

DIRECT EXPERIENCE OF GOD IN
CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY.

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To my Dominican sisters, Cabra for
the provision of privileged
opportunities and unfailing
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INTRODUCTION.

'Direct experience of God' is a term frequently used by theologians without adequate clarification regarding its meaning. The understanding thereof has become increasingly complicated by the process of secularization. In the 1960's, it was repeatedly asserted that modern people could not have direct experiences of God, albeit that one could still live by faith and by commitment to the way of Jesus in a world in which, it was asserted, "God is dead". This claim, although long predominant, has been challenged by the upsurge of interest in mysticism, both Eastern and Western, and the burgeoning of Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement, in which circles direct experience of God was frequently claimed. If direct experience of God is something natural to humanity, interpretation of it will vary in exactly the same way as interpretation of all other human experiences. This could be a possible reason for it being so very poorly integrated into everyday life, resulting in the loss of meaning and value.

This present thesis does not set out to prove that direct experience of God is possible or not. Nor does it try to prove that God exists because of the possibility of direct experience. It is an attempt to determine what precisely contemporary theologians mean when they use the term, particularly since God is not just another person distinct from us, but a transcendent reality. The question clamours for refinement and elucidation and it points to a crucial issue for Christian faith and practice. The thesis

highlights the fact that experience is not a simple datum which we report, but that it is the result of interpreting something given in the light of a conceptual scheme. It is, therefore, appropriate for this thesis to examine specific characteristics of direct experience of God.

Chapter one tries to show very succinctly how direct experiences of God are firmly rooted in Biblical religion. The Israelites claimed to have had explicit experiences of God, but their adherence to human unworthiness undermined their ownership thereof. The unique and intimate 'Abba-experiences' of Jesus formed part of the unconditional assurance that God is to be found in every aspect of human life while the direct experiences of the early Christians were indispensable to the foundational period of Christianity.

Since it is impossible to include every significant theologian, the research has been confined to the work of five contemporary theologians: Karl Rahner, Thomas Merton, Matthew Fox, Gustavo Gutiérrez, all Catholic theologians, and Morton Kelsey, who shares in the broader Catholic tradition. Despite their differences in style, ideas and purposes, it is possible to place their respective views on a continuum ranging from the abstract philosophical stance of Rahner to a concrete social-historical one of Gutiérrez.

The first presentation, that of Karl Rahner, is an excellent example of a philosophical-theological treatise which serves as a

preparation towards understanding the illustrations of the other theologians. His exposition is situated in "transcendental Thomism". He places strong emphasis on direct experience of God as a universal experience and as an essential constituent of being human which metaphysics and theology attempt to interpret. The understanding of direct experience of God requires a knowledge of the God-world relation and of God as the source and criterion of our total experience of reality and of human self-transcendence.

Morton Kelsey's explicit philosophical and scientific framework of religious experience links him with Rahner. He presents powerful arguments for the restoration of the ancient Platonic world-view, which makes provision for belief in the spiritual dimension of reality. His insistence on the integration of a healthy ego in direct experience cannot be overstated as he bases his work on the philosophical implications of Jung's thought: hence also the reliance on the insights of contemporary depth psychology.

This leads us to Thomas Merton, a contemplative monk, who was familiar with both the life of the cloister and secular life. Although differently, he correlates with Kelsey in utilizing contemporary psychological insights towards growth in human wholeness. He stresses the personal element of direct encounter with God, and refocuses on humanity's need for direct contact with God in apophatic prayer experiences. The experience forms part of the discovery of the 'true self', i.e. humanity's restoring itself

in the image and likeness of God.

The last two theologians focus especially on the broader world: Matthew Fox on creation and Gustavo Gutiérrez on socio-political realities. Fox's brand of mysticism forms part of an earthly spirituality which celebrates natural ecstasies defined by him as direct experiences of God. This non-elitist creation-ecstasy and compassion-centered spirituality provides the understanding that direct experiences are readily available in the ordinary events of life. God can be experienced in sensual realities and this contains intense personal and world-transforming implications as it is related to our human responsibility of justice-making towards the earth. In this sense Fox links up with Gutiérrez's approach to direct experience of God.

Since Gustavo Gutierrez's theology is primarily a practical approach to social realities, it provides the framework for people to experience God directly in socio-political distress and poverty. Direct experience of God is related to a profound experience of conversion in the biblical sense of the word. In concrete terms the direct experience of God takes place in the least of our brothers and sisters, the outcast and the oppressed. The meaning of direct experience of God is, however, not self-evident, nor explicit in the writings of the various theologians, since the concept is deeply embedded in their philosophies and entangled with numerous other notions. To obtain some type of meaning it is necessary to

extricate it from the wider framework of their works. Since none of the theologians' work can present a finished and final statement regarding direct experience of God, the thesis does not contain the final definition of what direct experience of God means. As no presentation of direct experience of God is beyond critique, analytical comments occur at the end of each chapter. Evaluative comparisons and conclusions have been postponed until the final chapter when significant perspectives are related and compared as an aggregate.

1. DIRECT EXPERIENCE OF GOD: A PARADOX WITHIN JEWISH THEOLOGY.

1.1. Introduction.

The idea of a *direct experience of God* is thoroughly biblical and lies at the heart of the foundational period of Christianity. Religious experience undoubtedly forms the nucleus of all religion and is a vital dimension of humanity's experience of reality.

In the Biblical tradition God was a continually experienced reality. The Israelites adhered to a world-view in which the idea of human-divine encounter was generally considered a natural and necessary phenomenon of human existence. For the Jews, experience of the spiritual dimension of reality formed part of their understanding of the nature of God, and of the created universe, both physical and non-physical. Since the spiritual dimension of reality formed an integral part of life, contact with it, whether in the form of visions, fantasies, dreams, poetic-inspiration, ecstasy or religious experience, was not considered as something out of the course of natural human events. In fact they not only believed in the spiritual dimension of reality, but regarded such experience as imperative. For this reason myth, legend, story and saga played significant roles in the symbolic descriptions of encounters with this dimension of reality. The mytho-poetic imagery indicated to the finite human intellect the existence of an ineffable infinite. The myths, however, were not completely

divorced from reality, but provided a way to speak about aspects of reality about which little, or nothing, could be said using ordinary language.

In the context of this world-view, where the spiritual dimension of reality is considered a vital aspect of a wholesome existence, God is not a philosophical abstract, but is known in the light of a shared and lived experience. The God that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses experienced, was the true and living God of the Biblical faith. The Jewish people experienced their God as profoundly near, intimately close, and the term 'ginosko' (to know, to experience) was very often used to accentuate the immediacy of their relationship with Yahweh (Nemeck and Coombs:1985:19). Yet the Old Testament also testified to the Jewish understanding and experience of God as profound mystery, and the Jews respected the essential unknowability of the true God. The possibility of seeing this God, in particular of seeing the face of God, was an exceptional privilege, but it was also perceived as a dangerous experience, because seeing the face of God meant certain death (Ex 33:20).

The Jewish understanding of the unworthiness of human nature is implicit in their acceptance of the consequence of such an encounter. Parallel to this perception of human nature, is the Jewish theological understanding of God as omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, and the Jews frequently resort to the language of paradox, as evident in the Sinai revelation (Ex 33), to explain how

God could be more, or differently, present in particular places.

1.2. The Old Testament idea of a direct experience.

A fundamental principle of Yahwism is that God cannot directly be seen or portrayed. The question in this regard is then: what is meant by experiencing God *directly* in the Old Testament?

An experience of God occurred either in dreams, visions or face-to-face encounters. The face-to-face experience of God was wrapped in mystery, and for the Israelites it was imperative that this mystery be preserved, particularly by the discretion of speech; hence the constraint shown in Jewish spirituality in uttering the Divine Name. The apparently obscure vision the Jews had of the true and living God, contrasted sharply with the false gods of Israel's neighbours. Their idols could be seen directly, their forms delineated, their nature conceptualized and their territories and limits defined (Leech 1985:162). The God of the Old Testament is not knowable in that sense and with that kind of directness; it was rather an experience whereby they were fully conscious of the mysterious and ineffable nature of God and an awareness of the inevitability thereof. To experiencing the innermost being of God was to experience God in a direct but mysterious way. The two aspects went hand in hand (Leech 1985:162).

In the context of this perception of God, the word 'panîm' or 'countenance' or 'face' is the anthropomorphic symbol of presence, of direct encounter of the presence of God. When however the word is used with the verb of visual perception, "to see God face-to-face" the term refers to the essence and glory of God (Terrien 1978,146). To have seen the face of God is to have experienced the innermost being of God. It is still, however, in obscurity and hiddenness that something of God's divine radiance is perceived (see 1.2.2).

1.2.1. Human unworthiness.

The concept of human unworthiness operated as a restraining factor in claiming a direct experience of God whether visual, audial or of any other kind. The understanding that a person had to perish if s\he looked on God or even if s\he heard God's voice (Num.4:20), made people reluctant to claim a direct experience of God and often people had to cover their faces in God's presence. Manoah exclaimed "we are doomed to die, we have seen God"(Judg 13:22). Yet this did not diminish humanity's innate desire to experience God directly, however terrifying, as it is the nature of the human person to seek God and the nature of God to seek humanity (Terrien 1978,xvii).

Although God was regarded as absolutely transcendent, wholly other and veiled in darkness, God was nevertheless believed to be intimately near to, and was the light of, the Israelites. Yahweh

was experienced as the object of their deepest human desires, searchings and yearnings. To be united with the living God was life itself. The Israelites, however, remained reluctant to claim themselves worthy of any direct experience of God, since the qualitative difference between God and humanity always prevailed.

1.2.2. *The expression panim-el-panim.*

The expression panim-el-panim, as used in the Old Testament, literally means the face of El, and is used, above all, for the face of God. It also sometimes refers to a special relationship of God to a human person. Samuel Terrien comments that the term should not be construed as referring literally to visual perception. He describes it as:

"an idiom, often used with the verb of auditive rather than visual perception and it refers simply to the *direct non-mediated i.e. mediate character of a manifestation of God's presence*. It describes a person-to-person encounter *without the help or hindrance of an intermediary*" (my italics) (Terrien 1978:90,91).

Others understand the term "*my panim*" as "I myself" i.e. that the emphasis is on the personal presence of Yahweh. To seek the face of God in the Old Testament, would in this case imply seeking the direct fellowship of God, to come near God, as for example in prayer. Moses sought a direct experience with Yahweh not primarily

for himself, but also for the Israelites, God's people.

The use of *panîm* is significant for the several different nuances of the word. Since the Hebrew faith had such an intense personal character, the use of the term God's face in divine-human encounter, emphasised God's *direct, unmediated involvement* as well as God's personal sense of "presence" to humanity (Moberly 1983,74). According to Samual Terrien, Biblical Hebrew apparently did not possess an abstract term meaning "presence". The expression "the face of Yahweh" or "the face of Elohim" was often specifically used to designate, not only the presence, but also the innermost being of God. God was regarded as inaccessible even to a person of exceptional spiritual stature (like Moses) and the word *panîm* was consequently used in a metaphorical sense to designate a sense of God's immediate proximity. The expression literally carried the meaning that God "showed Himself" or "appeared" to individuals, but the paradox inherent in attempts to speak of humanity's communion with God remained unaltered (Terrien 1978,65).

1.3. Direct experiences of some Biblical personages, especially Moses.

Several Biblical personages such as Moses, Jacob and Job claimed to have had face-to-face encounters with God. Most of them qualify the degree of directness with which they gazed into God's face (Egan

1984:18) and how their respective circumstances determined the nature of the 'directness' of the encounter. Jacob, for example, after his wrestle with God, decided to call the place Peniel, "because I have seen God face-to-face and I have survived" (Gen 32:30). Job's final answer after his severe testing was that "I know you only by hearsay, but now having seen you with my own eyes, I can retract all I have said" (Job 42:5-6). Job's honour was no longer of importance when he was ushered into the realm of the divine. The moment he spent in the glorious presence of God, offered Job an all-sufficient gift: the immediacy of God himself. Job encountered God's holiness in its fullness, without intermediary, and the entire experience provided him with new insight into God and himself.

The face-to-face encounter of God with Moses is of deep significance in understanding the relationship, not only between Moses and Yahweh (Num.12:8; Deut. 34:10), but more generally between God and humanity as a whole. 'Direct' experiences of God in the Old Testament are characterized by the immediacy of God's presence, and individuals such as Jacob, Moses and Job were all brought closely into immediate proximity to "the Holy" or "the Presence of God". Human-Divine encounter occurred at the most intimate level of human consciousness in the form of a vision, a dream or a 'face-to-face' experience:

" If any person among you is a prophet I make myself known to

him in a vision. I speak to him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is at home in my house; I speak with him face-to-face plainly and not in riddles and he sees the form of Yahweh." Numb.12:7-8

The presence of God, though real, remained unseen, but the intensity of feeling was accompanied by the urge to know God with a deeper certainty. This is evident from the juxtaposition of apparently conflicting statements:

Ex.33:11 "And Yahweh spoke with Moses face-to-face".

Ex.33:26 "But (Yahweh) said: "You cannot see my face, for a human person shall not see me and live".

Yahweh spoke to Moses *panim-el-panim* as a person speaks with a friend (Ex 33:11). Moses requested God to manifest his real presence, and Yahweh was willing to reveal his splendour, but warned all the same, that there were dangers attached when He is experienced in such a direct way. He said: "*You cannot see my face and live*" (Ex 33:22). It is precisely herein that the paradox of Jewish theology lies: "that God is seen and yet not seen, known and yet unknowable, revealed but always in obscurity" (Leech 1985,162).

1.3.1. Moses' face-to-face experience of God.

The face-to-face encounter which Moses had with God was described

in spatial and temporal terms. Moses' deep desire was to see the divine, to see God. This is characteristic of all forms of mysticism, but the religion of the Bible, says Moberly, does not claim to be a mystical religion. It is nevertheless striking how the Old Testament in these or related passages, resists moves towards mysticism or divinization by insisting on the qualitative and ontological differences between God and humanity. Yet the paradox is clear in the fact that precisely those passages which say that a human person cannot see and hear God also affirm that just such has indeed happened (Moberly 1983,81).

1.3.1.1. Significant features of Moses' 'direct' experience of God.

1. The first important feature of Moses' experience of God was his all-pervasive *desire* to know God or at least some aspect of God and he *requested* a direct experience of God. When he was brought directly into the 'direct' presence of God, he was fully *aware* of the experience.

2. The Sinai encounter was also characterised by *divine-human dialogue*, a form of give and take between God and Moses, which was also evident in the 'Burning Bush' experience.

3. Another significant feature is that both the Sinai and the 'Burning Bush' experiences of God contained an intense *fear* of that which is unknown and the awe of that which is sacred. Moses

experienced that fear when he entered the direct presence of God. He was afraid to look in God's face, and as a result he veiled his face and saw only the back of Yahweh. The blinding light was too much to absorb directly and consequently he saw God by partial vision. (Ex 33:22). On the other hand the immediate impact of the divine face on Moses would have been fatal. The splendour of God was present in all its fullness, and Moses for his own sake needed to be protected from this. So Yahweh pressed on ahead and Moses came to see the "traces left behind" - the so-called "after-glow". Moberly states that the impact of this imagery in Exodus was important as it enhanced the qualitative superiority of God over humanity. Yahweh protected Moses, while Moses enjoyed the close presence of God, but the gulf between God and humanity was clearly emphasized, as the fine divine/human balance is central and of the utmost importance to Moses' encounter with God (Moberly 1983:82).

4. What was also meaningful in the experience was that the revelation of God provided Moses with a deeper certainty and assurance that God is Real. Terrien professes that it seems evident that at the moment of Moses's encounter with God he "discerns that the only knowledge is an acquaintance with divine presence in history. The inner core of the divine reality, precisely because it is divine, forever escapes humanity's grasp. Moses in requesting to know God's ways, wishes passionately to go beyond what he has already learned " (Terrien 1978:140).

The theological point made in Ex 3:20 was meant for humanity as a whole. In Moses's request for a fuller revelation of God, the distance between God and humanity had to be preserved. Even Moses had to observe the limitations inherent in humanity (Moberly 1983,81). Moses was thereafter revered as the man whom Yahweh knew face-to-face (Terrien 1978:112,113).

1.4. General characteristics of direct experiences of God in the Old Testament.

Direct experiences of God recorded in the Old Testament were inextricably linked with the audial and the visual faculties of humanity; both types of 'direct' experiences exercised a significant impact on the individual and could be equally awesome. Since Hebraism was a religion not of the eye, but of the ear (Terrien 1978:112) the presence of the Biblical God in the Old Testament was "heard" rather than "seen". In the case of Moses and the Burning Bush he did not see God, but he heard his Word. The presence of God was experienced as real and so was the spoken Word. The invisibility of the God who speaks is a cardinal tenet of Hebraic theology and still is today. Sight is submitted to hearing, the 'eye' is closed but the 'ear' is opened (Terrien 1978:112) .

Old Testament direct experiences of God can be characterised by the *immediacy of God's presence* and the bringing of the individual with *total awareness* and willingness into the close proximity of the

Holy. The directness of the experience is brought about *without the assistance of any intermediary*, as the encounter between God and the individual is marked by the personal nature of the experience. God and the individual experience each other by the strength of the one's awareness of the other.

The 'direct' experience of God normally took place in a few *fleeting instances*. The instances of awareness of the immediate encounter with the Divine Reality, were not only extremely brief, but appeared to have been the privilege of an extremely restricted few (Terrien 1978:29).

The experience is often marked by *human-divine dialogue* (as observed in the case of Moses, Jacob and Job), but throughout the dialogue, an interacting tension is maintained by the awareness of the *qualitative differences between God and the individual*.

The experience is accompanied not only by *intensity of feeling*, but also, an urge to know God with a deeper certainty. Throughout the experience some of God's wonder is perceived, the individual is provided with deeper insight into at least one aspect of the divine and this in turn provides better understanding of human nature.

1.4.1. *Significant results of direct experiences in the Old Testament.*

'Direct' meetings with God as recorded, *transformed* figures such as Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel and Job. In the case of Moses he was transformed from a fretful individual to a secure person. "My presence will go with you and I shall make you restful" (Ex 33: 12-14). Job, who experienced the mystery of God for himself, did not necessarily have his questions answered, but his entire understanding of God changed and that caused him to retract all his previous statements. His experience of God had changed his perspective and his knowledge of God was first-hand. His agonizing questions ceased, because he had 'seen' God for himself; he had experienced something of the essence and glory of God. What he obtained involved an encounter with the unutterable, because he could not describe God 'directly', but only in relationship and in action. The course of Abraham's, Jacob's and Samuel's lives changed after they encountered God in their respective ways.

The *transforming power* inherent in the experience leaves the individual with a more secure sense of identity and purpose of mission. The visions and ecstatic encounters of the prophets in the Old Testament often left them speechless and with God's Word burning in their hearts. Their collective experiences form a paradigm for those who experience God as Holy, as a wondrous and fascinating mystery (Egan 1984,18).

1.5. The paradox of "presence in absence".

Generally the Jewish people seemed, however, to have understood the paradox of presence in absence and absence in presence. They know that the hidden God was still God and, for this reason, S.Terrien says "Israel rose to a sublimity of theological perception because she understood the paradox of presence in absence" (Terrien 1978,83). They experienced God's hiddenness with the same intensity as they experienced God's presence, as both aspects formed an integral part of the understanding of God and both were of equal importance to Israel's faith. Both types of experiences were deeply rooted in the Jewish understanding of the nature of their God and the Universe. God for the Jews, was both hidden and present, near and far away (Balentine 1982,172) and the experience of God's presence was thus both real and elusive. The Sinai revelation would have presupposed this understanding; hence the apparently conflicting statements regarding Moses's face-to-face experiences of God. This dilemma which faith in Israel's God presents, is not a "dilemma that undermines Israel's faith, though it does stretch it to the farthest dimensions" (Balentine 1982,172). For Israel, to experience God meant not only to experience hiddenness and presence, God's oneness with humanity and with the entire universe, but also - and this is very important - God's otherness, God's omnipotence, omnipresence and immanence.

