‘I WAS IN THE SPIRIT ON THE LORD’S DAY’

Reflections on Ecstatic Religion in the New Testament

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One of the things which the experimental and innovative 1960s did for the study of religion in the West was to draw attention to the problem of what gradually came to be called ‘altered states of consciousness’ and their relationship to the other elements of religious belief and practice. The circumstances are well enough known — young (or at least youngish) people being persuaded to experiment with certain drugs, of which LSD was the best known and one of the most spectacular, and in some cases emerging from their experiences with a fresh view of the structure of the universe. I say ‘in some cases’ deliberately, because most drug experimenters never thought of drawing any metaphysical conclusions from what they had experienced. But enough claims were made to fan a spark of interest here and there.

The question was this: do altered states of consciousness, however they may be induced (or indeed if they occur spontaneously) help to authenticate faith, or do they not? Are they to be explained solely in terms of the chemistry of the brain and central nervous system, or might they have some wider significance? These questions pointed backward at something far more fundamental and far more disturbing, namely the possible conclusion that ecstasy had always been a well-defined mode in which religion expressed itself, and that the absence of ecstasy from most contemporary forms of Christianity was less a matter to be noted with satisfaction than a matter of serious concern. One of the consequences of reflections such as these was of course the so-called ‘charismatic movement’ among otherwise well-balanced Christians, in which glossolalia of a kind again became common among churchpeople who not so long before would have recoiled in horror from such pentecostal crudities. Some churches and even theological colleges became deeply divided over the issue of the gifts of the Spirit. On one side the charismatics, or if you prefer, the neo-Pentecostals, with their


2. A variety of views will be found in Nils G. Holm (ed.), Religious Ecstasy (Stockholm 1982) — an especially valuable collection of case studies. See particularly the essays by Nora Ahlberg, Kaj Björkqvist and Owe Wikström on pp.63–102.
speaking in tongues and their healings and exorcisms; on the other side the majority.³ Of course even the non-charismatic majority could not escape the many references in the Bible to the work of the Holy Spirit. But what they could — and did — do was to scale down the ecstasies, the trances, the visions and the voices to what they could understand and appreciate, in most cases good behaviour and a certain sense of spiritual comfort. This was, I suppose, inevitable. But the historian of religions whose field of vision is wide enough to see some more comprehensive patterns of belief and behaviour cannot avoid the sense that the tamed vision and the chastened and moralized ecstasy is a wilful misinterpretation of at least part of the New Testament.

Religion is not, and never has been, merely a matter of organized thought, well-behaved ritual and sound morals. Always it has had another side — the spontaneous, the unstructured and the ecstatic.⁴ And there are reasons why many scholars have believed that the spontaneous came first in human history, and that rational reflection on the nature of the supernatural world was a relative late-comer on the human scene.⁵ On this evolutionary view, reason would then be the safety-valve holding down the spontaneous and unstructured. Of course, even the best safety-valves break occasionally, and that is when nasty things happen, when visions are seen and voices are heard, when clothes are thrown off and roles are abandoned, when processions give way to riots and windows are broken. But in the recent history of the Christian West, organized religion has served precisely as a safety-valve of that kind, allowing the passage of only limited and predetermined amounts of spiritual steam.

The New Testament, I often feel, is far less structured than we should like to make it. As well as its element of law, it also contains an element of the potentially lawless, which we see Paul in particular struggling to contain within reasonable bounds. The most graphic passages having to do with ecstasy are however those in the Book of Revelation, which appears to move in a different world from that of the greater part of the Pauline corpus. In Revelation, it is ecstasy which rules from the first moment: ‘I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet

³. There is however reason to suspect that in many such cases the issue has been less a matter of ecstatic religion as such than of the authority of the Bible when it speaks of the gifts of the Spirit. Many so-called charismatics, glossolalia notwithstanding, are probably not ecstatics at all, their ‘ecstatic’ phenomena being consciously produced and capable of being brought to an end whenever required.


