, and he learned much that no study could ever have taught' (Bucke, 1969 [1901]:9-10). The noetic dimension of Bucke's metanoic experience is inescapable, as it is also in the account of the physicist Fritjof Capra (1983:11), who has described the experience of metanoia that led him to write his influential study of *The Tao of Physics*:

I was sitting by the ocean one late summer afternoon ... when I suddenly became aware of my whole environment as being engaged in a gigantic cosmic dance ... I 'saw' cascades of energy ... I 'saw' the atoms of the elements and those of my body participating in this cosmic dance of energy; I felt its rhythm and I 'heard' its sound, and at that moment I *knew* that this was the Dance of Shiva, the Lord of Dancers worshipped by the Hindus.

Capra's qualification of how he 'saw' and 'heard', and his emphasis on how he 'knew' indicate the extraordinary nature of the knowledge into which he felt he had been initiated by this experience. In his subsequent work he proceeded like Bucke to gather a mass of evidence to both explicate and explain the insight he believed he had been privileged to acquire. The humanistic psychologist, Abraham Maslow has carried out a similar survey and sought to relate metanoia to his own conception of human 'peak experience'. He believed such experiences had several key characteristics, including the vital notions of 'B-cognition' and 'B-values', which involve knowing and valuing Being, and which affirm the intrinsic meaning and sacredness of life and the world. As with James's description, this form of metanoia involves 'a moving toward the perception of unity and integration in the world. The person tends to move toward fusion, integration and unity, and away from splitting, conflicts, and oppositions' (Maslow, 1972:362). Significantly, Maslow also notes that metanoia or the peak-experience 'is felt as a self-validating, self-justifying moment which carries its own intrinsic value with it. It is felt to be a highly valuable - even uniquely valuable - experience ... so great and high an experience that it justifies not only itself but even living itself' (359-60).

Christianity generally views metanoia in terms of a conversion that profoundly changes the way one understands oneself and the world. In a systematized statement within Catholic theology, 'a conversion is a radical transformation from which follows on all levels of life an interlocking series of changes and developments ... One's direction is altered, one's eyes are opened, and one perceives the world in a new way. Indeed, one perceives a new world.' (McBrien, 1981:962) This conversion then expresses itself at the religious, intellectual, and moral levels, confirming one's rebirth into faith. Within the broad Christian tradition, the archetypal example of metanoia is the 'sudden conversion and illumination, resulting in a complete change of outlook and life' of Saul on the road to Damascus (Happold, 1970:52; cf. Acts

9:1-19, 22:3-16). This encounter with the risen Christ left Saul blind for three days and completely transformed his attitudes, beliefs and life work, emerging as Paul with a comprehensive vision of the significance of Jesus's death that served as the core of subsequent Christian faith. In the same period, within the Jewish tradition, Philo invoked 'metanoia' to signify a 'change of mind' that orientates one to God alone and radically and irreversibly transforms one's life, a usage that Josephus adopted. Later, the Desert Fathers actively sought out metanoia as they pursued *theosis* (deification). St. Augustine experienced metanoia after a period of spiritual agony, as he records in his *Confessions* (8.8-12), consequently turning from the dualistic rationalism of Manicheism to a form of Christian humility and faith that went beyond reason. St Francis of Assisi also underwent a fierce internal struggle between the attractions of the world and the call of the spirit before he underwent an illumination when he entered the ruined church of San Domian: 'being led by the spirit he went in to pray [and, upon leaving,] found himself another man than he who had gone in' (Happold, 1970:53). In the foundational moment of the Reformation, and after great inner turmoil, Martin Luther had the metanoic illumination that transformed the meaning of the text 'The just shall live by faith' (Rom.1:17), and provided the basis for the Reformation principle of justification by faith alone: 'I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself' (Luther, 1961 [1545]:11). Crucially, this insight arose from intense study and refinement of knowledge. Some 140 years later, Blaise Pascal underwent his 'Night of Fire' on 23 November 1654, when he had, over a period of two hours, a series of insights into his relationship to Jesus Christ that changed his life completely, as he recorded in his *Memorial* that he kept with him for the rest of his life. Soren Kierkegaard (1962) spoke of metanoia in terms of a 'leap of faith' that is essentially qualitative, rather than quantitative in nature, ie., it is a transformation of the self that cannot be made to occur through the accumulation of 'good works' or by study, or force of will. Such a leap involves a discontinuity with the individual's past life and requires a conscious 'letting go'. It is also ratified by a decision *for* the new self that may, to onlookers, defy logic or reason.

As we saw in connection with Augustine, Luther and Pascal, this type of metanoia may also be associated with a sense of personal crisis or despair, as Kierkegaard emphasized. This analysis of the role of personal crises in metanoia was further developed by the philosopher and psychologist Karl Jaspers (1969) in terms of what he called 'Existenz' and 'boundary situations', the purport of which is that human beings can only break through to the authentic actuality of true selfhood and existential freedom through moments of extreme crisis involving, for example, intense danger, grief, separation or death. It is in such situations that one breaks through to the truly transformative noetic experience that reveals the true nature of Existenz. Elsewhere, in Zen Buddhism, this true nature is revealed upon Enlightenment to be absolute Nothingness: 'This realization of absolute Nothingness is in Zen the realization of one's true Self. For the realization of absolute Nothingness opens up the deepest ground of one's subjectivity' (Abe, 1985:187). This realization of the grounds of one's being is opened up by the intense iterative reflexivity noted above.