From a theological perspective, it is necessary to affirm that God

can be known as intimately present and simultaneously beyond all human reach and comprehension, precisely because God is understood to be transcendent and immanent. This ambiguity is inherent in language about God and does not need to be resolved. What is important is not so much that this tension should be dissipated, but that it should be recognised as paradox, and be described directly, as in Ex 33:11. (Moberly 1983,66).

1.6. The direct experience of God as an eschatological reality in the New Testament.

Since a human person, according to the Old Testament tradition, could not see the 'face' of God without having to face death, this concept of a 'direct' experience of God came to form part of an eschatological reality. The deep intuition of seeing the face of God, the synonym of experiencing God 'directly', came to be regarded as a privilege reserved for the moment of death and the life hereafter. The tradition was carried into the New Testament where the metaphor of experiencing God face-to-face was reluctantly used as far as human experience is concerned. Like the Old Testament, the New Testament teaches that the human person cannot see God and live, and further distinguishes between two phases in the economy of salvation. The distinction is made by the anthesis between 'now' and 'then'. Both the Old and New Testament adhere to a twofold claim that it is 'possible' and 'impossible' to 'see' and 'know' God 'directly'.

Just as Moses had to act as the intermediary between God and the Israelites: "You speak to us and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we shall die" (Ex 20:18-19), so the Christians came to prefer the mediation of the Church instead of any kind of 'direct' experience of God. To see God is to be in heaven; to be on earth came to mean "not seeing God", not experiencing God 'directly'. While the New Testament remained faithful to the teachings of the Old Testament, Jesus brought a different dimension to the concept of seeing God face-to-face while we are on this side of the eschatological divide (Shannon 1992:4,5).

The Old Testament experience of God remained the preliminary stage of God's new covenant which would give 'the light of knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Christ' (2 Cor 4:6.). Christ, who is the true likeness of God, made it possible for humanity to gaze at the 'face of God' and live. Jesus told his disciples that in the Old Testament "many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see and did not and hear what you hear and did not hear it" (Mt 13:17).

Significantly, during the mission of Christ on earth, the imagery of 'seeing' God was frequently used and the responsibility was placed upon the disciples to interpret Jesus asking: "Having eyes do you not see yet? " and " Blessed are the eyes that see the things you see" (Lk:10:23-24). Jesus as the Son of God and the revelation of the Father, brought the Good News that all who

receive Him receive the Father and become the children of God.

1.7. Jesus' direct experiences of God the Father.

There is an elusiveness about Jesus' private experiences of God. Dunn, who has done excellent research into this topic, and from which much that follows is drawn, suggested that one way to determine Jesus' experiences of God is to look at what in Jesus' own experiences He referred to God (Dunn 1975:11).

The nature of the intimate relationship of Jesus to His Father was expressed by Jesus when he said: "No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God. He has seen the Father" (Jn 14:10). The fact that Jesus claimed to know the Father, in the Biblical sense of the word, means that He had direct experiential knowledge of God as His Father. The knowledge that the Father had of the Son and the Son of the Father was direct and intuitive, one abiding in the other, having direct experiences of the other. This loving interchange, the unique knowledge Jesus had of God, He wished to share with those close to Him (Mt 11:27).

Jesus, by His direct encounters with the Father at His baptism, His transfiguration and when praying, not only continued with the Old Testament tradition, but transcended the Jewish milieu. His intimate firsthand experiences of the Father and the Holy Spirit permeated everything He did and was (Dunn 1975:90).

1.7.1. Unique elements in Jesus' direct experiences of God the Father.

According to Dunn the Old Testament concepts of God did not shape Jesus' experiences of God as he operated out of "a consciousness of His own Sonship, His own Authority, His own Mission and Power, which seemed to have transcended that of ordinary prophetic experiences in the Old Testament" (Dunn 1975:91,92).

1.7.1.1. Jesus' quality of God-consciousness.

Although Jesus, in His human form, was like all people, it is argued that His uniqueness was captured in the quality of His experiences of God as His experiences of God were marked by his exceptional quality of God-Consciousness (Dunn 1975:12). This sense of God-consciousness not only distinguished him from others, but empowered him and was basic to his mission.

1.7.1.2. The distinctiveness of his own Abba-relationship.

Dunn points out that at certain times in Jesus life, such as at his baptism or when he prayed, it is possible to see fairly deeply into Jesus' experiences of God, for they provide insight into how He conceived of His relation with God.

The Abba-Prayer, in which Jesus expressed an unusual and

unprecedented sense of intimacy with God by using the term 'Abba', enables us to see into the heart of Jesus' relationship with God as perceived by him. In this particular type of experience Jesus experienced God's love and authority in a direct manner. He also had direct experiences of God in moments of naked aloneness and in such times the only language that could give expression to the unusual intimacy was that of a child to his Father.

1.7.1.3. Direct experiences of God as providing Jesus with a sense of his own identity.

Jesus' direct experience of God as Father was real, loving and compelling, and in the experience he came to know himself as the Son of God. "Jesus experienced his Sonship in a direct and unmediated way" (Dunn 1975:358). The direct experience of God enhanced his consciousness of Sonship as well as the consciousness of God. The experiences of God as Father occur only in relation to his own consciousness of Sonship and it is also in prayer that Jesus was most conscious of God's care and authority as Father (Dunn 1975:24).

1.7.1.4. Direct experiences provided Jesus with insight into the Father's will and with understanding of his own mission.

Jesus' awareness and experience of God crystallised at His Baptism by John. What Jesus experienced there, was a relationship between

Himself and God, between Father and Son, and with the experience he received deep confirmation of his own personhood and the will of God. Dunn says the experience also provided Jesus with understanding of His mission and His consciousness of the Spirit. He was "conscious of a direct and unmediated authority, a transcendent authority which set him above party and even the law" (Dunn 1975:77). The experience provided a powerful certainty of a direct and unmediated kind, a certainty that he knew God's will, which set Him apart from other people of comparable significance in the history of religions. (Dunn 1975:79)

For Jesus then, direct experiences of God were distinctive experiences of God as Father. His direct experiences were the deep wells out of which flowed his sense of mission, his authority, his gospel and his life-style (Dunn 1975:357). Jesus' experiences of God, which came to be expressed in the gospels, became determinative for later Christian experiences.

1.8. Paul's direct experience of Jesus.

The disciples underwent profound spiritual transformations when they experienced Jesus directly, both during His life on earth and after His resurrection. Christianity has its roots in the Resurrection experiences when many Christians claimed that Jesus appeared to them.

The day to day experiences the disciples had of the earthly Jesus was of a different nature to that which Paul had of the Risen Christ. As the experiences of Paul are more in line with the type of experience the thesis is exploring, more attention is rendered to the experiences of Paul rather than to that of the other disciples.

Paul claimed a dramatic direct encounter with the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-8; Gal.11:12 ; 1 Cor 9:1). Paul said he "saw" the Lord (Acts 9:27) and in 1 Cor 15:15 he states that Jesus 'has also appeared to me". Many biblical scholars question whether Paul actually "saw" the Risen Lord or whether the dazzling light blinded him and thus prevented him from literally seeing Jesus as in the case of Moses. Was the seeing a perception of the mind or of the eye? Significant in Paul's direct experience of the resurrected Christ was that it was also a strong audial experience coupled with important dialogue as in the case of Moses at the 'Burning Bush' and Jesus at His baptism by John. Both the 'seeing' and 'hearing' experiences had profound repercussions for Paul and his life in the future.

The distinctiveness of the direct experience for Paul lies in the element of seeing and what was seen. (1 Cor 9:1). "Have I not seen Jesus the Lord?"; " He appeared to me". Dunn questions the mode of seeing, whether it was a mental perception, a physical perception or a visionary perception? (Dunn 1975:104).

Paul was convinced that what he saw was external to him "I saw Jesus". This experience drove Paul out in mission and thereafter he was unquestionably convinced that he had experienced "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (Dunn 1975:109).

1.8.1. Paul's direct experience of God as determining his discipleship and transformed his life.

Paul regarded the Damascus experience as unique among of his experiences as this direct experience of Christ determined his discipleship and transformed the rest of his life. The direct experience he had of the Risen Christ provided Paul with personal conviction of his mission and as far as he was concerned, he ascribed his authority as an apostle to the direct experience of Jesus. He professed the direct encounter with Jesus to be the first and final authority for the eschatological compulsion which moulded his life as apostle and mouthpiece (Dunn 1975, 113). Dunn claims that once Paul yielded to this experience, it became a source of compulsion and inner grace from which his sense of mission immediately sprang.

Dunn maintains that the experience was of the same compelling nature as that which Jesus had of God at His Baptism. It was a once in a life time experience, uniquely different in qualification from his subsequent experiences of God and of the Holy Spirit (Dunn 1975:108). Paul personally claimed that his basic and

characteristic understanding of Christ, and of the significance of Christ for all people, came to him directly from God through the revelation of Christ on the Damascus Road (Dunn 1975:110).

1.9. The early Christians and direct experience of God.

The experiences of the first Christians became more complicated as they claimed experiences of Jesus and the Spirit. Where Jesus had been the subject of religious experiences, he became the object of religious experiences.

The early Christians believed that God was supremely revealed in the person of Jesus, that Jesus was, in fact, God made flesh. Jesus himself said: "The Father and I are one". In answer to a question put to him he said: "If you knew me you would know my Father as well" (Jn.8:19).

Paul expected Christians to have relatively easy access to an experience of God. "All of us with faces unveiled, while reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transfigured in the same image from glory to glory, by the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:8). Paul in this instance and often in others, departed from the Hebraic reticence about "seeing" God directly, since he affirmed that Christians were able to "behold the glory of God". The Israelites, he said, were blinded by the veil over their faces and at the moment of conversion the veil falls from their faces and

they enter a live relation of immediacy with God and God is seen under the image of Jesus (Terrien 1978:457). To take away the veils implies that the individual has no choice but to look at the face of God and to experience His Holy Presence directly (Shannon 1992,14).

Paul also claimed that it is only by direct vision that we will obtain perfect knowledge of God as all knowledge by faith is regarded as imperfect. This knowledge is an anticipation of the future knowledge we shall obtain when we see God literally face-to-face (1 Cor 13:12). During this present life he says the Christian knows God partially, obscurely, as in a mirror. Later when the person is an 'adult' in the faith, s\he will know God as God knows him\her. Paul here contrasts the obscure, indirect vision in the mirror with the clear vision that will occur when the knower is face-to-face with God. At present we are busy seeking the face of the Invisible God. This deliberate juxtaposition of knowing God indirectly through His created manifestations as in a mirror, with the direct. face-to-face vision through no created medium, emphasizes the difference between face-to-face vision in 1 Cor 13:12 and the intimacy of Moses with God in Ex 13:11. In this case 1 Cor 13:12 can mean the clear intuitive vision of the divine essence. It is made quite clear by Paul that only *agape, real love, leads to a direct experience of God*. This type of love never fails, so that in the end only love and a direct vision of God remain and are of ultimate significance.

Paul insists that all Christians can experience God directly in the Spirit, as Christianity is essentially a religion of the Spirit rather than the law. Under the Old Covenant only Moses had direct access to the divine presence of God, but in Christianity an experience of the living God is a reality open to all. A direct experience for the Christian arises out of a living relationship with God and the experience deepens that relationship existentially (Dunn 1975, 257).

1.10. Direct experience of God in the Beatific Vision.

"The servants of God will not see God's face until they are in the New Jerusalem" (Rev 22:4). The concept of beatific vision, to see God when a radically new creation has been created, formed a strong association with the eschatological understanding of a 'direct' experience of God. The direct experience of God as a future event appears as a strong motif in the New Testament as was the case in the Old Testament. "What we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed, all we know is that when it is revealed we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is" ; "Now we know by faith, but then we shall know by vision" (1 Jn 3:2). The mystery of who God really is cannot, however, be exhausted by the clear knowledge obtained by vision.

1.11. Conclusion

Scripture speaks of God who can be directly experienced while remaining hidden, yet no one can see God's brilliance and live (Ex 33:20). In the New Testament the direct experience of God is mediated through the person of Jesus Christ: No one has seen God except the Son who has made God known (Jn 1:18, 6:36). To have seen Jesus is to have seen the Father (Jn 14:9). The uniqueness of Jesus' direct experience of the Father derives from his pre-existent relation to the Father. There were instances in Jesus' life that the glory of God was revealed as at his baptism, the transfiguration, and above all, at the resurrection.

2. EXPERIENCING GOD DIRECTLY ACCORDING TO KARL RAHNER'S THEOLOGY OF TRANSCENDENCE.

2.1. Introduction.

Among contemporary theologians Karl Rahner is perhaps one of the most widely recognized thinkers to grapple with the philosophical aspects of *experiencing God directly*. Since the God which Christians experience is, as for all the great theistic religions, totally other than humanity, Rahner focuses upon the issue by explaining it in terms of transcendent experiences. His theology is built upon the firm belief that Christians know and experience God directly, but it takes place in what he calls an unthematic way. As theologian, Rahner operates from the premise that every person has an unthematic experience of God, and by a process of reflection, the prior pre-conscious experience of God can be brought to a thematic and conscious experience of God. For Rahner, a direct experience of God is intrinsic to the constitution of every human being and therefore experienced by every human being in a pre-conscious way. Moreover the conscious experience of God is open to all human beings, and not only in mystical situations.

Apart from its strong philosophical and theological basis, his understanding of a direct experience of God also springs from a profound personal faith experience of God. His personal testimony of a direct experience of God provides the foundation of his own theology. He writes:

"I have experienced God directly. I have experienced God, the nameless and unfathomable one, the one who is silent and yet near in the Trinity of his approach to me. I have really encountered God, the true and living one, the one for whom this name that quenches all names is fitting, God Himself. I have experienced God himself, not some human words about him. This experience is not barred to anyone. I want to communicate it to others as well as I can" (as quoted by Vorgrimler 1986:11).

Karl Rahner regards the Ignatian spirituality of his Order as the outward help which brought him to the experience of the inner grace of God and thus made possible the most important thing in his life: a direct experience of God. This brought him to say that he sees the main task of all Jesuits in the giving of the Exercises to help people and themselves towards direct experiences of God. He states that by means of a direct experience of God, Christians come to realize that the incomprehensible mystery, that we call God, is not only very near, but that it can be addressed, and that we can open ourselves unconditionally to this very mystery - God (see Vorgrimler 1986:35).

At the source of his theological thought we find a deep and simple faith, penetrated with a rare passion for the incomprehensible God. In his perception of a direct experience of God, the philosophical experiences of a far-away, silent, inaccessible God and the

intimate Christian experiences of the ineffable nearness of the same God in the forgiving and sheltering grace of Jesus Christ, form a mutual complementary totality. God, for Rahner, is rooted in a deeply personal reality: that is in his own direct experience of God. His own direct experiences of God confirmed his profound conviction and firmness of faith, so that he could say, without doubt, that his faith in God would remain unshaken even if Holy Scripture did not exist (see Vorgrimler on Rahner 1986:11). The complete clarity and sureness of his experience of God is a dimension of the experience of himself as a person, created by God. For this reason he encourages people to enter into themselves, to discover their innermost depths, so as to become fully aware of themselves and thus be free to communicate with God. Rahner is convinced that the human person's relationship with God remains alive only through a direct encounter with God.

2.2. Experiencing God.

Experiencing God implies two presuppositions: that God is a reality that exists and that there is such a possibility as an experience of God. The concept has two further implications: firstly, that the experience must have a special and peculiar quality of its own which differentiates it from other experiences and, secondly, that there is something more, something different and something more fundamental in the experience than the knowledge of God acquired through the so-called proofs of God's existence (Rahner 1974a:149).

If God exists, it is conceivable, indeed imperative, that some experience of God takes place in our lives; however, the entire notion of experiencing God directly is theoretically calling God's transcendence into question. In fact, it is calling God's essence into question. How can God, who is understood to be non-spatio-temporal, utterly transcendent and uncreated be directly experienced by a human person, who in turn, is totally other than God, created by Him, and is confined by time and space? If a direct experience is understood to be a unitive experience between the experienced subject and the experiencing object, that is to say, without intermediaries, how is a direct experience possible between God and humanity and what exactly, in Rahner's theology, amounts to a direct experience of God?

Rahner makes it quite clear that God is experienced in a qualitatively different manner from that in which one human being experiences another human being (Rahner 1989:45). Experiencing God has a number of differentiating characteristics. Apart from the fact that spatio-temporal realities are experienced directly by means of our senses, it is also possible to distinguish one concrete experience from another. An added obvious factor of our experience of a spatio-temporal reality is that the person is normally capable of describing the limits of the experience. "The individual realities with which we are usually dealing in our

lives, always become clearly intelligible and comprehensible and manipulable because we can differentiate them from other things. There is no such way of knowing God. Because God is something quite different from any of the individual realities which appear within the realm of our experiences or which are inferred from it, and because the knowledge of God has quite a definite and unique character and is not just an instance of knowledge in general, it is for these reasons very easy to overlook God" (Rahner 1989:54).

According to Rahner, God is experienced by humanity in and through spatio-temporal realities. Humanity's experience of God occurs in the human person's "categorical encounter with concrete reality in our world, both the world of things and the world of persons" (Rahner 1989:52). The experience of God is, however, classified as a transcendental experience. This is so, because according to Rahner's anthropology, "man's basic and original orientation towards absolute mystery, which constitutes his fundamental experience of God, is a permanent existential of man as a spiritual subject" (Rahner 1989:52). God is experienced as a dimension of all spatio-temporal realities. The experience of God, says Rahner, is not an encounter with an individual object alongside of other objects. One cannot therefore speak of the experience of God and the experience of spatio-temporal realities separately because God is a dimension of all reality (Rahner 1989:54).

A very important characteristic of the human person's experience of a spatio-temporal reality is the direct sensory nature of the experience. It is also possible that one spatio-temporal experience can be distinguished from other spatio-temporal experiences, and it is usually possible for a person to describe the limits of the experience. In comparison, an experience of God is not so clearly distinguishable, because God is experienced as a dimension of the spatio-temporal realities. As explained by Gaybba it is impossible to distinguish the divine element in any experience from the spatio-temporal one (Gaybba 1987:254). For this reason God is experienced in and through spatio-temporal realities as a dimension of them and not as a separate entity.

By presenting an experience of God as a dimension of all spatio-temporal experiences, Rahner argues that God can be experienced everywhere in everyday life. For him God is present in the whole of everyday life, but is experienced as the infinite horizon within which every finite object is apprehended. God remains forever hidden and unknown and is never the direct object of our knowledge, but rather is glimpsed in the knowledge of concrete things. On this level the experience of God is always 'transcendental'. By this Rahner means that such an experience of God transcends the way we grasp spatio-temporal objects. He maintains that God is not a person like created persons any more than the horizon of objective knowledge is an object like other objects within the horizon. This experience of God forms part of the incomprehensible

horizon of human experience. All this makes sense only when we understand what is meant by the absolute unlimited transcendentalty of the human spirit (see below on Rahner's theological anthropology).

For Rahner, God remains at all times the Absolute Mystery (Rahner 1989:57) and, in this sense, God will always remain unintelligible to the human person, experienced only as the horizon and goal of human transcendence in knowledge and freedom (Rahner 1966:36). As the horizon remains beyond our grasp, so, too, God remains incomprehensible: the absolute mystery beyond the grasp of direct human knowledge, but always present in absolute immediacy (Rahner 1979:227,243,244,254).