⁵. ‘Spontaneous’ in this sense need not mean ‘ecstatic’. But R. R. Marett’s theory of ‘preanimistic religion’ and Rudolf Otto’s parallel theory of ‘the holy’ both emphasized the primacy of the feelings in the earliest stage of religion.
saying, "Write what you see in a book . . ."' (1:10f.) John turns to 'see the
voice', whereupon he sees seven lampstands and amid them 'one like a son
of man': 'When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.' (v.17) Later in
the book we are told how John saw an open door in heaven, and heard a
voice saying, 'Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place
after this' (4:1). John responds, or something within him responds: 'At
once I was in the Spirit . . .' (4:2) Again he looked, saw and heard. Two
further examples may complete the record. From chapter 17: 'And he
carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting
on a scarlet beast . . .' (17:3) And finally the vision of the New Jerusalem:
'And in the Spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain, and showed
me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God . . .' (21:10).

From these few texts (and leaving others on one side for the moment) we
can see a typical ecstatic pattern, involving visions, voices, symbols, loss of
consciousness ('I fell at his feet as though dead'), and the communication of
secret, hidden knowledge. Elsewhere in the Book of Revelation there is
much that is cryptic and in cipher, as I am sure I need not remind you — all
those codes which later Christian generations have struggled so hard to
break. So while the revelation may in part be relatively obvious in its points
of reference, one cannot altogether avoid the impression that some of the
codes involved, like the code of glossolalia, were intended to be broken only
by the same means, in conditions of ecstasy.

The one verbal formula which binds all the visions together is, of course,
the expression 'in the Spirit' (ἐν πνεύματι). It was only while preparing this
paper that I was struck by a simple device used by practically all English
translators to make a theological point, namely the spelling of 'Spirit' with
a capital 'S'. To any Christian reader, this at once suggests that the Spirit in
question is the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity, and that
whatever 'in the Spirit' might mean, it has to be in accordance with what is
otherwise believed about the Holy Spirit. Reading Revelation in the light of,
say, Ephesians, would establish a background of an opposition between the
Spirit and the flesh, and between the Spirit and the law; and a well-known
catalogue of 'the fruit of the Spirit' — 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,
goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Gal.5:16ff.) Therefore it
might easily seem as though it is in these qualities that the Spirit is revealed,
and that since any or all of them can be achieved without the need to lose
control of the conscious mind, whatever ecstasies there may be in the New
Testament are in no way essential to the force of the message.6

6. There would seem to have been a certain resistance among New Testament scholars to
acknowledging too freely the ecstatic and visionary element in early Christianity, due no
doubt to an over-emphasis on the ethical and the moral. For instance, Vincent Taylor: 'It
But while the spelling of Spirit with a capital 'S' may sometimes be justified, I am by no means convinced that this is always the case. In fact I am inclined to think that in the cases I have quoted, it may point us in the wrong direction altogether. I am disposed to believe that ἐν πνεύματι could be translated almost as easily 'in a trance' — which is not to say that there is anything suspect about the phenomenon, merely that it cannot be reduced to questions of subsequent good behaviour and a lasting sense of joy and wellbeing.

Whether Jesus himself had ecstatic experiences of this order it is a little more difficult to say, though certain passages in the Gospels rather suggest that he did. For instance, at his baptism '. . . the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven . . .' (Matt.4:16f.). And immediately following this 'Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil': he fasted, heard the voice of the tempter; was transported to the pinnacle of the temple, and to 'a very high mountain'. He was belaboured by the devil, and subsequently ministered to by angels. He 'saw' Satan fall like lightning from heaven (Lk.10:18); and he 'rejoiced in the Holy Spirit' (10:21).

Concerning Paul, we are better informed. In an oblique reference to himself he spoke of ' . . . a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up (ἀρπαγέντα) to the third heaven . . . and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter' (2 Cor.12:2-4). This was productive of elation at 'the abundance of revelations' (12:7) he had received; but it also led to his 'thorn in the flesh', his 'messenger of Satan' to prevent him from making too much of what he had experienced — an interesting parallel to the belief fairly common in other traditions, that direct experiential contact with the world of the spirit is always achieved (or granted) at a price — an injury, the loss of some faculty, or perhaps even death. Paul was 'caught up' to the third heaven. At the Parousia, '. . . we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air' (1 Thess.4:17). The verb is the same — in this case ἀρπαγησόμεθα. I know that one should not make too much of this, but it does rather suggest that, as in other cultures, biblical ecstasy is strictly a foretaste of

is especially notable that the fruits of the Spirit are ethical. The Early Church knew strange manifestations of the Spirit . . . but these are exceptional and sporadic. The broad stream of New Testament teaching concerning men ‘Filled with the Spirit’ is related to conduct, duties, service, insight, and saintliness.' The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit (London 1937), p.50.

that which will happen once and for all on death, and to the whole com-
unity at the Parousia.