## Conclusion

These are well-known and accessible accounts of metanoia, chosen from various Western and non-Western traditions. They illustrate the centrality of this phenomenon to religious experience and spiritual knowledge. They emphasize also the extent to which these experiences possess a profound noetic quality that is inherently transformative and transcends the mode of reflexivity as it is generally conceived within RMT:

They result in insights into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect, insights which carry with them a tremendous sense of authority and authenticity. Things take on a new pattern and a new, often unsuspected, significance. Even though he may not be able to say, in the language of the intellect, what he knows, one who has undergone [metanoia] is convinced with absolute certainty that he does know (Happold, 1970:45).

The knowledge that arises is far more profound than that provided by the mundane intellect and the senses, even if they are augmented by a general reflexive awareness. As James (1985 [1902]: 58) emphasizes: 'It is as if there were in the human consciousness a *sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception* of what we may call '*something there,*' more deep and more general than any of the special and particular senses' reveal.

It is this observation that directs us towards the formulation of 'reflexive spirituality' that we are seeking in this paper. Giddens had developed his notion of reflexivity using a form of 'reflective reason', which locates thought and knowledge within their social and historical context and this well supports his overall analysis of high modernity and particularly the key role of expert-systems. However, this contextual approach employs only an immanentist form of reason - in Habermasian terms, an instrumental rather than emancipatory reason. It remains within the horizon of a given historical and social reality, a reality that would be viewed within religious traditions as merely provisional, deeply problematic and destined to be transcended. It involves a notion of reflexivity that operates only along the horizontal axis of the given world, as it were, when what is required is an analysis that also proceeds along the vertical axis, beyond the mere *context* of spirituality to identify its *grounds*. What is required, in philosophical terms, is the application of a form of 'critical reason', as Rudolf Otto has demonstrated with regard to spiritual knowledge. Otto (1959 [1917]:129) argued that the phenomenon of metanoia points to something deeper even than the 'pure reason' that Kant identified as the foundation of human knowledge, 'namely, to that which mysticism has rightly named the *fundus animae*, the 'bottom' or 'ground of the soul' (*Seelengrund*)'. As Kant pointed out, although our knowledge begins with experience, it is not constituted by it. Consequently, it is necessary to distinguish between that dimension of knowledge that is contributed by our sensory experiences, and that which arises from the faculty of intellect itself, where sense impressions are merely the occasion for the emergence of knowledge. For Otto (1959 [1917]:130-1), this involves the numinous:

The numinous ... issues from the deepest foundation of cognitive apprehension that the soul possesses, [as can be revealed] by introspection and a critical examination of reason such as Kant instituted. We find ... involved in the numinous experience, beliefs and feelings qualitatively different from anything that 'natural' sense-perception is capable of giving us ... A 'pure reason' in the profoundest sense.

Within the Islamic tradition, the leading philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1981:2-3), argues that humanity's faculty of intelligence is 'endowed with the possibility of knowing the Absolute ... for finally that Ultimate Reality which *is* the Sacred as such is both the knower and the known, inner consciousness and outer reality, the pure immanent Subject and the Transcendent Object, the Infinite Self and Absolute Being.' The profound noetic impact of metanoia arises from the sense of certainty that one has penetrated through to this level of knowledge and that one can and must be transformed as a result. Moreover, as the various accounts provided above indicate, there is an imperative to metanoia - a drive to this spiritual noesis - that cannot be avoided, at least by those who come into proximity to it. For example, St Augustine believed that the end towards which all knowledge must be directed is the ascent towards and ultimate union with God, Who alone is the source of all happiness. Or, as a leading Buddhist scholar has emphasized, 'the human mind cannot stop at any point on its way towards [spiritual] knowledge. Standstill means death, rigidity and decay. This is the law of all life and of all consciousness. It is the law of the spirit, from which life and consciousness flow' (Govinda, 1972:240-1). From such a perspective, and despite the great value of the scientific study of religious phenomena within contemporary expert-systems, ultimately there is only *one* goal that *really* matters in an engagement with spirituality - transformative metanoia: 'to awaken within ourselves this deeper consciousness and to penetrate to that state, which the Buddha called the Awakening or Enlightenment' (249), and which has been identified in many religious traditions, as we have seen above.

Consequently, if RMT and the theory of reflexive spirituality are to realize their considerable potential within sociology and the study of religion they must incorporate more fully an appreciation of the central role within religions of metanoia, of the transforming nature of the noesis of the divine with which religion is ultimately concerned. They must recognize that spirituality is not just concerned with the deployment of religious knowledge for the construction of personal and collective narratives and meaning-systems only. Above all, reflexive spirituality is concerned with cultivating and facilitating metanoic encounters, of embracing noesis of a transcendent nature. This implies that the academic and para-academic expert-systems that increasingly mediate knowledge about spirituality and religion within the society of high modernity face special challenges not faced by expert-systems operating in other fields. This includes, for example, the hermeneutic question or so-called "Insider/Outsider Problem" represented in its various forms in McCutcheon (1999). This situation also generates tensions not only within the sociology of religion, religion studies and theology (eg., McCutcheon, 1997; Wiebe, 2000), but also between those and related fields that deal with more mundane forms of knowledge, as the example of Giddens and his social analysis illustrates. This may be felt to be some to be regrettable, while others will embrace it as the challenge it is.

Either way, it seems to be an unavoidable fact arising from the very nature of spirituality itself.

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