However, there is a sense in which God is known experientially. In the transcendent experience there is present what Rahner calls unthematic knowledge of God. This knowledge is always present, not just when spoken. It is an experience because the knowledge, though unthematic, "is a moment within and a condition of possibility for every concrete experience in any and every object" (Rahner 1989:20). By this Rahner means that everyone has a prior, pre-conscious unthematic experience of God and, as self-transcendent beings, humanity is always orientated towards the holy and absolute mystery. "This unthematic and ever present experience, this knowledge of God, which we always have even when we are thinking of, and are concerned with, anything but God, is the permanent

ground from out of which the thematic knowledge of God emerges which we have in explicitly religious activity and in philosophical reflection" (Rahner 1989:53). The unthematic experience of God in everyday life remains anonymous, unreflected; it is "like the generally diffusely extended light of the sun that we do not see as such, turning instead to the individual objects of our sensuous experience as they become visible in the light" (Rahner 1985:66). All thematic talk about God is, therefore, always rooted in and pointing to a transcendent unthematized experience.

2.3. Rahner's anthropology as the key to understanding humanity's experience of God.

Rahner, whose whole theology flows from his anthropology, begins with the conviction that all human beings are essentially oriented to the Infinite. In Hearers of the word he describes the human person in terms of his/her "obediential potency" whereby the person is by nature endowed with an openness to experience God (Rahner 1969:66).

The foundation of Rahner's anthropology lies in the *Vorgriff*, the pre-conscious grasp of God which is present in every human person. This *Vorgriff* is inherent in human nature and by means of this anticipation, a human person is capable of asking questions of being. In this light the human person is perceived as that being who has already experienced God in a dim and unreflexive way. God, though hidden and unknown, is experienced as the infinite horizon

which is glimpsed in the knowledge of concrete things (as quoted by Carr on Rahner 1973:362).

Despite the fact that the human person's direct knowledge of God is limited to that which may be perceived by sense, it contains an awareness of oneself as *spirit*, as one which transcends the world of immediate experiences. As a self-transcendent being, the human person is capable of striving beyond all limits and searching always for something more. Speaking of the human person as self-transcendent means that the person is able to reach out to that which transcends it, indeed to the infinite ground of all reality (Rahner 1985:65).

While recognizing the human person as spirit, Rahner at the same time also acknowledges that the human person abides in a concrete world. Simply by being spirit, the human person is open to the possible revelation of God, should it occur. As spirit, the human person exists on the border between God and the world, time and eternity (Rahner 1967:88). Cognizance ought to be taken of Rahner's understanding of two kinds of spirit: Infinite Spirit, which is the Absolute Spirit of God, and Finite Spirit, the spirit of human beings. These are closely related. The human spirit is spirit because it is created with the capacity to experience and discern the Infinite being that is God. The human spirit comes from God and returns to God. God therefore remains at all times the goal of the human person's movement (Newman 1981:49). By being spirit *in the*

world, the human person knows and experiences *in and through the world*. But by being *spirit*, a human person is also a *self-transcending being*. Hence experiences both of the world and of God occur through spatio-temporal realities.

Another important aspect of Rahner's anthropology is his idea of the *supernatural existential*. The "supernatural existential" consists in the acceptance that humanity's very being is stamped and altered by its call to unity with God. This is an aspect of grace. Grace for Rahner is not a static thing, but rather the dynamic and personal self-communication of God (Carr 1973:362). The self-communication presupposes an openness and this openness is present in humanity as an existential orientation towards God. It is grace that orientates a human person to what Rahner calls an "immediate experience" of God. By means of grace the human person is transformed in what is referred to by Rahner as "humanity's entitive alteration". The transformed state, according to Rahner, refers to humanity's nature not as pure nature, but as "graced nature", hence the understanding that humanity is 'supernaturally orientated' towards God. "Such an existential penetrates man's conscious existence, his knowledge and experience, even if only in an implicit and unthematized way" (Carr quoting Rahner 1973:364). The supernatural existential involves an expansion of the *a priori* openness of which the human person is conscious in being conscious of itself.

It is difficult to organize Rahner's anthropological insights, regarding the human person's experience of God, in a coherent fashion while trying at the same time to be faithful to its rich diversity and complexity. In practical terms, the fundamental characteristic of human existence, according to Rahner's anthropology, is that humanity's uniqueness lies in its essential orientation to God and that we are conscious of ourselves as self-transcendent beings always striving beyond our limits. We possess an unlimited drive to understand, but with finite capabilities. We are immersed in a finite world, while at the same time we have an infinite ability to question. We are historical creatures immersed in the world of space and time. Our existence in this world is not an accidental addition to our transcendence, but precisely the situation through which we actualize ourselves. It is in this situation that we experience God directly. We do not and cannot escape the limitations implied in our creatureliness, our bodiliness and our immersion in the rhythm of time and space, not even in the direct experience of God. Because of the transcendental dimension of our existence, we are in a position to experience God directly. But we are also in a position to deny or to say 'no' to the infinite source we call God, a denial made all the easier by our spatio-temporal limitations (Rahner 1961:311).

To sum up: Rahner's anthropology argues clearly that all of humanity possesses characteristics which involve openness to the infinite: we are spirit, self-transcendent, capable of asking

questions about being, free, responsible and immortal beings. We also have the qualities of being severely limited: material, finite, historical, sexual, temporal, communal and subject to death. The latter qualities are not limitations to experience of God, rather the matrix or gateway to the spiritual.

2.4. Direct experience of God.

As has been seen, Rahner's theology is built on the conviction that all people know and experience God directly. The direct experience of God comes in two 'forms': the unthematized and thematized form of direct experiences. It is well to keep in mind that the unthematic and thematic forms are not two 'separate' experiences, but that the one presupposes the other. The unthematic experience forms the ground of the thematic experience, the two are integrally part of each other and together they constitute a single direct experience of God. The two experiences do, however, have distinct characteristics pertaining to their respective natures.

2.4.1. The direct nature of the unthematic experience of God.

The original pre-conscious, unthematic experience is referred to by Rahner as the primitive experience of God which grounds all other experiences of God. This experience is inevitably present in the depths of ordinary life (Rahner 1989:57) and is constantly present as the secret ingredient of all our particular experiences (Rahner

1989:35). The unthematic experience of God is deeply buried within our daily activities and because it is anonymous by nature it is often overlooked or unrecognized. This unthematic experience of God is directly present to each human person regardless of their being objectively aware of it (Rahner 1985:48).

The direct nature of the unthematic experience of God is constituted by the original orientation of the human person towards God, the Absolute and incomprehensible mystery (Rahner 1989:52). The experience is described by Rahner as a permanent existential of the human person as spiritual subject, and the experience is regarded as direct due to it being constantly and directly present in human nature. In the unthematized direct experience of God, Rahner says "God encounters man in silence, encounters him as the absolute and incomprehensible" (Rahner 1989:21).

2.4.1.1. Characteristics of the unthematic direct experience of God.

These characteristics have been touched on in one way or another already, however, it will be useful to gather them all together in one place here.

The first characteristic of an unthematic direct experience of God is its *originality*. It is *the original* experience of God. The experience is original in this sense that it does not derive from

any prior experience and it is unlike most of our other experiences (Rahner 1989:54).

Secondly, God is experienced in this original experience in the mode of otherness and distance. God cannot be approached directly as we do with other human beings, or grasped immediately. God, in the direct unthematic experience, remains the incomprehensible mystery.

Thirdly, the original unthematic experience of God is marked by the fact that it is always *indefinable, nameless and beyond control*. We are not in control of the experience in the sense that we cannot discard it if we so wish (Rahner 1989:21). Moreover, we can only name and define what we can, to some extent, control. At the most, says Rahner, the unthematic experience can be approached asymptotically, if at all, in mystical experiences and perhaps in the experience of loneliness in the face of death.

A fourth characteristic of the unthematic experience is that by its very nature it is *mysterious* and remains a mystery since God in this original experience is beyond humanity (Rahner 1989:54). The experience is present *non-conceptually* and can never be completely understood.

A fifth characteristic of the unthematic experience of God is that it has the character of a *transcendental* experience. It pre-

supposes no space or time; it is not dependent on dogma; it is universally present, universally distant, always inexpressible, endlessly transcendent, known and experienced unobjectively. The unthematic experience of God is not the kind of experience in "which one grasps an object which happens to present itself directly or indirectly from outside." (Dych 1992:44). The knowledge of God is always present unthematically and without a name.

2.4.1.2. *Thematizing the unthematic experience of God.*

For an unthematic experience to be known or possessed consciously, it is necessary that the original unthematic experience be transposed and made thematic. According to Rahner's theological anthropology every human person possesses the natural openness or potency to transpose the experience and to make it thematic (Rahner 1975:175). Rahner is adamant that the human person "should be challenged to discover this universally present experience of God and to objectify it conceptually" (Rahner 1989:454).

Thematizing unthematic experiences of God does not mean that the experience is suddenly transformed into a direct experience. What occurs is that the unthematized direct experience of God is brought to our *awareness* and *expressed in spatio-temporal categories*. We have to speak about God by means of secondary and categorical concepts (Rahner 1989:71), but this does not make the experience indirect.

By thematizing the original experience of God we deepen, invigorate and bring to the fore the primal, ontological and transcendental relationship of humanity to God. We do not thereby discover complete knowledge of God, for we still experience God as the ineffable and incomprehensible. In making the unthematic experience thematic, Rahner argues, one allows "oneself to be grasped and mastered by the mystery of God, which is ever present and ever distant. The mystery of God remains even though it reveals itself to humanity in various ways directly and indirectly" (Rahner 1989:56).

The ability to bring the pre-conscious experience of the infinite into conscious awareness is a further dimension of the fact that we are spirit in the world. The embodied spirit of humanity only knows through spatio-temporal realities and therefore the human person can only experience God consciously in this-worldly categories (Rahner 1985:65).

Making the unthematic experience thematic does not create for us our original relationship with God (Rahner 1989:98). It merely enables us to express it in spatio-temporal categories, although, in the thematized form of experiencing God, we talk about Him, we form words about Him, we work out ideas, we become conscious of the reality of God. This secondary relationship of thematic experience of God is rooted and sustained by the previous unthematic, transcendental relatedness of our whole intellectuality to the

incomprehensible Infinite (Rahner 1970:6). By thematizing the experience we make it as intelligible and comprehensible as it can become for us at that moment.

2.4.1.3. *Means whereby the unthematic experience is thematized.*

Rahner suggests some practical means whereby human beings, as free and responsible persons, can come to some form of awareness of the original, unthematic ever-present experience of God. The means include spiritual exercises which include, *inter alia*, reflection, prayer, solitude, self-presence and contemplation.

First of all, he maintains that we cannot uncover the unthematic experience of God without some degree of reflection (Rahner 1989:52). By means of reflection we consciously discover the experience for ourselves, we admit to it and accept it. In fact, he says that thematic experience implies that the unthematic experience had been reflected upon and the result is a conscious thematic awareness of the original experience of God. Rahner concludes that the thematized experience of God "is not some subsequent emotional reaction to doctrinal instruction about the existence and nature of God. It is prior to any such teaching, underlies it and has to be there already for it to be made intelligible to all" (Rahner 1974a:149). In this sense it is clear that the thematized and the unthematized experience of God constitutes one single experience. As no one is excluded from the

pre-conscious experience of God, so, too, is everyone endowed with the ability to reflect on the experience of God. Despite the reflective nature of humanity, Rahner insists that each person has the responsibility to cultivate the ability to become sensitive to the God dimension in spatio-temporal realities. The awareness of the divine dimension in spatio-temporal realities is a particular thematic way of experiencing God directly. Reflection on the thematic experience in turn directs our attention back to the primordial experience of God, which grounds all particular experiences.

Prayer, for Rahner, is not so much to enable us to have a direct experience of God, but to help us become aware of the unthematic experience of God and come to the realization that it is part and parcel of our human condition (Rahner 1985:71). Rahner advocates that to cultivate a prayerful disposition is to become thematically aware of the original experience of God (Rahner 1974b:97). The cultivation of a prayerful disposition implies working towards awakening a conscious awareness of God by means of spiritual exercises and deep moments of prayerful reflection.

According to Rahner, lengthy perseverance in *solitude* helps a person to break through all words and concepts to God Himself (Vorgrimler 1986:20). Prayerful silences give deeper realities of the spirit a chance to rise to the surface: the ineffable longing for truth, for love, for fellowship, for God. By allowing the basic

human experiences such as loneliness, fear and imminent death to take precedence by enduring them, something like a primitive awareness of the direct experience of God emerges (Rahner 1970:7). He maintains that the role of a director of spiritual exercises is simply to provide the help so that "God and human beings really encounter one another directly" (Vorgrimler 1986:20).

Being quiet and reflective is, for Rahner, a process of self-discovery or of achieving *self-presence*. This, according to Rahner, is not simply a question of psychic health, but an essential characteristic of the human person in integrating thematically the vast amount of experiences whether spiritual or temporal. This process of self-discovery, or achieving self-presence is the means whereby God can be experienced. It is in a *state of self-presence* that the human person is in a position to experience God directly. This is done by the power to distance oneself from worldly affairs, to return to oneself in a process that makes human knowledge and spiritual activities possible (Bacik 1986:175).

Contemplation, which, for Rahner, is the essence of mystical prayer and the direct consequence of spiritual exercises, is one of the most profound means of getting in touch with the original unthematic experience of God. To obtain this level of contemplative prayer does not occur overnight, but requires from us the faithful and regular practice of contemplative prayer exercises which will help us to orientate our attention to the primordial experience of

God.

2.4.2. The direct nature of the thematic experience of God.

What type of experience is a direct thematic experience of God? It emerges clearly from Rahner that direct thematic experience is that explicit, conceptual and thematic experience of God which is rooted in, and always points to, a more original, unthematic and unreflexive experience of God (Rahner 1989:52). The thematic experience is an expression of our transcendent orientation towards God, and while the thematic experience of God is grounded in the unthematic experience of God, it is not the original and foundational mode of the transcendental experience of God (Rahner 1989:52).

The direct thematic experience of God is the direct expression of the original unthematic experience of God in our concrete historical realities. It is the visible embodiment and conscious experience of God (Dych 1992:79). This experience of God is directly present in our categorical world of space and time and the directness of the experience is expressed as our worldly experiences, because God is experienced as a dimension of our spatio-temporal realities. The direct experience, as a concrete experience of God, is, according to Rahner, "a moment in and a modality of our transcendence and at the same time a historically mediated immediacy of God" (Rahner 1989:87). Every direct thematic



experience of God can therefore be perceived as God 's presence becoming concrete in this world.

The direct nature of the thematic experience of God can be best understood in the light of Rahner's theology of symbol. A real symbol is one in which the reality of what is symbolized is really present in the symbol and therefore can come to expression in the symbol. It is not like a sign which is only extrinsically or arbitrarily related to that which it signifies. In contrast, says Rahner, a real symbol has an intrinsic ontological relationship to what is symbolized so that it becomes present (Rahner 1966: 224,225). To illustrate this principle he cites the relationship between body and soul: the human soul as the form of the body comes to expression in the body as its symbol and has no existence apart from its expression in symbol (Rahner 1966:234). The symbol "is the self-realization of a being in the other which is constitutive of its essence" (Rahner 1966:234). Body and soul are thus one, but form a differentiated unity of symbol and symbolized. The same symbolic ontology can be applied to the inner relationship between thematic and unthematic experiences of God. Like the soul and the body the two experiences of God form a differentiated unity as symbol and symbolized.

In the direct thematic experience of God, the original, unthematic experience comes to the surface. The thematic experience is derived from a non-conceptual experience of God wherein the transcendence

of God, which accompanies all our experiences, emerges into a conscious awareness. The individual person transcends the self in the experience and has a sense of the immediacy of God by being in touch with the unthematic experience of God (Dych 1992:136). The spatio-temporal experience, whereby the thematic experience of God is mediated, seems to recede into the background, becomes less significant and more transparent, and can disappear almost entirely when the God dimension assumes greater awareness. Mediation and immediacy in this context are not contradictory. Immediacy to God is the form of 'mediated immediacy'. The very self of God is present in the mediated experience (Rahner 1989:83). This immediacy allows God really to be God, to be a God who does not give a mysterious gift which is different from 'Himself', but who gives 'Himself' in the gift (Rahner 1989:125). We are therefore directly aware of the reality of God in thematic form and although this is regarded as a secondary mode of the original unthematic relationship to God, the thematic experience is, as it were, the 'real symbol' of the unthematic experience. As was seen it is the conscious embodiment of the unthematic experience of God (Rahner 1989:99).

Considering this (although Rahner does not say so), one can speak of degrees of directness and the degree of the direct nature of the thematic experience will depend on the degree to which the person allows the original experience to surface. Rahner says it is the task of theology to assist people to bring the unthematic

experience to the surface (Rahner 1989:16,17). Each person must be taken back in thematic consciousness to the original unthematic experience of God. It is also the task of theology to find concepts and language that can objectify and express the unthematic experience in a concrete way so that the faith may stay alive. For this purpose Rahner turns to the method developed by Ignatius Loyola for making the unthematic experience of God a direct thematic experience (Dych 1992:44).

2.4.2.1. Characteristics of a direct thematic experience of God.

As previously stated, for Rahner, the original direct unthematic experience of God is always part of the thematic experience of God. However there are certain characteristics which makes the direct thematic experience of God a distinct experience.

The first characteristic of the direct thematic experience of God is marked by an *intense awareness of the God dimension* in spatio-temporal realities. Here, the person is directly aware of the fact that s/he is experiencing more than that which is experienced. The person is aware of experiencing some aspect of God which points to an experience far greater and far more mysterious than that of which s/he is currently aware.

A second characteristic of a thematic experience is the fact that the experience is marked by a certain *closeness*, even though God

remains an Absolute mystery within the experience. The person becomes aware of the mystery not only as an infinite distant horizon, but as a hidden closeness, a forgiving intimacy; it is, says Rahner, 'like real home' (Rahner 1989:131).

A third characteristic of a direct thematic experience of God is that the human person encounters God as the *absolute and the incomprehensible* God (Rahner 1989:21). The depths of this experience is an experience of *ineffable nearness* of God. God, in the direct experience, bestows upon the person an immediacy that not only brings forgiveness, but also a share in God's divine life (Rahner 1974a:164).

A fourth characteristic of the direct thematic experience of God is the profound realization, which is brought about by the person experiencing God as the absolute and incomprehensible God, of his/her *finiteness* in relation to God's absolute infiniteness. Rahner says the finiteness of the person does not disappear in the immediate experiences of God, but rather reaches its fulfilment and hence its fullest autonomy as subject (Rahner 1989:84). The autonomy is at once both the presupposition and the consequence of the absolute directness to God and from God.

The fifth characteristic of the direct thematic experience of God is the fact that the experience is always *marked by love*. The experience is distinguished by its personal quality of love, as

well as the personal acceptance of God's love, which is absolute and unconditional. Normally the person would find no adequate justification for the unconditional love received from God in the concrete situation (Rahner 1974a:158).

A sixth characteristic of the direct thematic experience of God, is that the experience is usually accompanied by some *feeling* or a number of feelings that are *intensely* experienced. The person can for example experience deep joy. Another can speak of faithfulness. Others feel the *angst* to which they are subjected, such as the fear which they feel at the inexorability of truth. The experience can also be accompanied by the unbearable yearning which transcends every individual reality (Rahner 1974a:158). The feelings will obviously differ from person to person as well as from experience to experience.

Also characteristic of a thematic experience of God are the effects of the experience on the person:

One of the immediate consequences of the experience is that the individual is filled with an "inconceivable audacity to love likewise" (Rahner 1974a:158).

A second effect is that the person has suddenly the *courage to let go* of the tangible, the reliable element of life, when everything takes on the taste of death and destruction. In the experience the

person no longer belongs to the self. It seems that everything has moved, as if into an infinite distance, and in the moment of direct experience we live in the world of God, a world of grace and eternal life (Rahner 1967:86,89).

A third distinctive effect of a direct thematic experience of God is that a *revolutionary change* occurs in the person's interior life and that the person is conscious of the change. Thereafter the individual no longer wants to be understood as self-centered and self-sufficient, but as one who has experienced God's liberating love and forgiveness (Rahner 1989:31).

Although it is realized that the experience was not that of a concept of God, but God 'Himself', the experience is usually followed by some form of *reflection*. By means of reflection the person forms a concept of God and moulds the concept by forming words and ideas about God so as to come to a deeper appreciation of the experience. There is, however, a perpetual realization that words cannot capture the entire experience as there are always aspects of the experience that words cannot appropriate.