In touching on Paul's ecstatic experience, I have of course passed over
the record in Acts of the ecstatic experiences of the early Christian com-
munity in Jerusalem. But these are too well known to require any descrip-
tion. We may just note that in Acts, the direction is rather downward than
upward. There is nothing of the spirit — anyone's spirit — being caught up
into the heavens, or admitted into the secret counsels of the Almighty. But
that there was a measure of ecstasy even on the human level is obvious
enough, most obviously in respect of the much-discussed glossolalia. Except
that on this occasion the ecstasy is rather collective than individual.
Whether anyone ever spoke in tongues in the privacy of his own room we
have no way of knowing. But since glossolalia was after all a means of com-
munication, the main emphasis was on glossolalia in the assembly of the
faithful. Paul stated in 1 Cor. 14: 'I thank God that I speak in tongues more
than you all; nevertheless in church I would rather speak five words with my
mind, in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue'
(v.19), having previously said that 'one who speaks in a tongue speaks not
to men but to God', and 'utters mysteries in the Spirit' (1 Cor. 14:2).

Already with Paul, however, we have the beginnings of a paradigm of
later Christian treatment of ecstatic states, that they cannot be prevented
from happening, but that they should be placed under some measure of
control. Again in 1 Corinthians, Paul sums up his discussion of glossolalia
in the words: 'So, my brethren, earnestly desire to prophesy [which of
course did not mean the issuing of random forecasts on the shape of things
to come, but the passing on of direct personal communication from the
Lord], and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done
decently and in order' (14:39f.). Interestingly enough, on this occasion Paul
was in some measure pulling rank, stating that this was 'a command of the
Lord' (v.37). The question was, how this was to be achieved. Presumably
the Christian congregation as a whole was as concerned as Paul to see that
things were done 'decently and in order'; but ecstatic prophecy and
glossolalia could hardly be guaranteed always to submit to the rules of good
behaviour. A further question was how far the interpretation of the ecstatic
state could be made to fit into the emerging doctrinal patterns of the young
Christian Church.

It is interesting to note that even an interpreter of impeccable evangelical
orthodoxy, F. F. Bruce, once wrote that:

We might . . . have expected a priori that if God wished to communicate
the knowledge of His nature and will to mankind He might have done so
in a series of propositions, after the manner of theological summaries,
bodies of divinity and confessions of faith which are drawn up article by article in logical sequence. Doubtless God might have done so, but doubtless He never did.

It is encouraging to read this. But it is less encouraging to follow some of the steps by which the Church was forced to attempt to control that which happened outside the doctrinal fence. But before I take up that question, let me as a historian of religion make one further general reflection.

Ecstasy — or if you prefer, ‘altered states of consciousness’ — is a phenomenon common to practically all religious traditions, and there is no reason to suppose that the experiences of Paul and the ‘John’ of Revelation were in any way unique. The complex we generally call ‘shamanism’ is entirely based on the double presupposition that the individual soul or spirit is capable of being projected beyond the body into the regions of the powerful spirits who control human affairs, and that other spirits are able to enter into the human body. The phenomenon is particularly well attested in the northern hemisphere, from Japan to Lapland, but is to be seen in most parts of the world. The shaman is in a manner of speaking a prophet. He (or in some cases she) is also a priest, a healer and a guardian of tradition. Some of the features of shamanism are to be found in most of the world’s great religious traditions, though by this time placed within a social and doctrinal setting far different from that of the hunter-gatherers whom the shaman proper once served. The shaman, too, was ‘in the spirit’: that is, in a state in which the body ceased to be of importance, in which the senses were disconnected, in which messages were received and passed on.

Note that I am not even hinting that the author of the Book of Revelation was a shaman; but I am suggesting that the phenomenon of being ‘in the spirit’ was one which the shaman would have been able to recognize as part of the tools of his particular spiritual trade. That it involved being in a trance state is clear enough, also that it involved supernatural communications from ‘the other side’.

But has it not always been part of the Christian hermeneutical tradition to attempt to demonstrate the uniqueness of Christianity by energetically denying that phenomena which emerge in a Christian setting can have anything in common with parallel phenomena from any other part of the world of religion? And was not the Christian world scandalized by the German ‘history of religion school’ at the end of the last century when they


9. The literature of shamanism is also enormous. See e.g. the extensive bibliography in Louise Bäckman and Åke Hultkrantz. Studies in Lapp Shamanism (Stockholm 1978), pp.111-120.
began to suggest that some of those phenomena had well-attested parallels in other parts of the ancient world? That is one part of the later story: that ecstatic religion in the New Testament has been taken, for theological reasons, to be different from any other kind of ecstatic religion. Another part is that those later interpreters who were themselves strangers to the full-blooded ecstasy which I think we can see here and there in the New Testament, were forced to interpret the ‘ecstatic’ passages as though they referred to something else entirely. A third part concerns the confusion which arose later in Christian history, when the occasional ecstatic or visionary did emerge.

In the early Church there was clearly no question at all as to the existence or the power of the supernatural world, and it was entirely possible for anyone to be set upon or invaded by any of the seedy inhabitants of that world, or to receive utterly false messages from the father of lies. Thus Tertullian, in his *de Anima*, gives an account of daemons as the ‘explanation’ of the oracles of the pagan world, and in his *Apologia* he asserts that daemons inhabiting the atmosphere may be used as weather forecasters, apparently with some success. Clement of Alexandria stated that the ancient Greek prophets were ‘stirred up by daemons, or disordered by waters, fragrances or some quality of the air’; the Hebrews on the other hand always speaking ‘by the power and mind of God’. But when Christians, from Paul on, found ecstasy, prophecy, trance and glossolalia among their own members (as they were almost bound to, in the conditions of the day) they had perforce to refer those experiences and their manifestations to the only prototypes they possessed, either to Greek priestesses or Hebrew prophets. The phenomenon as such was not, however, necessarily connected with either. It was simply human, and bore no essential relationship to any of the theories which were found to account for it. There were early Christian groups who, like the Pentecostals of a later age, laid a certain stress on the cultivation of ecstasy, the best known of these being the Montanists and the best-known Montanist being no less a person than Tertullian.

By Tertullian’s day, to use T. R. Glover’s phrase, ‘... the ministry of the Spirit, the ministry of gifts, [had been] ... succeeded by the ministry of office, with its lower ideals of the practical and the expedient’. Even at this early stage, the time was perhaps ripe for some kind of reformation. It came out of Phrygia, and was centred around the person of Montanus and his

12. Ibid., p.343
two female disciples, Prisca and Maximilla, and their oracles. Rarely indeed will you find a later commentator who has a good word to say for the Montanists; generally it is held that in their deliberate cultivation of ecstasy they were turning away from what Glover calls 'the essentially spiritual conception of religion' in the direction of ecstasy. I fancy that they would have been extremely hard to convince on that point. But it was that latter day Montanist, Tertullian, who gave us a telling description of a visionary:

We have to-day among us a sister who has received gifts of the nature of revelations, which she undergoes in spirit in the church amid the rites of the Lord's day [another case of 'being in the spirit on the Lord's day!] falling into ecstasy. She converses with angels, sometimes even with the Lord, and sees and hears mysteries, and reads the hearts of certain persons, and brings healings to those who ask. According to what Scriptures are read, or psalms sung, or addresses made, or prayers offered up, the matter of her visions is supplied ....

Tertullian was however by no means disposed to condemn these experiences of hers as spurious. Not that Tertullian was himself a visionary; but he knew enough to recognize the genuine article when he came across it. And it may be that experiences like those of Tertullian's anonymous sister have been more common than we feel ourselves comfortable about accepting.