2.5. The direct experience of God in the mystical experience of transcendence.

Rahner maintains that the empirical knowledge of God in mystical experiences is an obscure and mysterious matter about which one

cannot speak without experience (Rahner 1975:86,89). His perception of God as being different from the world, but also as one with the world, makes it possible for him to speak of all human experience as a potential encounter with God. He maintains that although mysticism is generally understood by most as an immediate experience of God, which transcends all mediation by categorical objects of the everyday of God, he prefers to speak of the 'mysticism of everyday things' (Rahner 1985:58). In this respect we can detect the same principle which undergirds Rahner's understanding of all experiences: namely, that all experiences, including mystical experiences of God, are rooted in the original unthematic experience of God. God is to be experienced not only in "religious experiences" but in all experiences. In this light a mystical experience ought not to be regarded as a single, rare and exceptional experience for human beings. He argues that the basic phenomenon of mystical experiences of transcendence is present as the innermost sustaining experience of all Christian experiences of faith, hope and love (Rahner 1985:56). A mystical experience of God is, therefore, by definition, a conscious thematic experience of God with certain characteristics which differentiate it from other thematic experiences.

2.5.1. Significant features of mystical experiences as direct thematic experiences of God.

Rahner states that the experience of mystical illumination and

unification is most often represented as an occurrence in which *God's communication* is so direct that it is no longer clear how faith is not being outstripped and overtaken by the mystical experience itself. Rahner insists that it cannot be admitted that a mystical experience outstrips the domain of faith, since there can be no higher experience on earth than that of faith in God. Additionally, because the experience is basically already given in faith, a mystical experience must at all times be conceived of as *falling within the framework of faith* (Rahner 1985:59). A mystical experience, says Rahner, can be understood as a *variety* of the experience of God in faith. This '*mystical variety*' of the experience of God is an experience which is offered to every person and not only to mystics.

A second significant feature of a mystical experience, according to Rahner, is that it is the human person's experience of *unification with God* in grace and that it is not a 'higher' stage of the Christian life. Rahner says that it is indeed preferable to reserve the notion of mysticism to those psychologically extraordinary phenomena that are *elevated by grace* and it involves a "supernatural experience" of the Spirit. By "grace" he means that the experience is radicalized to the immediacy of God by means of grace (Rahner 1985:61).

A particular characteristic of a mystical experience is that the experience is '*psychologically distinct*' from everyday experiences

(Rahner 1985:59). This characteristic is ascribed to the experience by virtue of the fact that the experience is accompanied by an *altered state of consciousness* (Rahner 1985:60). According to Rahner, the psychological essence of the mystical experience is distinguished from the ordinary essence of everyday occurrence, in other words, mystical consciousness is not part of our ordinary consciousness but can be acquired (Rahner 1985:61).

The so-called 'transcendental nature,' which is often attributed to a mystical experience of God, lies in the fact that the experience mediates God's presence and is always directing the person to the immediacy of God. This can occur irrespective of whether we can interpret the experience in a way whereby s/he realizes that the experience is an ineradicable and unique experience of God (Rahner 1985:63). The experience is described as 'transcendent' since throughout it we are always extended beyond ourselves and the specific experience we have had.

A mystical experience is regarded by Rahner as a *natural* experience like any other human experience in this sense that it occurs in space and time. It is an experience that is rooted in the immediacy of the self-communicating God. Distinctive also of a mystical experience is that it is *more deeply based* in the inmost center of the person and according to Rahner it is known for its *more extensive stamp and transformation* of the whole person (Rahner 1985:62). He maintains that the greater personal depth which

accompanies the mystical experiences could be regarded as mysterious in itself (Rahner 1985:61).

2.6. Evaluation.

The novelty of Karl Rahner's elucidation of direct experience of God can be attributed to the fact that it forms part of humanity's transcendental dimension. Although Rahner provides the reader with an excellent theoretical presentation of direct experience of God, it would, however, be a misunderstanding to perceive his approach as exclusively theoretical. The practical implications are evident in his effort to do away with the division between doctrine and life, between theological system and religious experience.

Although reaching an understanding of the complexity of Rahner's approach to direct experience of God can be a trying exercise, it is nevertheless significant that once the basic principles from which he operates are understood, and his careful development of the concept is grasped, it is indeed possible to recognize how his system sustains various theological discourses concerning direct experience of God. Rahner not only made an indispensable theological and philosophical contribution to the comprehensibility of direct experience of God, but he is also to be commended for the way in which he made human experience a criterion towards understanding direct experience of God. His focus on human experience gave rise to his original theological-anthropological

method, which provides the crucial insight towards perceiving direct experience of God as a necessary constituent of being human.

While direct experience of God forms an integral part of the human person as mystery, Rahner regards it as imperative that all human beings should learn to interpret direct experiences of God. It can, however, be argued that not all people can necessarily perceive their own mystery. Although Rahner was convinced that people are deep down well aware of their own inner mystery, he was not insensitive towards the apparent 'inability' of people to perceive their own inner mystery. This was reflected in his constant concern with the difficulties of understanding God and believing in God in modern times. He was aware that the control of the world by science and technology meant that people would find it increasingly difficult to encounter their own mystery. He argued that it is often only the practical circumstances of one's life that confound the *interpretation* of direct experiences of God. If this the so, it would have been useful for Rahner to suggest practical means to remove obstacles towards interpreting direct experiences of God. He is also insistent that direct experiences of God are *always present* even though there 'appear' to be no visible proofs, other than reflection, which assist people in becoming aware of them. While Rahner presents reflection as the means which brings the human person to the realization of the God-dimension in a spatio-temporal experience, it is also an acknowledged fact that it is not in every person's power to uncover the dense nature of spatio-temporal

experiences. Considering this, some of us may have to settle for the possibility that a direct experience of God may remain an unrealized experience.

2.6.1. *In what sense is an unthematic experience of God an 'experience' and in what sense is it a 'direct' experience ?*

Rahner depicts direct experiences of God as both *transcendental and unthematic*. Although the unthematic and thematic experiences are inextricably intertwined, the thematic experience is considered as an expression of the unthematic experience. The unthematic experience of God possesses, however, an autonomy of its own. The unthematic experience of God, as described by Rahner, is anonymous, indefinable and existing in a mode of otherness. In this sense the experience can lack realization, can remain nameless and can be easily overlooked. The prevailing question is: in what sense can an unthematic experience be regarded as an *experience* and how *direct* is an unthematic experience of God? Does Rahner provide any positive reason to consider the unthematic experience of God as direct? Does Rahner account for the *experiential quality* of an unthematic experience or is it, as T.S. Eliot said in The dry salvages that it is possible to have the experience, but miss the meaning?

Although the word "experience" encompasses a broad spectrum of meaning, it can be argued that in experience one is confronted with

something real and objective, existing independently of ourselves, our views, our attitudes. An experience also comprises a vivid moment of awareness and comprehension. If an unthematic experience is not a demonstrable experience, not palpable and not datable, in what sense does Rahner use the term 'experience'?

Either Rahner uses the term very ambiguously, or he stretches the meaning beyond the conventional understanding, or he uses the term conveniently for want of a better word. If, as Rahner says, the unthematized forms of experience form part of another 'mode' of experience, then one may have to be content with the idea that the nature of the experience will always remain unverifiable. Rahner may argue that because one will never obtain a manipulative hold on the unthematic experience of God, in the same way one may never come to a satisfactory understanding of how an unthematic experience of God is an 'experience'. One may therefore conclude that our inability to discern unthematic experience of God is related to our lack of understanding unthematic experience.

If the *direct nature* of an unthematic experience of God is understood to be a constant state of being, there exists, as acknowledged by Rahner, an inherent danger that it can be taken for granted and will always lack realization. Rahner also claims that the *acknowledgement* of the existence of direct experience of God forms part of a spiritual decision which he describes as an honour and a responsibility of humanity since we possess free will. If

this be so a rational decision for God can obviously not be based on an unthematic experience of God since it is nameless and deeply buried in our daily activities. Viewed in this way, it seems that the *directness* of an unthematic experience of God, is associated with the intrinsic nature of an unthematic experience of God, and our ability or inability to appreciate the direct nature of the experience, does not alter its reality. It can be argued that since the direct nature of the unthematic experience has to be mediated in some way, it is up to the thematic form of direct experience to provide insight into and recognition of the direct nature of the unthematic experience of God. One needs, however, to develop one's ability to discern direct experience of God particularly as it is also an intrinsic dimension of an experience of something else in the empirical world.

2.6.2. Rahner and the mystical form of direct experience.

As mentioned earlier, Rahner is not very helpful with regard to mysticism as a specific form of direct experience of God. Despite the fact that he claimed to have had direct experiences of God, he nevertheless hesitates to describe them as mystical experiences. Neither does he expound in any great detail the doctrine of mystical experiences, but it does not mean that Rahner does not believe in the possibility of mystical experiences. He is of the opinion that the mystical experiences are not radically different from the Christian experience at large. It is rather a prolongation

of that experience. The mystical form, as a specialized form of direct experience of God, is not in opposition to Rahner's presentation of direct experience of God. Instead, Rahner talks of everyday mystical experiences rather than focusing on those people who are blessed with classic mystical aptitudes. In this sense every believer, simply on the basis of the faith of his or her baptism is a primitive or inchoate mystic. He refers to God as the 'incomprehensible mystery' and because God is the mystery of love, he is able to speak of the 'mysticism of everyday things' where God is always very close.

2.6.3. Rahner's world-centeredness.

Despite the fact that Rahner's presentation of direct experience of God can easily be perceived as the work of an idealistic theoretician, he does not deny the world. Direct experience of God is an integral part of life. In fact it *is human life*. To experience God directly is to be involved in and with the world and humankind. Rahner does not tire of saying that God is not known and experienced as one object among other objects. He is insistent that God is experienced not just as a separate category of religious experience and is to be found not only in religious moments, but in all moments and 'in all things'.

Perhaps the special genius of Rahner's approach is that, apart from providing deeper insight into the concept direct experience of God,

he teaches one to question and to search. Direct experience is obviously not just one moment in one's life, but it is a living process to be reflected upon. Direct experience is never complete as there are thousands of direct experiences of God and underlying them all is the one primal experience. Understood in this way direct experience of God is inherent in specific, ordinary everyday experiences and one can therefore never exhaust searching and reflecting on direct experiences of God.

3. MORTON KELSEY ON EXPERIENCING GOD DIRECTLY.

3.1. Introduction.

Morton Kelsey has devoted most of his work to an apology for the reality of the spiritual world. He presents an impressive case for the restoration of a world view and a theology which suggests that modern people still have a possibility of direct access to God. He addresses a Western world which he says is spiritually undernourished and which makes little provision for a direct experience of God. He sets out to reach an audience for whom all contact with God is limited to the rationally conceptual, for whom spirituality is no longer respectable and the term mysticism is loaded with negative religious connotations (Kelsey 1976a: 131). He also hopes to meet a perceived need in the same society which has resorted to an abnormal overuse of mind-expanding drugs in an attempt to experience another dimension of reality and to reach an altered state of consciousness (Kelsey 1987:11).

Kelsey is convinced of the genuine nature of a direct experience of God and provides a framework whereby he hopes to persuade the contemporary sceptical society that humanity can directly experience God through both sense experience and reason.

In his eagerness to restore a firm foundation for religious experience and religious practice in our contemporary materialistic society, he makes a passionate appeal for a revival of the world

view wherein a direct experience of God is regarded not only as a possibility, but a necessity for the fullness of human existence.

Kelsey operates within a dualistic view of reality whereby he places humanity's existence between two worlds: the outer, physical reality with endless potentiality and the inner one, the spiritual reality, equally powerful and inexhaustible (Kelsey 1964:169-170). Although he acknowledges the value of both realities, he appeals in his work for a revival of faith in the dimension of the spirit as, according to him, more meaningful contact with God is possible on this level of human existence.

To avoid a possible misunderstanding of Kelsey's presentation of experiencing God directly, it is essential to bear in mind the circumstances and the issues so prevalent in the sixties which formed the context of his work. As already stated, it was an important concern of Kelsey to provide an acceptable framework for discussion of spiritual experience within a situation where materialistic secularism scorned and denigrated the metaphysical and mystical aspects of humanity. It was a particular interest of Kelsey's to counteract the then prevailing search of people for credible and transforming "experiences" which they endeavoured to obtain through a variety of means such as experimentation with drugs and eastern techniques for the purpose of psycho-spiritual transformation. Kelsey, being a Jungian, is particularly careful not to introduce ontological statements about the reality of God

into his discussion of spiritual experience. In the light of this it is therefore essential, if one is to understand Kelsey's presentation of experiencing God directly, to realize that his methodological avoidance of ontology does, however, not mean that he reduces the reality of "God" to the spiritual aspect of the world or of humanity.

3.2. The concept 'direct experience'.

Although Kelsey argues for the possibility of direct experience of God, he does not, however, provide the reader with a clear definition of exactly what direct experience of God entails. He delineates certain characteristics of direct experience as he understands it. He also sets out the preparatory conditions conducive to direct experience, but he does not define the essence and exact meaning of the experience. Neither does he qualify what constitutes the directness of the experience. He is, however, adamant that direct and energizing encounter with God can occur in various ways and claims that the non-physical realm is the most probable one for a direct experience, although it is also possible in the physical dimension of reality (Kelsey 1976b:8).

In explaining what direct experience entails, Kelsey draws heavily upon the contemporary insights of depth psychology. He states that in the experience, the ego of the person becomes a "partner with the divine and is transformed" (Kelsey 1982a:28). In the process of

the experience the husks of ego defences are shattered and the functions of words, images and concepts become defunct.

'Ego' is used by Kelsey as the stable center of a person's consciousness (Kelsey 1972:115). He maintains that unless one has a strong sense of identity one cannot assimilate experiences of the divine (Kelsey 1987:175). To have a strong ego, or center of personality, enables a person to distinguish between inner and outer reality. The ego has no negative moral or spiritual connotations. It is simply one's stable "I-ness" (Kelsey 1987:181).

In the direct experience of God then, the spirit of the person merges with the spirit of God and the meeting is a concrete encounter of love which results in bringing the person's whole life in line with divine love. The experience provides a sense of identity, oneness, ecstasy and bliss. Since the experience comes unexpectedly, it is received as pure gift, marked by passivity, openness and waiting. The experience is also characterized by pure and almost inexpressible joy of being one with the centre of all things, of having found one's goal and meaning (Kelsey 1976a:134).

The ultimate evidence of a direct experience of God, says Kelsey, consists of the transformation of the ego at the moment of divine breakthrough and the establishment of an immediate rapport between God and the human spirit. The direct experience comprises a response to the call of God experienced within the person together

with the conscious perception of the spiritual dynamics at work. In the experience the person momentarily tastes wholeness which sustains and motivates all subsequent experiences (Kelsey 1972:42).

Drawing on the works of C.G.Jung, Kelsey advocates that for a direct experience to occur, the person has willingly to present to God the totality of the psyche. Because in the direct experience of God, the Spirit makes a direct impression on the soul or psyche of the person, Kelsey maintains that the direct experience is received through the psyche of the person (Kelsey 1972:146). What normally occurs is that the ego does not resist the experience, but abandons itself to the presence of God and allows itself to be absorbed completely and willingly. To be able to do this, the person ought to know his\her psyche as deeply as is possible (Kelsey 1982a:50). He describes the psyche as that which contains:

"all the depths of ourselves, our amazing capacity to remember , our animal instincts that emerge in dreams and fantasies and those parts of ourselves that we have forgotten and even that part of us which is open to the Holy Spirit, it is the vestibule in which God dwells within each of us" [Kelsey 1982a:32]

The psyche goes much deeper than simple consciousness. In fact it consists of layers of consciousness, and for the direct contact to

occur implies going on what Kelsey calls the "inner journey" and for this Kelsey recommends a strong ego. He describes the ego as the part of a person's psyche that develops to deal with the tensions of the outer world without falling apart (Kelsey 1982:50) and to give a base for relationship to the objective psyche (Kelsey 1972:114). Jung, in his writing about the unconscious, assumed the reality of a stable center of consciousness, an ego. To facilitate integration of the total psyche, ego consciousness is necessary. "It interacts with the depths of the psyche and in the integration the ego is expanded and transformed, not eliminated" (Kelsey 1987:22).

Unless the ego is strong and disciplined enough to both receive and sustain a direct experience of God, Kelsey cautions that it can be a dangerous experience, as the journey towards the inner self can swallow us ten times faster than that towards the outer one (Kelsey 1982a:50). The classic definition of a weak ego is the person who is incapable of genuine deep relatedness. As already mentioned above: a direct experience implies bringing "the totality of the psyche to God's transforming influence" and this experience can be wholesome if one knows one's psyche very deeply. (Kelsey 1982a:50). The development of the psyche is not possible without a well-developed and stable ego.

For the direct experience to materialize Kelsey gives preference to the inner reality of existence and he seems to make provision for

degrees of directness in experiencing God. God can and does remain veiled in the midst of the encounter, as in the case of Moses (Ex 33) and the knowledge obtained from the experience need not be complete or fully comprehensible. It seems that these so-called inadequate factors do not detract from the fact that the experience is real and 'direct'. Neither does the fact that God remains beyond the understanding of the person diminish the intensity peculiar to a direct experience.

The possibility of a direct experience occurring in the physical dimension of reality is not totally discounted either, as Kelsey makes provision for God intervening directly by breaking through into the natural processes of life.

One of Kelsey's aims is to convince our Western materialistic society of the reality of a direct experience of God. But because direct access to God takes place in the context of faith, where truth is believed, he warns that the experience cannot always be logically proven. Kelsey regards the Western 'proof mentality' as undermining the person's ability to recognize a direct experience when it actually does take place. He cautions that logical 'proofs' for the direct experience could be found to be insufficient and inconsistent, precisely because faith matters do not often adhere to logic. The direct experience itself provides a certainty and security which is unlike the quality of our everyday experiences and this is exactly where the difference lies (Kelsey 1981a:30,31).

Kelsey does not claim that there is a fixed pattern as regards how a direct experience of God occurs. What is certain is that the individual is always aware of the immediate effects of divine action. This is because the experience touches the person's psyche or spirit directly and the person is fully aware of what is taking place at the precise moment of direct contact (Kelsey 1972:146).

3.3. Mystical experiences as direct experiences.

Although mystical experiences are not the exclusive form of direct experiences of God, Kelsey regards mystical or contemplative experiences as an exceptional form of direct contact with the divine. He regards mysticism as a return of the individual to what he calls the harmonious union with God which existed before the fall of humanity. Jung talks of the layers of consciousness in the person. Using this, Kelsey says that in mystical prayer the person passes from one layer to the next in the inward journey, to the core of the personality where the great mystery, God, dwells. In the mystical experience the whole personality of the person is absorbed in the great mystery of God. The call to love at the core of the person's being, at the centre of the soul, makes the experience a reality when the person responds with his\her entire being to the call. The directness of the experience is also determined by the quality of the individual's response to God in the depths of the inner spiritual realm. Despite the fact that Kelsey does not favour imageless contemplation he recognizes the

value of a mystical experience as an imageless and blissful union of the soul with God (Kelsey 1976a:10,130,134).

The mystical dimension is a world not confined to the personal, social and material, but it transcends them. "This is an experience of union with the divine in which no outside elements are involved. Physical matter, symbols, ritual are all forgotten, and the only things that matter are the person and the immediate perception of the divine" (Kelsey 1976a:133).

Operative in the mystical dimension are powers and forces at work within the person's life that we know very little about unless brought into it by prayer practices such as contemplation. These forces are characterized by supernatural manifestations and can take the form of angels, demons, God, etc., as presented in the Old and New Testament accounts of experiences of God. Supernatural powers announce themselves through the material world where they are engaged in a communication process with the individual. The communication can be direct and in understandable words to the person concerned, but the communication can also be indirect through the signs or events in the surrounding material and social world in which the person finds him or herself. The awareness experienced by the individual that he or she has been involved on a deep personal level in the communication process makes the experience into a direct experience of God (Kelsey 1976b:128).

Many mystics point out that a direct experience of God is ultimately an experience of Love, which is the characteristic taken up and expounded by Kelsey. In the experience the person becomes unified with all that is loved. The direct experience is thus essentially an experience of finding and opening us to the source of all love, i.e., God (Kelsey 1976a:128). The experience of this is described by the individual as a feeling of being at one with all of the created universe.

3.3.1. The principal characteristics of the mystical form of direct experiences.

Kelsey divides religious experiences into three kinds: the sacramental, the contemplative and meditating in images - using the imagination as a tool with which to contact the reality of the spiritual world (Kelsey 1976a:130,131,136). It is easier to characterize the contemplative or mystical experiences as they are regarded as the most unitive and therefore, most direct of all religious experiences of God. Kelsey draws on the characteristics of the experiences of classical mystics such as Teresa of Avilla, John of the Cross, Catherine of Sienna and Francis of Asissi, to support his claims that the direct experience of God is more than just a possibility, but is a reality. Kelsey's characteristics of religious experiences are therefore not original as he also draws heavily on the work of William James and Rudolf Otto. James, however, in presenting his characteristics of religious

experience, does not designate them as 'direct' or 'indirect'.

First of all, the nature of a mystical form of religious experience is *ineffable* in the sense that it cannot adequately be described or relayed to those who have never experienced it. Kelsey classifies it as genuine experiences and people who have had this type of experience can communicate about it on a very deep and personal level (Kelsey 1987:85). William James says that "mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make it clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it exists...It follows from this that its quality must be *directly experienced*; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others" (James 1960:380).

The second characteristic is that the mystical form of religious experiences are *noetic*; they are known as states of knowledge (Kelsey 1987:85). The prime purpose is that they convey understanding, knowledge, illuminations, revelations and significance. James describes them as providing "insights into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect" (James 1960:381).

The third most obvious characteristic is that the experience of God in this direct mystical form carries a strange sense of *authority* for most of those who have them (Kelsey 1987:85,86).

The fourth characteristic is that the experience is *transient* and is distinguished by its momentary nature. The experience cannot be sustained for too long and when it has faded it can only be imperfectly reproduced in the memory (Kelsey 1987:85), but when the experience recurs it is recognized instantaneously.

The fifth characteristic is that the experience is known for its *passive nature* as it is not achieved by the person's efforts. The human person is never the agent of the experience; that prerogative belongs to God. It is the person's privilege to freely respond (Kelsey 1987:85).

Despite Kelsey's statement that the person remains passive in the experience, for the experience to be direct, the person must always be actively aware of a new way of experiencing his or her own existence. The person must also become aware of the relevance and meaning that the various aspects of the mystical experience are offering.

3.3.2. Characteristics of non-mystical forms of direct experiences of God.

Despite the fact that Kelsey regards what he calls 'true mystical' experiences as the most unitive of all direct contact with God, he does not confine direct encounters to mystical experiences. What Kelsey advocates is that the non-rational elements of human

experience, such as dreams, visions, intuition and images, be given recognition as various ways of directly experiencing God.

The *non-mystical characteristics* of direct experiences of God are associated by Kelsey especially with the sacraments, healing experiences, speaking in tongues and dreams. In this instance the person can use images, symbols or the imagination to contact the reality of the spiritual world (Kelsey 1976a:136). The characteristics are:

- The sense of *overwhelming attraction* to God in spite of ourselves, while at the same time the felt presence of God satisfies a need deep within the person's being. The result of the experience is reflected in the fact that the person's life, or an aspect of the person's life, is *transformed* in some obvious way (Kelsey 1987:85).

- The experience is also accompanied by a sense of *holy fear* (Rudolf Otto's term) which is the sense of the person's own *insignificance* in the presence of God. The person is normally "overwhelmed with awe" since the experience requires looking deeply into oneself (Kelsey 1987:86).

- The experience is very often also marked by "*ravishing love*". [Kelsey 1987:86.] This experience of love results in a subsequent experience of compassion. The authenticity of direct experiences of

God is further reflected in the fact that it bears fruit in an increase of love (Kelsey 1976a:139].

- The experience can occur "in quite clear and distinct images" (Kelsey 1987:86), but it can also be perceived as imageless. The distinct image can be an overpowering light or a deep sense of presence. Whether the experience is perceived as imageless or through the clearest of images, the two aspects are complementary and do not oppose each other (Kelsey 1987:86).

For Kelsey, a direct experience of God does not incorporate all the characteristics at once, nor to the same degree. The results of the experience are not the same for every person. In his work Kelsey shows abundant respect for traditional elements of Christian spirituality. He maintains that there are various ways of arriving at a direct experience of God and the directness of the experience will vary according to the mode, be it meditation, contemplation, sacraments, the inner perception of divine images or mystical experiences (Kelsey 1976a:131; 1981b:34). The various levels of experiencing God require different degrees of awareness and understanding of the non-physical world as well as our identity.

Most direct experiences of God are of a positive transforming nature, but Kelsey warns that in some instances when one enters into direct experiences "without the right preparation, or for the wrong motives" (Kelsey 1972:172) the result of the experience can

take on pathological manifestations. A person can regress, particularly if s/he is not psychologically strong enough to sustain the experience. For this reason he maintains that it is not only irresponsible, but extremely dangerous to enter the spiritual dimension unprepared (Kelsey 1972:172,173).

A common result of direct experience of God is that the individual experiences a new harmony of purpose, which is often obvious in a sense of creative peace and sometimes even physical healing.

Each experience brings a greater openness to other forms of direct experiences such as dreams and visions (Kelsey 1972:166). It brings greater compassion and understanding of others and diminishes the destructive, critical and defensive elements in the person's individual nature (Kelsey 1972:165).

3.4. The conditions for a 'direct experience of God'

For a direct experience of God to materialize, Kelsey maintains that the working together of a number of pre-existing conditions are required. The first condition is that the individual *adheres to a world view* in which God holds a significant place and which also makes provision for the belief in the spiritual dimension of reality (Kelsey 1981b:13). To come in contact with the spiritual dimension of reality, which constitutes part of a direct experience, the person has to adhere to prayer practices which

cultivate some personal means and which facilitate some form of direct contact with God. These means could be in the form of visions, poetic inspiration, dreams, prophecy, symbols, intuitions or love (Kelsey 1972:28).

On the other hand, the contact with the spiritual dimension is primarily an action of God's prevenient grace and the individual cannot take credit for the experience. Although the action of divine grace takes place in our natural world, it does not mean that the experience is entirely natural, as it can be discerned as the direct presence of God operative within the person.

In his effort to find a congenial world view or framework wherein religious experiences are once again appreciated as important for wholesome living, Kelsey resorts to the world view of Plato, one which distinguishes itself from, what he calls, the current materialistic world view as well as from the eastern world view. He maintains that humanity's misunderstanding of the created universe, both physical and spiritual, undermines our possibility of experiencing God directly (Kelsey 1972:7). According to the *materialistic world view* we perceive the world in which we live as purely *physical* and the spiritual world as an illusion (Kelsey 1981a: 29). This world view limits the human person to the five or six physical senses and any possibility of being able to perceive or intuit anything beyond the purely physical universe is unthinkable (Kelsey 1981a:31). (See diagram no 1).

Kelsey illustrates this view of the universe with the following diagram:

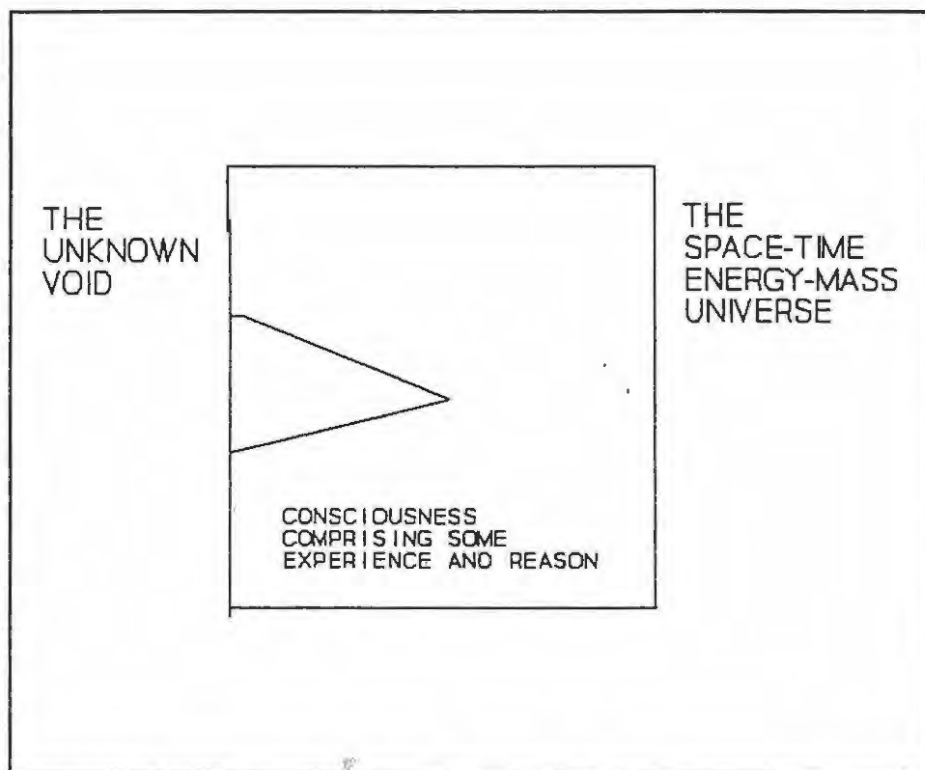


Diagram 1

1. The four walls represent the limits of the physical universe, with human consciousness directed only toward external, physical stimuli.¹
2. The little triangle represents the human being who is able to perceive through the five senses and then process the material through the intellect.
3. Outside the box there is nothing but the great void (Kelsey

¹ Since it is believed that this is the only source of experience that are real and valid, there can be no direct source of religious experience. There is no way of knowing any non-physical reality. "Any idea of a direct experience of God such as a vision that might come from the God source, is absurd" (Kelsey 1976a:146).

1981a:31).

The second view is that the *physical world is an illusion and the spiritual world is real* (Kelsey 1981a:34). This is predominantly the Eastern picture of the universe. Diagram no 2 illustrates this world view.

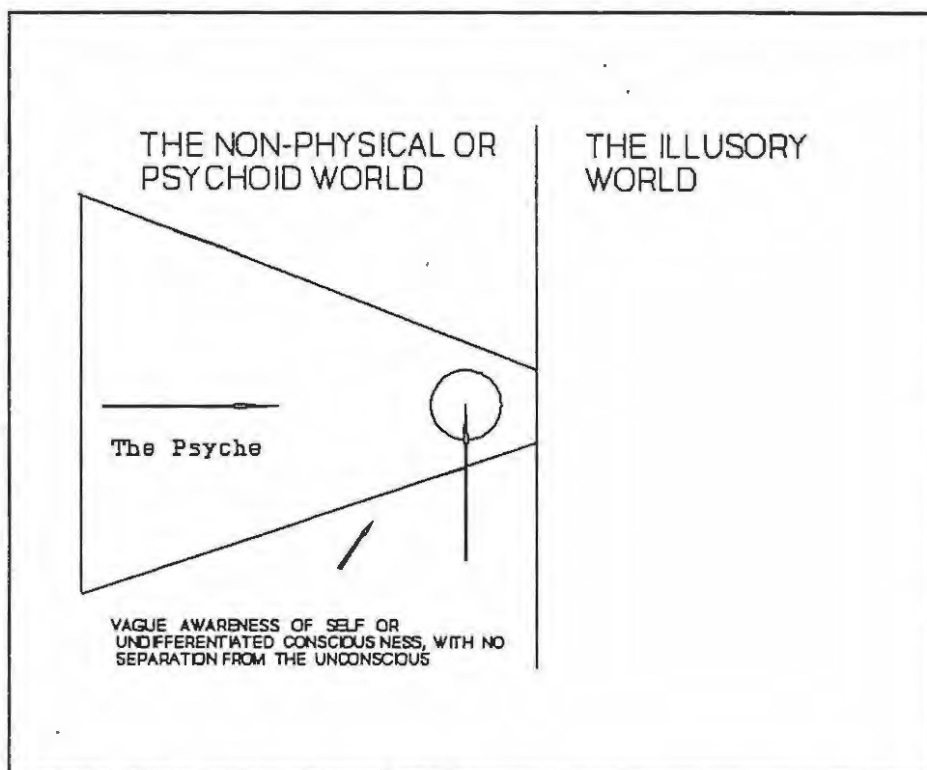


Diagram 2

1. The vague awareness of self is suggested by the small circle.
2. The human psyche is based in the non-physical, unconscious realm.
3. The physical and the spiritual realms are not interrelated.
4. The human personality is an expression of eternal spiritual

realities within the unreality of the physical world.

5. The goal of life is to lose one's sense of ego and merge into the absolute (Kelsey 1981a:34).

The third is the world view of Plato, the way of primitive religions, which rates both the physical and the spiritual realms of our human existence as real and valuable" (Kelsey 1981a:36). (See diagram no 3).

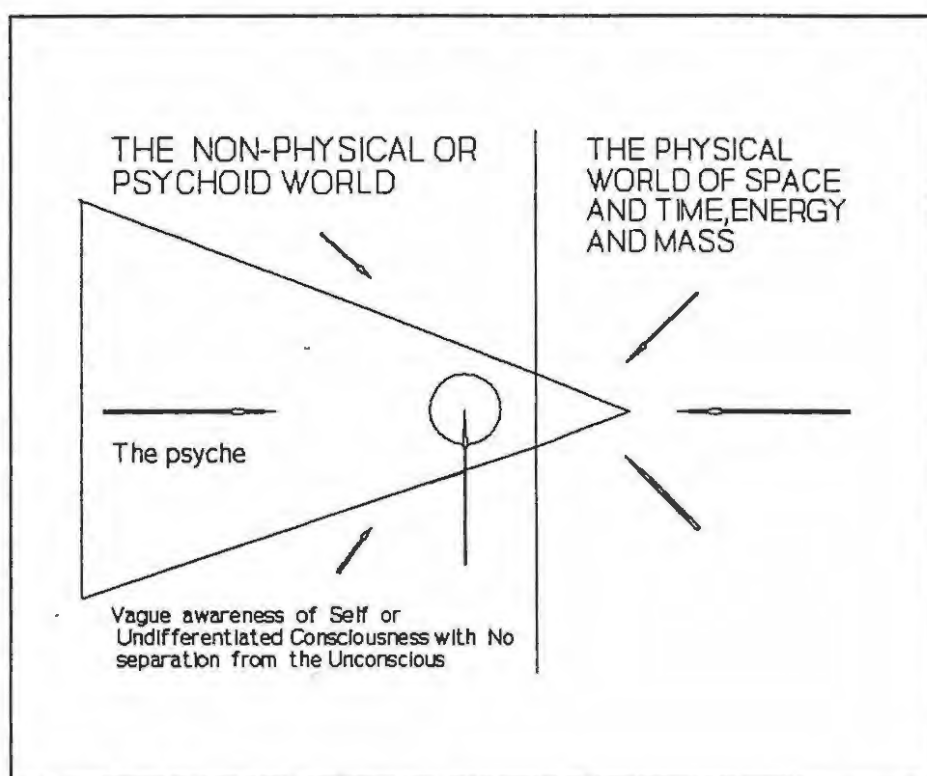


Diagram 3

1. The psyche is represented by the triangle lying between the world of psychoid or psyche-like reality and that of space and time, energy and mass.

2. The vague awareness of self is suggested by the small circle.
3. The physical and the spiritual realms are interrelated.
4. Human beings share in both aspects of reality.
5. Human beings are often in tension between the two realms

(Kelsey 1981a:36).

Kelsey subscribes to the world view of Plato because it permits belief in the spiritual reality. As already mentioned he claims that a direct experience is more possible in the spiritual dimension of reality. With this perception Kelsey's view seems to be in line with the understanding that religious experience resides in a different sphere or level of human existence. This understanding explains the fact that religious experiences defy conceptualization and articulation in rational terms (Kelsey 1972:57).

Through his efforts to restore belief in spiritual structures, Kelsey hopes to reawaken an awareness of avenues whereby God can be related to in a direct and meaningful way. These avenues are not simply emotional feelings of well being, but can be connected to a particular way of existing and relating to this world. The relatedness with God provides a person with an openness towards the world as a whole. Direct experiences of God can then be attributed to a person's openness to experience God as well as the world with all its dimensions. This requires the ability to be in contact with the spiritual dimension of reality and to allow this reality to

manifest itself in as meaningful a way as possible .

According to Kelsey's reasoning, it seems that a direct experience of God depends on an increase in a person's openness towards the different dimensions of reality, particularly the spiritual dimension of reality. The increase in individual openness is brought about by religious experience itself. It is in this context that Kelsey advocates Jung's experiential way of relating to the spiritual dimension of reality which, for him, coincides with the way Plato, Jesus and the Church Fathers spoke of it (Kelsey 1981b:14). All previous conceptions of the self as well as of the world are broken down so as to facilitate a more open perception of the world and its various dimensions. In the process the person is perceived as freed and undergoes positive existential growth and transformation. This, however, does not mean that the person who is atheistically or secularly inclined does not undergo positive existential growth. Religious experience is simply representative of a general structure which can be found in many different forms.

In summary, Kelsey regards the necessary condition for experiencing God directly as an adherence to the spiritual dimension of reality as it is in this dimension that contact with God is most real. Contact with the spiritual dimension of reality is facilitated by a world view which makes provision for the exploration of the non-rational world. This spiritual world, where there is no space or time, is the area where the divine and the human interact and

relate. It is therefore, up to the individual to cultivate a receptive disposition and an openness to the spiritual world so as to become aware of God's direct involvement (Kelsey 1982a:33).

3.5. The world view of Plato.

Kelsey propounds the world view of Plato. The latter, according to Kelsey, had a unique understanding of the existence of the two realms of reality: namely the physical and the spiritual. He also adhered to a theory of knowledge which supported his understanding and he believed that humanity not only knows about these realms, but has direct contact with both dimensions of reality. According to Kelsey, Plato seemingly never doubted that the human person can be possessed by the divine and thus encounter the world of the spirit (Kelsey 1972:52,53).

Kelsey, who relies on and recommends Paul Friedlander's exposition of Plato's world view, explains it accordingly: (Kelsey 1972:52).

Plato's view of the world regards humanity as abiding in the physical reality or in the sense world where the human person gets to know this world through sense experiences and reason. According to Plato, the sense world is, however, unreliable despite the fact that the human person can physically see all its composite elements. Because the sense world is in a perpetual process of change, a person is prevented from ascertaining absolute truth or

fact. The aim of Plato's philosophy was thus an attempt to find the unchanging elements of reality. He found these in the Realm of Ideas and Spiritual Forms, knowledge of which was not reached through sense experience or reason, but through direct contact and participation in the Realm of the Eternal (Kelsey 1972:52,52).

Direct participation in the Realm of the Eternal, of the World of Ideas, is what Kelsey says humanity experiences. He maintains that there are four ways of coming to this participation and the "four methods of knowing are essential to an understanding of Platonic thought and of man's direct contact with the non-material reality" (Kelsey 1972:53).

Kelsey does not pay much attention to the first three methods of acquiring knowledge namely: recollection, dialectic activity and love desire (eros), as he maintains that it is the fourth way, called "divine madness," which provides direct participation in the realm of the eternal, the world of Ideas. "Divine madness" is described by Plato as a divine gift and the source of the chiefest blessings granted to humanity by God (Friedländer 1958:68 also Kelsey 1972:53,55,56).