From Tertullian to John Wesley is a fairly long and abrupt step, a giant stride which leaps over many known and unknown mediaeval visionaries. Wesley was no stranger to ecstasy, though less in himself than in those who (somewhat oddly) were thrown into ecstasy by listening to his sermons. But he insists that the work of the Holy Spirit never breaks the bounds of decorum:

The impulses of the Holy Spirit, even in men really inspired, so suit themselves to their rational faculties, as not to divest themselves of the government of themselves, like the heathen priests under their diabolical possessions. Evil spirits threw their prophets into such ungovernable ecstasies, as forced them to speak and act like madmen. But the Spirit of God left His prophets the clear use of their judgement, and never hurried them into any improprieties either as to the matter, manner, or time of their speaking ....

Interestingly enough, though, Wesley, was able to place a somewhat different interpretation on Paul's ecstatic experience in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul could not have been deceived, and God must therefore be able to

13. Ibid., p.345.
transport the faithful into any of the various heavens, should he so choose. To quote Wesley again:

It is equally possible with God to present distant things to the imagination in the body, as if the soul were absent from it, and present with them; or to transport both soul and body for what time He pleases to heaven; or to transport the soul only thither for a season, and in the meantime to preserve the body fit for its re-entrance.

But since even Paul claimed not to have known precisely what had happened to him, it is safest not to speculate too far: 'it would be vain curiosity for us to attempt determining it'. But at least we may surmise that in Wesley's view, the Holy Spirit might on an occasion break one or other rule of consciousness, space or time; but not the rule of rationality or the rule of law (in the ethical sense). Commenting on Revelation 1:10, and the phrase 'in the Spirit', he says — and this was absolutely as far as he was prepared to go — that 'in the Spirit' means 'in a trance, a prophetic vision; so overwhelmed with the power, and filled with the light, of the Holy Spirit, as to be insensible of outward things, and wholly taken up with the spiritual and divine'. There were, of course, still the 'fruits of the Spirit' to be taken into account.

For most of the time, Wesley was speaking with the voice of the Age of Reason. Fortunately, though, he was not as yet able to speak with the voice of the Age of Psychology, which in almost all later interpretations of ecstasy, whether Christian or not, contrives to be able to shout down whatever other options might be entertained. On this occasion I have neither the time nor the inclination to undertake a whistle-stop tour of psychological opinion on the subject of ecstasy. Let me merely mention one or two of its salient features. In the first place, it always tacitly assumes that ecstasy is, if not actually pathological, at least abnormal. Secondly, it generally supposes that it is generated within the human brain and nervous system, and may be capable of being explained away chemically, as a product of under-nourishment (fasting), prolonged meditation, the ingestion of poisons, or in extreme cases hallucinogens; or alternatively, that it is part of the individual's genetic make-up. Ecstasies are simply, on this view, short-circuits in the brain, which become religious only to the extent to which the data they provide are slotted into the doctrinal framework of one or another religious tradition. Ecstasy is one; it is the interpretations

16. Ibid., p.672
17. Ibid., p.938
which are diverse. Add to this the overwhelming impact of the categories of the Age of Reason on biblical hermeneutics, and the ecstatic wing of pneumatology was bound to run into some very stony ground. In the most extreme cases, it was stated categorically that not only were the experiences themselves not quite what a pre-scientific age believed them to be, but also that there was in effect no supernatural order there for anyone to relate to. In less extreme cases, there might be an increasingly shapeless 'transcendent' out there (or in there) somewhere; but ecstasy had little or nothing to do with it.

But rather than continue to generalize along these lines, allow me to give you a concrete example from our own century.

In the 1920s, one of the most celebrated of international Christians was an Indian convert, Sadhu Sundar Singh, born in 1889 in the Punjab, converted to Christianity as a direct result of seeing a vision of Jesus Christ, and later a much-travelled preacher.  

He was baptized by an Anglican missionary, and for a couple of years attended an Anglican theological college; but in all essentials he was a non-denominational free spirit. He was also an ecstatic and visionary.