"Madness" did not have an entirely negative connotation for the Greeks. On the contrary the experiences were then perceived as if the mind has been taken over by the divine. This "divine madness" can in turn be subdivided into four types which give direct access

of a direct experience. He insists, therefore, that a person must present a strong ego to God for the reception of a direct experience. The profound influence of Western psychotherapies can be detected in this statement as well as the influence of Jung on Kelsey. Since it is the avowed aim of psychotherapies to strengthen the ego, to correct the self-image, and to integrate the self, the perspective from which Kelsey operates is quite clear. However, making a strong ego a necessary requirement for a direct experience gives the impression that one exists separately from all one's experiences, and even more disturbing, is the implication that one can *earn* a direct experience, because one's ego-health has determined the readiness for such an experience. It is nevertheless appreciated that a person should be sufficiently psychologically and spiritually stable and strong in order to sustain the profound impact of direct experience of God without being overwhelmed by pride or shattered by remorse and falling apart.

The Eastern approach, which sets out to either completely *transcend* the ego or to obtain a healthy ego (self-knowledge), should not be dismissed on the basis that it requires the spiritual discipline of monastic life and because it is associated with imageless contemplation. It seems an infinitely richer, more natural and more satisfying state of consciousness than the one proposed by Kelsey. In fact, the pre-occupation with developing a healthy ego can operate as an obstacle between God and humanity, and hence of a direct experience of God.

3.7.3. *'True' mysticism and 'lesser' mystical experiences.*

Although Kelsey integrates the insights of depth psychology with the traditional teachings of Christian masters on the devotional life, he draws more on the work of Plato, William James, Carl Jung and the mystics to provide a credible basis for the events of scripture and to prove that direct experiences of God are still possible today. The credibility of Kelsey's approach would have been greatly enhanced if he had balanced his work with more scriptural support than is the case.

The characteristics of the mystical form of direct experiences Kelsey abstracted from the characteristics of William James' mystical experiences of God. His characteristics are thus not original to his own findings yet he presumes a distinction between 'true mystical' characteristics, 'lesser' mystical and non-mystical characteristics. Although he makes this differentiation, he does not define what exactly constitutes the differences. He obviously regards mystical prayer as the highest form of prayer but he does not explain why, as does Ken Wilber for example. The latter maintains that 'lesser' or 'non' mystical experiences occur on the ego level of a person's consciousness whereas 'true' mystical experiences take place at the level of the Mind. At this level of prayer the person "no longer contemplates reality, but becomes reality. All dualisms and images are totally removed " (Wilber 1977:271). The dualisms are present, but they are more or less

suspended or harmonized. At this level, he says, people transcend space and time, and exist entirely in the Now-moment. At this level the mystic enjoys direct, imageless awareness. In contrast, the 'lesser' mystical experience does not attain to the same intensity of experience as 'true' mystical experiences. Kelsey lacks this type of explanation and does not clarify exactly why he makes differentiations in characteristics.

3.7.4. *Dreams.*

Despite the fact that Kelsey presents a powerful argument for re-directing attention to dream material in cultivating religious life, Howe comments that Kelsey has not emphasized the paradigmatic quality of biblical materials for dream interpretation. The possibility that the biblical materials constitute a normative set of paradigms, or a normative hermeneutical framework, has not been seriously entertained by Kelsey (Howe 1982:54). Kelsey's serious appropriation of a Jungian orientation caused him to relegate theological concepts to a subordinate status.

Another factor in need of consideration is that dreams, according to Howe, have been radically called into question in modern theological thinking, as has much other material in the history of Judaism and Christianity. Howe claims that the clarity with which some dreams seem to mediate a direct experience of God is often not

convincing. Although it is not always clear on what basis Kelsey cites different forms such as dreams, visions, healings and miracles as direct experiences of God, it is, however, well known that modern psychotherapies, especially Jungian therapies, make extensive use of dream material to gain access to the unconscious (Howe 1982:50). Howe also regards it as rather curious that, while the use of dreams as a way to the unconscious has generally undergone some de-emphasis in the psychoanalytic community, Kelsey still encourages it as a method for spiritual directors. It is obvious that Kelsey's appreciation of Jung's methods influenced his insistence that God can be experienced directly in dreams. This method can be regarded as convincing only to those who have a 'specialist' dream-interpreter who can assist the dreamer to come to a meaningful understanding of his/her experience of God. It can nevertheless be argued that the value of dreams lies more in cultivating a religious life, than being a vehicle of direct experience of God.

3.7.5. *'Divine mania' and Plato's world view.*

'Divine mania', elicited by Kelsey as a fourth means of obtaining knowledge of the spiritual world, deals with the world and the soul, and is a term that can be disturbing to many. So, too, can the gnostic implications of Plato's world view. Kelsey however, uses Plato's basic idea to point out how we acquire knowledge and what knowledge is accessible to us. The purpose of

his construction is to convey the information that the human person can have direct access to the spiritual world. It remains questionable, nevertheless, whether the restoration of a world view according to Plato will enhance belief in direct experiences of God or even foster people's growth in spiritual matters.

Kelsey's appeal for humanity to connect with what Plato calls the world of Universals, of Ideas, is in fact to deny the senses. There is a marked dualism that exists between the world of ideas and the world of things. The one is spiritual and the other physical. Ever since Plato separated ideas from experience, the argument as to which is really real has continued and it seems that Kelsey has fallen into the same trap. Even though Kelsey advocates that direct experiences of God must be possible on this side of the eschatological divide, he still gives more preference to the spiritual world. The greater part of his appeal is for us to get in touch with the spiritual dimension of reality.

4. 'DIRECT' EXPERIENCE OF GOD IN THOMAS MERTON'S THEOLOGY OF PRAYER.

4.1. Introduction.

Thomas Merton, who has received recognition as a spiritual writer of unique significance for our present times, is acclaimed for having made the present world more aware of the value of prayer, particularly contemplative prayer.

In Merton's theology of prayer, the '*directness*' of experiencing God and the reality of a 'direct' experience of God is expressed by him in the context of his personal and experiential understanding of *contemplative prayer*. Contemplation for Merton subscribes to all the characteristics that he delineates for a direct experience of God and he expresses the necessity of contemplative prayer in the life of every contemporary Christian.

The primary value of contemplative prayer lies in the fact that in a time when God is denied, regarded as obsolete and meaningless, people are in dire need of experiencing the reality and relevance of God in this life. Merton's theology of prayer offers an explicit refocus on humanity's ultimate reason for existence in which a person comes to completion in God. It is for this reason that he places strong emphasis on the *direct and personal encounter* with God and shows that even if humanity is blind to the possibility of experiencing God directly in this life, the possibility still remains. He points out that unless there is a

continual and vital contact with God the human person's spiritual life will become non-existent. For this reason Merton "places emphasis on the vertical and direct relationship with God rather than on the horizontal relationship of man with man" (Higgins 1975:148). Merton's theology of prayer is most appreciated when understood in the context of the central message of his spirituality, which is that life is a seeking of God in love and a sharing of that love with others.

The anthropological foundation to Merton's theology heightens the originality of his teaching on prayer. According to his theology, God's image is grounded in the human person's nature and this provides the human person with the radical potential to experience God directly and makes humanity capable of receiving God's love. The human person, distinctively and qualitatively different from God, can under no circumstances sustain an experience of the totality of God, yet the difference between God and humanity does not serve as a restraining factor for a 'direct' experience of God. Direct access to God takes place through what he calls the *centre* of each individual person. The center he defines as the soul.

A direct experience of God is appropriately presented as intrinsic to the practical component of his theology of prayer; in other words, Merton regards a *direct and immediate* relationship with God as essential to the fullness of life. In fact, Merton makes an explicit relationship between a 'direct' experience of God and the

human person's growth towards authentic self-knowledge, inner awareness and personal wholeness. For him, humanity is so constituted that with suitable effort and discipline a direct experience of God is more than just a possibility, but a necessity for human wholeness.

Merton's understanding of God as infinite, omnipotent, immanent and transcendent, does not detract from the 'directness' of the experience between God and the human person. In the 'direct' experience, God remains *infinitely transcendent*, but He is experienced as *intimately close and directly present* in the very ground of the human person's being.

4.2. The concept "direct experience of God".

A direct experience of God, as described in Merton's theology of prayer, forms part of his definition of *contemplative prayer* as well as one's *personal search for the true self*. The two aspects are inextricably intertwined in Merton's theology of prayer; in fact, the one presupposes the other.

Contemplation he defines as "a supernatural love and knowledge of God, simple and obscure, infused by Him into the summit of the soul, giving it *direct and experimental contact* with Him" (Merton 1975a:98). In contemplation we reach "the mysterious ineffable Divine Person - directly and immediately through grace and love,

without images (or with them if one likes, but this is less direct) and *without rationalization*. The real mystery of Christian *agape* (charity) is this power that the person of the Word, in coming to us, has given to us. The power of a direct and simple contact with Him, not as with an object only, a "thing" seen or imagined, but in the transsubjective union of love which does not unite an object with the subject but two subjects in one affective union" (Merton 1972:153).

The only way to experience God directly is through the center of the *true self*, which Merton defines as the soul or the whole self before God. The *centre* of our being "is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin, and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will" (Merton 1968:142). The direct experience at this level is understood as the perfect unity of the human spirit with the spirit of God, a temporary merging, while remaining distinct. The experience is described by Merton as a perfect coalescence of the uncreated image with our created image, not only in the perfect identification of minds and wills, but of knowledge and love in perfect communion (Merton 1976a:99).

At no stage during the direct experience does the individual fuse with God. Nor does the direct experience annihilate the person's

individuality. What occurs at this point of 'direct' contact is an experience of *deep loving union* which is marked with a feeling of intense inter-connectedness. Despite the fact that the person has the feeling of being dissolved in God's Being, there remains a definite distinction between the two entities, the two substances remain separate (Merton 1972:158,159).

Firstly, according to Merton's theology of prayer, a direct experience of God *moves beyond words and concepts to a direct experience of God insofar as this is humanly possible in this life*. Merton acknowledges that reading, prayer and meditation are each in their own way an experience of God, "an inner awareness of God's direct presence" (Merton 1980:162), but these experiences are mediated as they occur through the medium of words, concepts and thoughts. Meditation, Merton professes, is concerned with *doing* whereas contemplation is concerned with *being*. "It is not thinking about anything, but a direct seeking of the Face of the invisible, which cannot be found unless we become lost in Him who is Invisible" (Merton 1985:64).

Secondly, the search for the true self and contemplative awareness are the two indispensable features in a direct experience of God. Contemplation is also depicted as the means whereby one searches for one's true identity; it is the way of regaining the 'likeness of God' (see below). A direct experience of God, which is the "real and experimental contact" with God occurs in the true self

which emerges in contemplation where the person is stripped from the false self (Merton 1972:7,8).

4.3. Merton's theological anthropology.

Merton's anthropology is the key to understanding his ideas about humanity's direct experience of God. His anthropology emphasizes the basic goodness of human nature as well as the idea that the human person is both a spiritual and self-transcendent being.

Merton maintains that it is a fundamental duty of humanity to orientate its whole being towards God, to experience union with God and to be transformed in God. He emphasizes the transcendental element in humanity as he perceives it as the most natural and most distinctive quality the human person possesses. By virtue of this transcendent element the human person is capable of a transcendent experience, that is to say, the human person is capable of transcending him/herself (Merton 1976a:89).

Merton regards the doctrine of the image of God as the most valid basis for an authentic Christian anthropology. It has influenced his perception of the human person as a spiritual and self-transcending being considerably (Merton 1976a:44). According to his writings the human person is destined by God for a perfect union of likeness with God and he describes this state of natural union with God as "an immediate existential union with Him residing in our

soul as the source of our physical life"(Merton 1976a:99).

According to Merton there are three elements which constitutes this natural unity of the human person in the Divine image. The first element noted by him is that the person has a obediencial potency of being drawn to God in perfect identification. The other two elements are rooted in the human capacity for perfect freedom and for pure love, for at the very core of our essence we are constituted in God's likeness by our freedom, and the exercise of that freedom is nothing else but the exercise of disinterested love, the love of God for His own sake, because He is God (Merton 1972:200). Merton states that for the human person to say that s/he is made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for one's existence, because God is Love (Merton 1972:60). He asserts that it is the human person's capacity to love which stamps him or her with the image and likeness of God.

The human person, says Merton, has failed to realize this fundamental orientation towards God because of the Fall. Original sin has weakened human nature, as well as the natural capacity for divine union, and Merton sees the sin of Adam as the failure of humanity to be true to its own nature. As a result of the Fall, the human person, while still retaining the image of God insofar as it is the essence of the human person's being, has lost the likeness of God. The image of God is distorted by 'unlikeness'. In the light of this, the human person has become deeply false to his/her inmost

reality; that is to say to the true or inner self. In this sense, the human person has become alienated from the true self/inner self which is the image of God.

This alienation from God has been rectified in the Incarnation of Christ; it is in Christ that the human person recovers the original unity with God. Christ, says Merton, restored man to his original existential communion with God, the source of life (1976a:95).

Merton's theology constantly urges the human persons to find their true selves hidden with God in Christ. This true self is indistinguishable from the image of God but, he says, we constantly lose our true self by our habits of selfishness and our constant flights from reality (Merton 1976a:44). He asserts that it is the Christian's function in this life to find the real self and finding the real self is, in fact, finding God. He urges people to 'let go' of the 'false self' they have created and to 'restore' the 'true self', the divine image of God within themselves. He writes: "For us to awaken to the realities of the Spirit and to discover the image of God within us is to plunge into the existential depths of the concrete union of body and soul which makes up the human person" (Merton 1976a:45). He claims that " Unless we discover this deep self, which is hidden with Christ in God, we will never really know ourselves as persons. Nor will we know God. For it is by the door of this deep self that we enter into the spiritual knowledge of God (Merton 1976a: 30).

4.3.1. *The concept 'self'.*

The concept 'self', according to Anne Carr, is in fact an ambiguous term: "it can mean the centre of the highest personal and religious responsibility; it can equally suggest an egotistic concern for self-fulfilment-selfishness" (Carr 1988:2). For Merton however the 'self', and the search for the 'self', is a fundamentally spiritual issue and one that remained an intense concern in all his writings.

Merton says that in the 'direct' experience of God the person transcends the Self as all conflicts and contradictions between the Self and God are resolved. He acknowledges repeatedly that the False self is the most complicated obstruction towards a direct experience of God, but Merton's anthropological understanding of the human person, as the image of God, offers a solution to the problem, because he differentiates between the 'true self' and the 'false self'. In the direct experience of God, the person transcends the false self as the subject undergoes a radical change, an inner transformation of consciousness from an awareness of the false self (also referred to as the empirical self or ego self), to an awareness of the true self (also referred to as the transcendent self) (Merton 1972:7).

The discovery of the true self is the only real means of bringing the human personality to mature fruition i.e. to recover his\her

likeness to God in Christ by the Spirit (Merton 1976a:45). This is done by means of grace, and "grace is not opposed to nature, only to the limitations, deficiencies, to the weakness of nature. Grace is given to us to discover and actualize our deepest, truest self" [Merton 1976a:30]. Merton's theology advocates the restoration of the divine image in humanity by discovering the inmost self in the mystery of Christ, but this also results in a consciousness of and openness to the inmost self of other people who also bear within themselves the image of God.

4.3.1.1. The true self as both the image and likeness of God.

As previously mentioned, the concept 'true self', as used by Merton, makes sense only in the framework of his theology of original sin. He presents his doctrine of the human person not as a biblical scholar, but as a spokesperson of the Christian contemplative tradition. Functioning in the tradition of the Church Fathers, who claimed that original sin not only caused the loss of the human person's likeness to God, but also the loss of contemplative union which Adam enjoyed before the Fall, Merton also turns to 'Adam' in his reflection on the true self hidden with Christ in God.

According to the Patristic doctrine, human life proceeded mysteriously from the intimate depths of God's own life and, in the light of this anthropology, the human person's true identity is

constituted by both God's image and likeness. As a result of original sin, the human person, while retaining the image of God, has lost the 'likeness of God', hence the understanding that the human person is out of touch with its true human identity (Merton 1976a:78). Merton maintains that in order to have a direct experience of God it is essential to discover who we really are by restoring ourselves in God's Divine Image and Likeness (Merton 1976a:85). Like Augustine, he claims that human nature cannot rest except in the perfect likeness of the Divine Word (Merton 1976a:78).

4.3.1.2. *The image of God.*

Merton stresses that the image of God is present in every person by virtue of our human nature, while the likeness of God is imparted by grace. Relying on the theological insights of Thomas Aquinas, Merton explains that the divine image is not a static representation of something in the divine essence, but it is a dynamic tendency that comes to us towards union with God. "It is a kind of gravitational sensitivity to the things of God. The image of God is seen in the soul in so far as the soul is carried or is able to be carried towards God" (Merton 1976a:85). Merton argues that even though we can come to know the image by rational inference, this is not enough. The Christian has to experience his/her own identity in contemplative prayer, which is a deep experience of love (Merton 1976a:86).

4.3.1.3. *Restoring the 'divine likeness' within ourselves.*

To obtain the metaphysical union of the image and likeness of God which fashions our deep spiritual identity, implies that we restore the divine likeness of God in ourselves. To have the likeness of God restored in our souls presupposes that we are to be delivered from our illusory, false selves (Merton 1976a:44).

The restoration of one's likeness to God does not happen instantaneously, but gradually as the soul conforms to Christ. A person takes on its lost likeness to God when touched by God's ineffable mercy and forgiveness as well as coming to the recognition that s/he is known and loved by God (Merton 1976a: 87,88). According to Merton's theology, the Divine Spirit of God assists the human person in reconstituting itself in the likeness of God by curing itself of its spiritual blindness and opening its eyes to the things of God. In submitting one's will to the Spirit of God, the person ceases to be a prisoner of his/her own sinful passions (Merton 1976a:119).

The practical means to restore the likeness of God in one's soul is by "listening to the Word of God and bring it into our hearts, in listening to God in the Liturgy, in meditation" (Merton 1976a: 87). Contemplation and acts of love are indispensable to the spiritual process of restoring God's divine likeness in our souls.

4.3.1.4. *The true self as hidden with Christ in God.*

The true self is described by Merton as the part of ourselves that is mostly hidden, hidden with Christ in God. It is not easy to find this true self precisely because it is hidden in obscurity and nothingness and it is somehow even identical with God (Merton 1976b:86). It is nevertheless essential to discover our true self because: " unless we discover the deep self, which is hidden with Christ in God, we will never really know ourselves as persons. Nor will we know God" (Merton 1976a:30). Furthermore in the light of Merton's anthropology a direct experience is dependent on the discovery of the true self. Apart from the fact that the true self is hidden in Christ, it cannot surface easily, either, because it is swamped and weighed down by the sins and egocentric desires of the external self. "The creative and mysterious inner self must be delivered from the wasteful, hedonistic and destructive ego that seeks only to cover itself with disguises (Merton 1972:38). Merton goes on to state that the "inner self must be drawn up like a jewel from the bottom of the sea, rescued from confusion, from indistinction, from immersion in the common, the non-descript, the trivial, the sordid, the evanescent" (Merton 1972:38).

The true self is in constant opposition to the false self with its ego-centric desires. This false self is perceived as a whole syndrome of lies and illusions that originate from a radical rejection of God in whom alone we find our own truth and ultimate

identity. The external self is a disguise of the hidden self; it is divided within and alienated from its own truth and identity. This universal predicament, which is observed by Merton as the source of all sin, can only be restored by dying to the false self so as to be able to embrace the true self which is hidden with Christ in God.

4.3.2. Love is the substance of the true self.

The secret of our true identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God. Merton says that for us to say that we are made in the image of God is to say that: "Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name" (Merton 1972:60). This love that is the nature of our true self and which manifests our true self, originates from God and not from the ego, the empirical self. This love is the opposite of self-love as it goes out of itself to find a new center. Through love for God in contemplation we discover a self that is greater than our isolated false ego. It is essentially prayer that reveals to us that God's love forms the deepest part of our true identity.

4.3.3. The true self as self-transcendent.

An experience of self-transcendence is, for Merton, much more definite than a 'peak experience'. It is an experience that is beyond the ordinary level of religious experience; it is beyond the

level where the person remains more or less conscious only of him/herself. It is described by Merton as "an experience of metaphysical or mystical self-transcending and also at the same time an experience of the 'Transcendent' or the 'Absolute' or 'God' not so much as object but Subject" (Merton 1976b:121).

Merton argues that the transcendent self is metaphysically distinct from the Self of God, while during the transcendent experience the transcendent self is perfectly identified with the Self of God by love and freedom (Merton 1976b:121). The true self is at once both the subject and beneficiary of a transcendent experience.

In transcending itself the person goes beyond the false self as it is only the metaphysical person that is capable of a transcendent union with God. The focus of the transcendental experience in the Christian tradition is not on the individual self as a separate, limited and temporal person, but on Christ or the Holy Spirit 'within' this self (Merton 1976b:124).

In the Christian tradition personal transcendence refers to the experience as "having the mind of Christ". or "participating in the mind of Christ". It implies a transformation of consciousness: from a consciousness of the false self to a consciousness in Christ. The transcendent experience is, therefore, one of the self who is in union with Christ, who is identified with Christ (Merton 1976b:124).

To attain this transcendental experience is to penetrate the reality of all that is, to grasp the meaning of one's own existence, to find one's true place in the scheme of things, to relate perfectly to all that is in identity and love (Merton 1976b:122).

4.4. Contemplation as a direct experience of God.

The goal of all prayer is to see the face of God and the task of all prayer is to remove the veils that prevent us from seeing. Merton describes 'pure contemplation' as the "direct quasi-experimental contact of God beyond all thoughts, that is beyond the medium of concepts. In this sense contemplation is direct contact with God. It goes beyond symbols and intuitions of the intellect and attains to God directly without the medium of any created image" (Merton 1975a:98 also 1983:298). He says that there exists a definite point in contemplation when the role of concepts and images become obsolete and that it is precisely at this point that contemplative prayer is a form of *direct unitive contact with the Being of God*. The experience brings a person face to face with his\her most inner depth where God is profoundly present. "We awaken not only to a realization of the immensity and majesty of God....but also a more intimate and more wonderful perception of Him as directly and personally present in our being" (Merton 1980:160).

Merton says that in contemplation "we do not seek to know about God as though he were an object like other objects which submit to our scrutiny and can be expressed in clear scientific ideas, we seek to know God himself, beyond the level of all objects which he has made and which confront us as "things" isolated from one another, "defined", "delimited" with clear boundaries. The infinite God has no boundaries and our minds cannot set limits to him or to his love" (Merton 1973:98,99).

Contemplation, as an intuition of God, is born of pure love. It is a gift of God that absolutely transcends all the natural capabilities of the person and which a person cannot acquire by any effort of his/her own. As contemplation, according to Merton's theology, cannot be a function of the external, false self so, too, a direct experience of God *cannot* be a function of the external self as there exists an irreducible opposition between the deep transcendent self that awakens only in contemplation, and the superficial external self (Merton 1972:7; 1980:161). Contemplation, which Merton calls a mystical form of prayer, is not something the person can create for him\herself as it is a pure gift of God to the person. It does not consist of reasoning about dogmas of faith or the mysteries, but in contemplation "we seek to gain a direct existential grasp, a personal experience of the deepest truths of life and faith, finding ourselves in God's truth" (Merton 1973:82). His description of contemplation is that of a deeply tranquil and joyful experience since it brings us in direct contact with the

source of all joy and all life (Merton 1973:86). Merton appropriates terminologies such as 'pure experience' or 'pure act' by which he wishes to emphasize the originality, the 'unadulteratedness', the immediateness' of the experience.

Contemplation is thus both the means towards a direct experience as well as the most authentic form of a direct experience of God. It means emptying oneself of every created love to be filled with the love of God. This love is infused by God into the summit of the soul, giving it a direct and experimental contact with Him as He is in Himself (Merton 1973:105;1983:298).

4.5. Merton's characteristics of direct experiences of God.

4.5.1. *A direct experience of God as an experience beyond images, symbols and concepts.*

At no stage in his theology of prayer does Merton deny the value of symbols, images, imagination, concepts and ideas, but he is all the same of strong opinion that a direct experience of God is "beyond all images, symbols and ideas" (Merton 1973:105,106). In contemplation the person transcends the dependence on all sensations, images and concepts. He states that there are limitations in using symbols and images particularly in contemplation. For this reason they can only be a means to an end. The realization that God is "beyond all images, symbols and ideas"

dawns only on one who has previously made good use of these things, who has reached the limits of symbols and ideas and wishes to go further to the stage that one can do without them (Merton 1973:105,106).

The function of the symbols, images, music, chant, the kataphatic approach to prayer, is a way to open up the inner self to the contemplative. The only reason why we meditate on the images of God in our memory "is in order that we may be prepared for this more intimate contact with Him by love" (Merton 1972:155). Merton maintains that the person must use whatever is of help towards a direct experience of God, but must avoid at all cost what gets in the way. He says when God touches our souls with His love "He affects us even more directly and intimately than a material object moves and affects our eyes or our other senses" (Merton 1972:155). When we experience God directly "there is surely no strict necessity for using our imaginations any more" (Merton 1972:155).

Thoughts, concepts and images are perceived as veils or coverings that impede the spiritual receptiveness by which the spirit touches the Divine Being. When the veils are removed one is in a position to touch or rather to be touched by God in the mystical darkness. (Merton 1983:300). Merton differentiates between a direct experience in contemplative prayer and that of the Beatific vision by stating that "although in contemplation the direct vision of God is a vision in darkness and therefore not the face to face vision

enjoyed by the Blessed in Paradise it is still an equally real and genuine contact with God" (Merton 1983:298).

Merton cautions that, even if one is proficient in meditation, it is not wise to neglect the senses and the body completely in contemplation, as it will not be meaningful and the results will not be significant (Merton 1973:106).

It is thus a salient feature that in a direct experience of God, intermediaries can assist in the facilitation of the experience, but their role is of secondary importance. Merton says in a direct experience or 'pure contemplation' the so-called 'coverings' cease to function or simply dissolve. The result of the experience is 'pure knowledge', or 'immediate contact' as God is encountered without any filters, without intermediaries, that is to say 'directly' as far as it is humanly possible (Merton 1983:300).

It is thus obvious that Merton reveals a preference for the apophatic way, the experience of God whereby the contemplative penetrates beyond concepts and symbols so as to become gradually familiar with a God who is, so to speak, "non-existent" to all human experience (Merton 1980:172). Merton states very emphatically that although the human person bears in him/herself the imprint of God, "one simply cannot enter through creatures into the presence of God" (Merton 1975a:10). The contemplative renounces the mind's

activity and enters into the darkness where God, the ineffable reality, is experienced as a "dazzling darkness" (Merton 1975a:10).

4.5.2. A direct experience of God as an experience of transcendent union with God.

Every meditation, every act of mental prayer according to Merton should bring us into direct union with God, but he describes a direct experience of God as achieved in contemplative prayer as the *perfect unity of the human spirit with the spirit of God*. He defines the supernatural union (the human person's mystical or transforming union with God) as "the perfect coalescence of the uncreated image of God with our created image not only in a perfect identification of minds and wills but in knowledge and love" (Merton 1972:99,100).

In the experience of union, Merton distinguishes once again the daily empirical selfish ego from the transcendent self, which, as previously mentioned, he claims is metaphysically distinct from the Self of God and yet can be perfectly identified with the Self by love. He describes the unitive experience as the unity of love between the true self and God and the nature of the experience obliterates all forms of intermediaries. It can be argued that by virtue of the qualitative difference between God and humanity, intermediaries will always exist between God and His people regardless of the depth of the experience. According to Merton's

theology of prayer, intermediaries, though present in contemplation, become totally insignificant, meaningless and functionless. According to Merton, it is the encounter of oneness with God, of being 'identical with Him, the Ground of Being, that amounts ultimately to the directness of an experience of God (Merton 1975a:10).

This spiritual union of the person and God is the work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Love. Merton differentiates the union of the person with God from the union between Christ and God. The latter he describes as "ontologically perfect and indestructible, a union of essences in one subsisting Personal entity Who is the eternal God" (Merton 1972:158). The union between a person and God is not of this ontological or inseparable character. This union is however "more than just a moral union or an agreement of hearts" (Merton 1972:159). This union of the human person with Christ, Merton describes as something much more than just a similarity of inclination and feeling, of mutual consent of minds and wills. "It has a more radical, more mysterious and supernatural quality: it is a mystical union in which Christ himself becomes the source of divine life in me" (Merton 1972: 159).

At the level of experiencing God directly, Merton says, prayer is no longer communication, but 'com-union'. It is wordless, beyond speech and concepts. He describes communication and communion as two fundamentally different modes of knowing. In communion words

are superfluous, it is something that the deepest ground of our being cries out for and it is something for which a life-time of striving would not be enough (Merton 1976:62,63).

4.5.3. *A direct experience as an experience of Love.*

Contemplation, as a direct experience of God, provides the person with a supernatural realization of God as Love and the feeling of being one with God in love. Merton says "it is love that forms us in the likeness of God and it is also love that establishes the intimate embrace with God in the darkness of not knowing" (Merton 1976:13).

Merton considers the deep sense of identification with God by love as one of the most profound characteristics of a direct experience of God which a human person can have. He claims that this identification is a spiritual sharing in the life of God (Merton 1983:134). In fact he regards the direct participation in God's love as a sharing in God's existence because God is Love (Merton 1972:60).

In contemplation, Merton says, we do not *see* God, but we *know* God by love: "for He is pure Love and when we taste the experience of loving God for His own sake alone, we know and experience Who and what He is" (Merton 1972:268). Contemplation is thus a direct intuition of God that is grounded in love and terminates in love.

The direct experience overwhelms the person so much that it excludes every other affection from the inner self, except love. The personal quality of the experience of God's love provides a heightened awareness of God which cannot be completely replaced by words.

The characteristics of this love as noted by Merton includes the idea that love in contemplative prayer transcends all the person's natural capacities and this cannot be acquired by the person's own efforts. It is one's spirit that recognizes how much one is loved by God (Merton 1955:77,78). Merton says however that the depth of contemplative love also implies the recognition of one's own freedom and the fact that one's union with God in love is inseparable from one's union of love with other people. In the actual experience of love Merton writes "the self, the separate entity that is you, apparently disappears and nothing seems to be left but a pure love. Not two loves, one waiting for the other, striving for the other, seeking for the other, but one love, loving in Freedom" (Merton 1961:220;1972:283).

4.5.4. *Transformation of consciousness.*

Significant of a direct experience of God, according to Merton's theology of prayer, is that the person undergoes a radical change which he calls the transformation of consciousness. This implies that the person's awareness shifts from an awareness of the false

self to an awareness of the true self. By being no longer conscious of the false self the person is free to find the real self which is hidden with Christ in God. In the experience the person ceases to assert its own self as the center of consciousness and discovers God as the center of his/her conscious being (Merton 1961:33;1972:34,35). According to Merton it is God Who directly produces this transformation and makes 'Himself' known by the experience.

Merton calls such a shift in consciousness a transcendent experience in which the person experiences itself as a 'transcendent self', Although metaphysically distinct from the Self of God, the person in the transcendent state can identify perfectly with God in love (Merton 1976b:124).

Related to the transformation of consciousness is the sudden gift of spiritual awareness which is also another significant feature of a direct experience of God. The experience is accompanied by the *spiritual awakening* of the person's *inner self* to God. Merton talks about being "aware" and being "awake". He writes: "...contemplation is a sudden gift of awareness, an awakening to the Real within the real. A vivid awareness of the infinite Being at the roots of our own limited being. An awareness of our contingent reality as received, as a present from God, as a free gift of love" (Merton 1972:3). In this sense contemplation, as a direct experience of God, *awakens* the human person to the

realization of the immensity of God "out there" and of the more intimate perception of Him as immanently present in our deepest being (Merton 1980:160).

Only when the inner self is awakened to God's presence can the person respond directly to God's immediate presence. This awakening to spiritual consciousness, which requires a radical shift from the exterior life to the interior life, enables the person to recognize God as present in the depth of his\her being. The spiritual awakening of the person to that inner self, brings with it the remarkable, conscious discovery that God and the inner self share a single 'I' (Merton 1972:279). Merton says that as long as there is a sense of separation between God and ourselves, then we are not experiencing God directly. As long as the 'I' is the subject of contemplation, we are not in the realm of experiencing God directly. The true 'I' is completely stripped from its falseness, "it is beyond the kind of experience which says "I want", "I love", "I know", "I feel" (Merton 1972:282). In the transition the personal 'I' apparently disappears, what is experienced is a perfect renunciation of all things in favour of God. The person vanishes into God by pure contemplation. "God alone is left. He is the 'I' who acts there. He is the one Who loves and knows and rejoices" (Merton 1972:287).

4.5.5. *The overwhelming awareness of God's presence.*

The overwhelming awareness of the Divine Presence is another distinctive feature of a direct experience, as propounded by Merton, together with the full awareness of the impassable gap between God and humanity. The experiential, felt presence of God, peculiar to a direct experience, is qualitatively different from other contacts with God. In the experience of God's presence, the individual discards all forms of inordinate created love and selfishness to be filled with God's love (Merton 1972: 264). The dynamic of self-emptying, and of transcendence, accurately defines the transformation of the Christian consciousness which takes place in the direct experience. Merton describes it as "a kenotic transformation, an emptying of all contents of the ego-consciousness to become a void in which the lights of God, or the glory of God, the full radiation of the infinite reality of His Being and Love are manifested" (Merton 1976b:125).

4.6. Conclusion

The whole purpose of Merton's theology of prayer is to bring a person into an awareness of his/her personal union with God in Christ. Every human person has the fundamental duty to orient his/her entire being towards God. The human person achieves this union with God only by discovering the true self, as it is in the true self that one awakens to the presence of God. This is what

contemplation is all about. It brings a person to the deepest 'center' where s/he discovers his/her complete emptiness and, passing through that center, the inner transcendent, to God.

The *direct experience of God* is, then something that happens to the person. It cannot be induced on one's own volition, but a person can prepare the way for the experience by contemplative prayer practices. Direct experiences take place in the transcendent dimension, at the *centre* of our being, where the act of contemplation is pure, direct and the contact with the divine reality is ineffable (Merton 1976b:9).

4.7. Evaluation:

There is no doubt that Thomas Merton's work is an outstanding example of an experiential approach to spirituality. As the central theme of his spiritual theology is the search for the true self, it is of no surprise that the concept of experiencing God directly is so closely related to it. The true self is regarded by Merton as our image of God and by discovering our true image we are in fact discovering God.

It can, however, be observed that Merton's approach is very elitist in this sense that only a select group would be able to embrace Merton's love for the apophatic mystical tradition of imageless contemplation. Because he relates a direct experience of God so

intimately to the search for the true self, the question arises whether it is in every person's capacity to obtain such a depth of self-awareness which would necessarily facilitate a direct experience of God. The requirements of self-emptying and the abandonment of defences necessary for contemplation, leads one to ponder the necessity for a system or a pattern of life which will alter the constituents of one's mental life so as to 'equip' one for a direct experience of God. It is a known fact that the human personality is a far deeper and more mysterious thing than the superficial self, the Ego, but how does a normal person come to realize the unplumbed depths of one's personality?

Merton seems to redeem himself in this respect that the search for the true self is a pursuit not confined to the inmates of monasteries, but that it is a God-given task for all people regardless of the religious tradition and life style to which they adhere. A direct experience of God, like the search for the true self, seems to be a process and not an achievement that reaches its completion once and for all. Merton, however, does not provide the ordinary person with a method other than contemplation whereby one can experience a certain consciousness of God which will facilitate a direct experience of God. If contemplation is the method, it is still necessary for a person to adhere to some form of discipline or way of life to come to that deep level of prayer.

It is also true that Merton was prone to a kind of anti-worldliness

or anti-materialism in his earlier writings, making his spirituality somewhat pietist. His contemplation was perceived as a "world-denying contemplation", but his later work reveals an ever-increasing appreciation of a spirituality which encompasses all facets of life, thus defusing the impression that his work is a privatized concern of the self. Yet, it still seems that Merton's form of contemplation requires to a large extent a form of 'departure' from this sense world in which we live.

Merton's understanding of a direct experience of God is a strong apophatic experience. According to Merton a direct experience of God is strongly apophatic, that is to say that God is to be experienced without images and symbols. The direct experience is thus obtained by negation. Although Merton does not renounce the sacramental, liturgical and scriptural life, it does not enjoy the same emphasis in his theology of prayer as contemplation does.

The kataphatic mystical way of prayer is primarily discursive and is regarded by Merton as a definite obstacle to the deeper level of contemplative prayer. Hence his preference for apophatic prayer. Much discipline is required for the apophatic form of prayer, to get rid of distractions, to forget oneself. It seems, therefore, that Merton's preference for 'pure mysticism' is once again making a direct experience of God a very exclusive privilege, beyond the reach of the average person.

The contemplative prayer presented by Merton lays claim to a forgetfulness of self to transcend the self. Although the union with God in a direct experience is not a merging, but a union with differentiation, it can be argued that Merton does not emphasise the value of our humanity in a direct experience, but this is not the case as Merton identifies the mystical life with the search for the true self.

As also pointed out by Merton, the task of finding the true self is not easy, because it is hidden in obscurity and nothingness at the 'centre' where we are in direct dependence on God. It can therefore be deduced that a direct experience is not readily available to everyone, but that it is an experience subjected to, and the result of, hard introspective work. By using his insights into Freud and Jung as a theoretical base for his approach to contemplation, Merton is risking making the understanding of a direct experience synonymous with personal self-awareness. The discovery of the self is for him synonymous with a discovery of God. There exists a real danger, however, that the process of discovering the self could easily slip into an unhealthy preoccupation with the self. It can be argued that because he places the search for self in the context of contemplation the danger can be averted. The question, however, still remains: what 'precautions' does Merton offer to prevent the search for the true self from becoming obsessive and degenerating into an unhealthy preoccupation with the self? Could it be that Merton has overlooked the necessity for the ordinary

person to adhere to some means or system to stabilize the possibility of an erratic self in its search for wholeness? Another point of contention regarding Merton's theology of prayer is that it can also be argued that ordinary people, caught up in the humdrum of hectic daily activities, are not in the same privileged position to experience God directly as are, for example, their monastic counterparts who can readily avail themselves of the solitude and contemplative silence so necessary for a meaningful experience of God.

One of the merits of Merton's work is that he presents contemplation in a manner which can be regarded as unconventional because of its psychological underpinnings. The skilful manner whereby Merton focuses on the 'rigorous nature' of contemplation clearly demonstrates his insights into the psychology of religion. It can be argued that contemplative prayer is presented by Merton as a form of psychotherapy or psychological reflection. To a certain extent it is true that for Merton contemplation functions like psychotherapy in the sense that it moves through our created projections and images. But there is, however, a definite and important difference which is often overlooked: that Merton's contemplation goes beyond analytical reflection. Merton focuses on the rigorous nature of contemplation to counteract the ego's frantic attachment to, and pathetic dependence on, fabricated images, that is to say, the false self. Merton does not present contemplation in a coldly clinical way. On the contrary, it is

presented in the context of God's love and care. Merton's fascination with psychology is clearly detectable in his understanding of contemplation and, perhaps, at times he wades beyond his depth, but it is well to keep in mind that he is using psychological insights for the sole purpose of displaying the need and value of contemplation in contemporary society. Contemplation for Merton is used as a means whereby one can experience a reality other than that of our self-centered existence. This is also another reason why contemplation is also more than psychological reflection as it can take us to the inner sanctuary of self-awareness with the hope of experiencing God. Merton's approach provides tremendous insight into human existence and makes it a rich combination of simplicity and depth.

One of the advantages of Merton's approach is that he operates from the perspective of personal experience and the understanding that, in the deep centre of self-awareness, there is the direct encounter, the direct participation, the direct confrontation and the direct meeting with God.