In 1920 he met in Oxford the noted New Testament scholar B. H. Streeter, who wrote a book about him with the assistance of a young Indian student, A. J. Appasamy. But Streeter was a liberal, a dabbler in psychology and a thoroughgoing rationalist. When he was told about the Sadhu’s visions, he accepted them up to a point, but with many reservations and not a few warnings. At this time, Sundar Singh was interesting chiefly because he was (or appeared to be) that oddity, a living and breathing 'mystic'. Streeter wrote: ‘India is the land of Mystics, but the Sadhu is the first Indian — or rather the first whose experiences we have on record — to become a Christocentric Mystic.’ ‘Mystic‘ in this case meant ‘visionary’, and one can safely say that visionaries were exceedingly uncommon in the Protestant world of the 1920s. Sundar Singh at this time was touchingly straightforward about his visions and ecstasies, which were by all accounts extremely common: ‘... I have seen many things like the visions at the end of Revelation; and I thought when I saw them, “Our elder brother two thousand years ago has been visiting these same places.”’ Sundar Singh, too, was prepared to distinguish between true and false ecstasies, the false

20. Again the Sundar Singh literature is vast, though most of it is grossly partisan. Much was written in the 1920s and 1930s. For more detail see Sharpe, 'Sadhu Sundar Singh and his Critics,' in Religion 6 (1976), pp.48–66; and idem, ‘Christian Mysticism in Theory and Practice: Nathan Söderblom and Sadhu Sundar Singh,’ in Religious Traditions 4/1 (1981), pp.19–37.


22. Ibid., p.143.

23. Ibid., p.122.
ones being accompanied on an occasion by 'a sort of heat' (which might locate them somewhere in the regions of Yoga, though that is not a subject I have time to go into now): 'but there was no joy in it, and I found these experiences were a hindrance to my getting into the true Ecstasy.'

Streeter appears actually to have been slightly embarrassed by what the Sadhu told him, and wondered whether it might not be better to suppress the whole business. At one point he observed that 'Educated people, unless indeed they have studied the lives of the Mystics, are apt to question the mental balance of any one who not only sees Visions, but takes them seriously.' This Sundar Singh undoubtedly did; he could not have taken them more seriously, though from this point on, he refused ever again to speak about them in public. This might have been connected with Streeter's final remarkable statement, that to Sundar Singh:

... Ecstasy may not only be without danger but may bring actual profit. It is not so with the rest of us. The light that we must walk by is the light of conscious thought, with prayer and meditation. The specious Visions and Revelations which come by the easy path of facile trance-practice, whether in ourselves or others, we are mistaken to admire, we are demented if we seek.

The message could not have been clearer. The New Testament may contain visions and voices, raptures and ecstasies, and flights 'in the spirit'. But the modern world of a modern churchman has no use for such manifestations of what probably belong to religious pathology, and have no place in the chancel, the church assembly or the senior common room.

Streeter was an Anglican. Ronald Knox had been an Anglican, but had become a Roman Catholic. He too was fascinated by the ecstatic side of religion, and wrote his magnum opus, Enthusiasm (1950) on it. To Knox, the only safeguard was the institutional Church of Rome. She at least knew how to control ecstastics. Those who were unable to accept her 'precept, example and such just correction as may be necessary' were in the most serious spiritual danger. He wrote toward the end of his book that in the mind of 'the ordinary believing Christian', the principles of reason and revelation are interlocked, and that in everyday life 'there is an unconscious give-and-take which regulates your thought without friction'. And he went on:

It is not so with the convert to enthusiasm. In his mind, a sudden coup d'état has dethroned the speculative intellect altogether; it remains a mere puppet monarch, signing every paper that is given to it with a rubber

24. Ibid., p.151.
25. Ibid., p.110.
26. Ibid., p.155f.
stamp. To be sure, you have the illusion of liberty; it is, in part at least, your own 'lights' that interpret doctrine for you. But those lights are not really your own; they are (supposedly at least) dictated to you by a Divine monitor whose authority you are not allowed to question. You must not think; that would be to use the arm of flesh, and forsake your birthright. That is the logic of enthusiasm...

Knox did not mention Sundar Singh. It was as well that he did not, for otherwise he might have found that workaday Christianity, with no element of the visionary in its make-up, had in the end driven him into the arms of the Swedenborgians. That however is not an episode I can go further into now. Let me merely add one last Sundar Singh footnote: that during the last few years of his short life, he was attacked bitterly and often by Roman Catholic writers. Doubtless there were many reasons for this, but one of them was certainly that since he was a visionary operating outside the boundaries of Mother Church, he was at considerable spiritual risk himself, and was liable to lead others along the same dangerous path. Not that there was any evidence that he actually ever persuaded anyone else to try to become a visionary or an ecstatic: but he might have.

In considering the Sundar Singh episode, it may seem that we have wandered far from our original subject. But there is, I believe, an organic connection. To the Christian community at large, the New Testament is not only a collection of first-century Greek writings; it is everything that those writings have been interpreted as meaning over a period of almost two thousand years. No, not everything — for every Christian body has had its own filter, through which the New Testament has been passed, its own explicit or implicit order of priorities which decrees which parts of the New Testament are of supreme importance, and which are not. By the twentieth century, the ecstatic had come to be fairly firmly excluded from the mainstream of Christianity, Catholic and Protestant alike. But the words 'spirit' (spelt with or without a capital 'S') and 'Holy Spirit' remained to inspire, challenge, tantalize and puzzle the faithful. Even Paul clearly did not believe that they should be taken to refer only to ecstasies, trances and visions. I fancy, though, that he would have been the last person to have denied that being 'caught up into the third heaven' was one manifestation of the Spirit. He had after all been there himself.

28. I have attempted to describe this remarkable and hitherto almost unknown episode in an article, 'Sadhu Sundar Singh and the New Church,' in Studia Swedenborgiana 5/2 (1984), pp.5–28. I have concluded that for most of his life, Sundar Singh was unable to gain any guidance from the Christians he had met on the matter of visionary (ecstatic) experience, and that on reading Swedenborg, for the first time he found a Christian who understood visions, and who was a visionary himself (p.27).
But what becomes of ‘pneumatology’ when this element of personal ecstatic experience comes to be tucked away in the ‘too hard’ file? Well, I think that we have seen a little of what becomes of it. If you cannot deal with a matter in the terms in which it was originally expressed, then *faute de mieux* you have to cope with it as best you can, in the terms you do understand. For modern Christianity that has meant very largely what we call by such names as ‘self-transcendence’, intensified moral effort and a sense of all-embracing love and compassion for a suffering cosmos — all held safely within the institutional framework of the Church. Where ecstasies and visions do occur in this moral (which we often designate ‘spiritual’) setting, they tend to be treated with the utmost discomfort — which is the most obvious reason why the ecstatic fringe of Christianity has gone its own way in recent years, usually pursuing its visions within its own ethnic or sectarian walls, though not without having an impact of sorts on some of the majority churches through the so-called charismatic movement.

There remains to be said that aside from theological interpretations, there is such a thing as the sociology of religious ecstasy. The contemplation of a sociological dimension of pneumatology may be distasteful to some religious thinkers, but it really cannot be avoided in the long run. I cannot say much about it at the tail-end of a lengthy paper, but it has to be recognised that ecstatic Christianity goes in waves, and that its periods of popularity (and acceptability) are not unconnected with the socio-economic conditions of the world at any given time and in any given place. Apocalyptic is always born of distress. Immediate revelations are more likely to be sought when the capacity of the dominant authority in religion to mediate with the unseen world is called in question. Periods of greater social stability are very likely to witness a decline in ecstatic religion and eschatological speculation. This is amply documented with respect to millennarian movements of all kinds, with their attendant visions, trances and prophecies — which do not occur when the fabric of society is secure and steady, but emerge almost without fail in times of fear and uncertainty.

This may all be ‘enthusiasm’. We may decline to submit to the treatment of our subject by such insensitive hands. But at least there would seem to be something there worth investigating, in Christianity just as much as in Melanesian cargo cults or South African prophet movements. But if we refuse to think of pneumatology in such (let us say) crass terms, we should be quite clear in our minds as to why we do so. Even that — the reasons we produce for declining the investigation — may be part of the evidence which needs to be considered in tracing the long road of pneumatology from Patmos to St. Paul’s.