Merton's definite inclination and attraction towards Zen Buddhism raises the inevitable question about his fidelity to Christianity. It is precisely Merton's understanding of a direct experience of God as an encounter which occurs beyond the confines of any religious perceptions that shifted his focus towards Zen. Zen is understood to be "non-doctrinal, concrete, direct, existential and

seeks above all to come to grips with life itself and not with ideas about life" (Lane 1989:261). His attraction towards Zen is that the presence of God seems more natural once a person has relinquished the self-absorption that prevents the directness of an experience of God.

Merton at all times remains faithful to scripture while embracing essential principles of Zen. The true self is to be found in Christ alone, particularly when one is emptied of the need for authentication, because in dying to ourselves, we live (Gal.2: 20). Merton's appropriation of Zen ideas reveals an ecumenical openness towards other religious traditions. This ecumenical openness can lead us beyond old hostilities and superficial comparisons to a discovery of genuine commonalities and analogies of experience between and among the religions of the world. As Merton so rightly points out, it is on the level where each person experiences God directly that all religious differences vanish and ecumenical unity is realized.

5. DIRECT EXPERIENCE OF GOD IN THE CREATION-CENTERED THEOLOGY OF MATTHEW FOX.

5.1. Introduction.

Matthew Fox, renowned for the revival of interest in creation-centered theology, deals with what he calls a non-elitist, creation-ecstasy and compassion-centered spirituality from both practical and theoretical viewpoints. Integral to his perspective is the celebration of ecstasies, which he defines as *direct experiences* of God. In fact, he stresses that creation-centered spirituality begins with ecstasy, which includes God's experience of humanity and humanity's experience of God (Fox 1981a:64).

Fox hopes to alert his readers to what he regards as the most urgent problem of our time, viz, the need to reverence our origins, our divinity, and to take seriously our responsibility as co-creators of all creation. One of his many aims is to lead us out of a traditionally private-oriented mysticism into a deepening link with all of humanity. He maintains that our understanding of creation-centered spirituality depends on our ability to unlearn all dualistic spiritualities to which Westerners have adhered for centuries.

Fox hopes that his work will redeem the "via positiva" (the way of affirmation, thanksgiving, ecstasy) which, according to him, has been forgotten (Fox 1983:33). To do so, he insists on all spirituality returning to experience (Fox 1981b:4), and he urges

people to take ecstasies seriously and to meditate on them. He makes it clear that if we are intent on developing creation spirituality, we must be at home with passion and with the body, since the return to ecstasies is both a sensual and spiritual experience. The moments of nature and friendship, dance, music, conversation, sexual expression, non-violent work, non-competitive sport, all these he terms bodily/spiritual experiences wherein natural ecstasies are celebrated.

Drawing heavily on the work of Eckhart, Fox uses his term for ecstasy, namely 'breakthrough', to make his readers aware of the possible lessons of unity inherent in ecstasies and the reciprocal nature of a direct experience of God in which God is experienced by us and we are experienced by him. It also includes lessons about ourselves in community as he is convinced that creation spirituality is more than an individual pursuit of salvation. He hopes to impress on people that creation-spirituality is a way of life and it is a profoundly social, political and a world-transforming affair.

In trying to revitalize our sense of wonder, Fox hopes to increase our capacity for the divine in ourselves as well as in creation. He presents life as a blessing, our bodies as blessings, our senses as blessings, through which we cannot ignore the holiness of creation, expressed in the spiritual experiences of natural ecstasies. He is utterly convinced that by returning to natural ecstasies, i.e. to

direct experiences of God, we are in a position to make a valuable and positive contribution towards creating God's kingdom on earth.

5.2. The meaning of the concept direct experience.

Creation-centered spirituality is defined by Matthew Fox as that of *celebrating shared ecstasies*. It is a "welcoming, non-elitist survival of all strong and gentle, earth-orientated, interdependent, nurturing and sensual panentheistic love of neighbour and love of God" (Fox 1979:41). He is convinced that life is full of direct experiences of God and the cause of all ecstatic experiences is love, any love (Fox 1992:109).

It is obvious that Fox does not use the term *direct experience* in any conventional way moreover he uses creation-centered theological terms in such a way that they include in their meaning the idea of direct experience of God. Two terms used by Fox are '*ecstasy*' and '*breakthrough*'. To determine the actual meaning of direct experience of God, it is therefore necessary to consider the terms as used in the context of Fox's writings. In doing so it is well to bear in mind that Fox does not set out to prove that God can or cannot be experienced directly. For him it is a foregone conclusion because creation-centered theology centers upon direct experiences of God.

Fox says that his use of the term *ecstasy*, as *direct experience of*

God, is not original as it was used by Bonaventure, by the school of Augustine and by Thomas Aquinas. According to Fox, Bonaventure and the school of Augustine confined ecstasy in a very exclusive way to an experience of God and the soul. Thomas Aquinas, who also used the term to mean direct experience of God, applied it universally, and Fox professes that his use of the term ecstasy subscribes to that of Aquinas (Fox 1981a:18).

The term '*breakthrough*' was obtained by Fox from Eckhart. The latter used the word '*breakthrough*' as an alternative for ecstasy and it also carries the meaning of a direct experience of God (Fox 1981a:17).

Fox maintains that we are all capable of '*ecstasies*' or '*breakthroughs*' into God and he defines ecstasy as an experience of "forgetting oneself and of being turned on in a full sense and in a deep way. Ecstasy is our *getting outside ourselves*, of *forgetting ourselves* if only for a second, a minute, an hour, a day, or a life time...." " For this very reason, because ecstasy is a forgetting, it is also *memorable*. Ecstasy is a memorable experience of our lives" (Fox 1981a :43). The idea of ecstasy placing us outside oneself, is a definition which Fox has taken from Aquinas and which literally means "standing outside of oneself" (Fox 1992:111).

Ecstasy is the process whereby we come *face to face* with God's

grace. "Grace" says Fox "is what God impresses *directly* upon the most sacred part of the soul. It is this grace that shapes the soul to the image of God. God makes the soul equal to God" (Fox 1980:55). When this happens the "soul is driven mad by the divine beauty to which we are so madly driven" Fox 1980:384). Ecstasies are both sexual and spiritual and in the ecstatic experiences we form harmony with our bodiliness and with bodily harmony comes harmony with the rest of creation.

Using Eckhart's terminology Fox describes a direct experience of God as a *breakthrough* between God and humans. "It is the humans becoming divine, and recovering and remembering their divine origins, as 'images' and 'likenesses' of God" (Fox 1979:30).

Breakthrough means a breakthrough in our consciousness, an awareness of the unity of all things in God. It is our *awakening* to the holiness of all being, the godliness of creation included (Fox 1981 a:17). The breakthrough is when all is in God and God is in all. It provides an *awareness of the unity* of all things in God.

5.2.1. *Natural ecstasies as direct experiences of God.*

Fox divides ecstatic experiences into *natural ecstatic* or *direct* experiences of God and *tactical* or *man-made* experiences of God. Of these two types only natural ecstatic experiences are direct experiences of God, which are the opposite of tactical experiences.

He maintains that natural ecstasies are ends in themselves. This means "that God is experienced *directly* in the experience of them. It follows then that the personal and cultural pursuit of them constitutes the truest and most timeless path of God experiences" (Fox 1981a:70).

The first of the natural experiences (direct experiences) of God can be recognized from our experiences of *nature* itself. The nearness of God in creation parallels the nearness of our experience of ecstasy. It is easy to fall into *forgetfulness*, *therefore ecstasy*, while sitting by the sea, walking barefoot on an earthen field, walking in a pine forest, listening to the rain, catching the fragrance of lilac bushes or watching the stars on a cloudless night (Fox 1981a:43). All these Fox describes as communing with nature and he insists that we must return to natural ecstasies. In fact he advocates that all spirituality should return to experience. We must rekindle our sense of wonder. By repressing it we destroy our capacity for the divine. Ecstasy in creation-centered spirituality is not reserved for a few cloistered individuals. It is potentially to be found in everyday events.

Another natural ecstasy depicted by Fox is that of *friendship*. The mutual attraction and sharing between people that reaches to a point of *forgetfulness of self*, he classifies as an experience of ecstasy. In friendship, he maintains, we ought to be relaxed enough to experience something greater than ourselves; some call this God,

others call it love, but Fox regards it as an experience of God built into our daily lives (Fox 1981a:46).

Another example of a natural ecstasy cited by Fox is that of *sexual enjoyment* which also constitutes a *forgetfulness of self*, "an experience beyond oneself, a taste of the divine" (Fox 1981a: 47). Sexual ecstasy, says Fox, finds its fullest joys as a combination of the ecstatic experience of both nature and friendship. Sadly, however, the respect that sexuality requires to maintain its ecstatic character appears to be rarer and rarer in our culture (Fox 1981a:47). For this reason Fox could make the statement that "the squandering or misuse of sexuality is such a cruel and wasteful way of depriving ourselves of beautiful experiences of ecstasy" (Fox 1981a:47).

Another familiar ecstatic experience in our lives is that of *sport*, but in this instance Fox disregards any sport with physical body-contact and potential violence. For example, the ecstatic experience of careening down a slope on skis, when diving into water, ice-skating or horse-riding make us *forget ourselves* and provide opportunity to commune with nature. When winning becomes a goal we are no longer involved in ecstatic experiences, but in "ego-tripping". Ecstasy is not the act of taking pleasure in pain, but in the experience of standing outside ourselves (Fox 1981a:49).

Experiences such as those involved in participating in and enjoying

art, music, dance, creativity, artistic inspiration, reading, writing, painting and craftsmanship, take their place alongside the list of natural ecstasies (Fox 1981a:48). Celebration, joyful moments, laughter, are by definition experiences of *forgetting in order to remember* and, therefore, form part of natural ecstasies. "All natural ecstasies presume that we are instruments and not controllers. Instruments of nature and the earth and sky, the seas and the sun, the human body and human wit" (Fox 1981a:53).

An *ecstatic experience, or direct experience* involves all our senses and as creation-spirituality embraces the body and the physical as 'good', it is essentially a sensual spirituality. It is a spirituality that praises God for creating and continuing to create the sensual experiences of touch, sight, hearing, smell and taste. The sensual ecstatic experiences are about enjoying and sharing the joys of the earth. It is not and cannot be about owning or accumulating power, immortality, control or rewards. It is sharing the pleasures of the earth by way of justice (Fox 1981a:223)..

It is, therefore, clear that to have *direct experiences of God* in natural ecstasies *is to share in creation's joys*. Fox says that those who experience ecstasy in creation know with certitude that we are made to be like God and not God like us. "That our becoming like God means just that - our changing from human to divine-like" (Fox 1981a:109).

5.2.2. *Tactical ecstasies.*

According to Fox tactical ecstasies are means devised by the human race to forget ourselves and for experiencing divinity. Unlike natural ecstasies wherein we are recipients of ecstasy, these experiences are tactics or strategies or means for taking ourselves out of the everyday world onto a more spiritual plane (Fox 1981a:53). Psychologically speaking, says Fox, God resides in the unconscious dimensions of our being and we need some means to release God from our unconscious so that He can permeate our consciousness. What prevents this release of spiritual energy is in fact, our conscious, everyday attitudes of survival and problem-solving. The conscious level of existence, says Fox, puts up a block to our ecstatic states of consciousness. The deliberate strategies devised by spiritual masters of the various great religions to relax this conscious level were intended to allow the unconscious might come into play more fully. Fox calls these strategies "tactical ecstasies" and therefore not direct experiences of God (Fox 1981a:56).

Chanting, for example, is an effective way of numbing the conscious level of our lives as it can produce a trancelike effect that is deeply moving and spiritual (Fox 1981a:57). To experience it is to experience the power of tactical ecstasies. Ritual dance produces the same trancelike experience and can be an effective tactical ecstasy when it is entered into for a specific purpose.

Another form of tactical ecstasy is the taking of *drugs* or the use of *alcohol*. Both are devices that encourage ecstatic experiences and can produce spiritual effects. Fox says, "like other means to tactical ecstasy, drugs can render one level of our consciousness numb and relaxed while conjuring up other depths of our unconscious" (Fox 1981a:59).

Yoga, *Zen* and other forms of meditation encourage the individual to listen, and to come in harmony with the music within one's own body. By concentrating on bodily chant or rhythm, everyday consciousness is lulled into relaxation to make the person more receptive to an ecstatic experience (Fox 1981a:61).

As noted earlier, the most fundamental contrast between natural and tactical ecstasies is that a *natural ecstasy is an end in itself*, while a *tactical ecstasy is only a means*. Fox claims that by calling natural ecstasy an end in itself is meant "that God is directly experienced in these actions" (Fox 1981a:64). By "*directly*" Fox implies that *no tactical means is necessary* to bring about the experience. It happens 'directly', naturally. The consciousness of God is not induced. It is not 'manufactured' by artificial means. It is a natural experience. The tactical ecstasy is a strategy devised by humanity and by religious cultures in preparation for an experience of God. The person receives aid from outside his body and personality, hence the fact that it is not 'natural'. In the actual tactical ecstasy, a person is "rendered

vulnerable for a God-experience, but the tactic itself is no guarantee of God's presence, it is a preparation for the event, but is not the event itself" (Fox 1981a:64).

Fox says that the tactical presumes the natural and one should build on it. "Tactical divorced from the natural ecstasy is open to danger" (Fox 1981:64). Fox maintains that one should realize that tactical ecstasy is only secondary to natural ecstasies. He says one often engages in tactical ecstasies because of failure with natural ecstasies and one of the so-called 'dangers' in tactical ecstasies is that of self-delusion and "ego-tripping" (Fox 1981a:65).

To call natural ecstasies 'natural' does not imply that they come to us 'naturally'. They should not be taken for granted. Much in our industrial and technological society renders natural ecstasies fewer and fewer, and for this reason, tactical ecstasies can actually heighten our appreciation of natural ecstasies. For example, meditation can, improve some people's enjoyment of nature, sexuality, friendship or the arts. Fox maintains that people can go through their whole life without tactical ecstasies, but never without natural ones (Fox 1981a:70).

5.3. Component elements of ecstatic 'direct' experiences of God.

Compassion is what is usually experienced in a direct experience of

God. Compassion, and not contemplation, is presented as the core of spiritual maturity (Fox 1983:18). It does not imply that contemplation is not regarded as important in this tradition, but compassion undergirds all spiritual experiences. According to the Hebrew scriptures, compassion is regarded as the "fullest divine attribute" (Fox 1983:279). To substantiate his assertion Fox cites the 'direct' encounter Moses had with God at Mount Sinai, when he proclaimed "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God of tenderness and *compassion*, slow to anger and rich in kindness and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6). Hence the understanding by creation-centered theologians that compassion is the fullest experience of God that is humanly possible in a direct experience. This compassion, Fox says, should manifest itself in just relationships between human beings and in a deep sense of reverence towards creation.

One of the pronounced characteristics of ecstatic 'direct' experiences of God, according to Fox, is the *sense of timelessness* in the experience (Fox 1980:223). Time seems to stop during the experience in the sense that ecstasy itself becomes the inherent reward; it becomes an end in itself. The *intense awareness* of the present moment is captured in the enjoyment of the mystery of creation and the Creator. The experience is that of *direct and intimate consciousness* of the Divine Presence, which provides the person with an immediate awareness of the close relationship with God (Fox 1972:78).

In such a direct ecstatic experience of God, all *dualism dies*, all separation ceases and *union* occurs. Fox describes the experience as the "soul becoming spirit as God is spirit, our spirit meets God's spirit" (Fox 1980:268). He also describes the experience as "a sinking into the innermost depths where God is most at home" (Fox 1980:167).

The ecstatic rapture, also described as the transport of mind (Fox 1992:111), makes all things *transparent*, as well as God. The transparency of God is experienced because God is in us and we are in God (1980:44). In the experience we "behold in a direct way the truth of the unity of God. *No intermediaries* behold such a truth. The equality with God is affirmed, our divinity is experienced" (Fox 1980:289). It is the direct knowledge of God without *image*. It is our *ecstatic unity of mind and will in God*. Fox, adhering to Eckhart, describes the experience as that of grace pouring all beauty directly into the kingdom of the soul (Fox 1980:194).

The divine relationship between God and the person in natural ecstasies is also marked by an *intense love* between the Creator and the person (Fox 1980:81). The actual moment of ecstasy is an apophatic experience as the ecstatic activity consists of loving God *mindlessly*, free from all mental activity. "If the soul has images, it has intermediaries and as long as it has intermediaries, it has neither oneness nor simplicity" (Fox 1980:180). It is an experience of *direct love* in which we "know God without image,

without mediation and without likeness" (Fox 1980:179). Fox, relying heavily on Eckhart's insights and terminologies, says that in such an unmediated experience one "simply becomes God and God becomes us" (Fox 1979:179). It is his way of emphasizing the experience of complete unity between God and the human person. He says the experience is as ineffable as God is ineffable (Fox 1983:186).

In the experience of divine rapture, according to Fox, the person tastes *wholeness*. It is a time when we trust the universe as well as trusting ourselves (1988:49). One of many sacred moments is when we are filled with wonder and we marvel at creation.

5.4. Compassion as the fullest experience of God.

As noted above, compassion is an integral component of the mystical experience of the divine. In fact, Fox says, the best test for authentic mysticism is *justice-making and compassion*. Compassion is defined in creation spirituality as the fullest experience of God that is humanly possible. It celebrates life. It is the breakthrough between God and humans: it is humans becoming divine and recovering and remembering their divine origins as images and likenesses of God. At conception we were endowed with the divine in us and by means of this common attribute we are joined to each other. This compassion is the love we have for each other which simultaneously is God's love for all (Fox 1979:30).

Compassion is thus one energy, divine and human, because God is immanent in our neighbour. Love of neighbour is love of God. By experiencing another at a deep and honest level, by experiencing the true self of another being, we experience God in that person. Moses experienced a compassionate God, and Jesus declared that we ought to be compassionate (perfect) as our heavenly Father is compassionate (perfect) (Mt 5:48). To call humanity to compassion is to call humanity to divinization (Fox 1982:18).

To do justice in creation is all part of compassionate action. It is an awareness that no creature is separate from any other, and no joy and no pain are apart from one's own. The mystic has a deep appreciation of the blessing of the world, to be radically amazed by it and to affirm it. S/he has a sense of the whole, an apprehension of it and a profound yearning for it (Fox 1988:51). Mysticism touches the true self of each one of us and the mystic in us yearns for silent times and for letting go of images, thoughts and symbols.

5.5. Natural ecstasies as part of the mystery dimension of creation.

Matthew Fox alerts us to the fact that people today have generally lost their capacity to *wonder*, to become ecstatic at natural mysteries. He reminds us that mature adult life is a life aware of its mystery dimension, not only a life that consists of problems to

be solved (1972:30). The mystic lies deep in every person and the intention of "creation-centered spirituality is to demystify mysticism and reveal its generic meanings and thereby encourage common practice and understanding of its great power" (1972:48). Fox says that, according to creation spirituality, humankind's relationship to God is primarily horizontal and concentric in its meeting places.

Fox describes mystery as that "which touches a need deeply felt within us, which challenges us by attracting us outside of our own petty worlds that we carry around in our heads calling to mind something bigger than ourselves. A mystery is something calling us out of ourselves, yet its presence is no less real within us than outside of us. It becomes one with us by the very act of its presence to us" (Fox 1972:29). Since everyone is a mystic and as mysticism is essentially a response to life, to enter into the mysteries of life is the starting point of the mystical journey of life, of experiencing God (Fox 1988:48).

The *mystic God* that is experienced in creation-centered spirituality is the One who is ever present, always elusive, never manipulated. Creation mysticism is the direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence, the immediate awareness of one's relation with God (Fox 1972:88).

Apart from depicting the *Universe* as the greatest mystery and the

source of all mysticism, Fox delineates a number of mysteries in our lives. The first and most universal experience of mystery considered by him, is the mystery of life itself (Fox 1972:32).

Life, says Fox, is the most primordial mystery which no one can deny or evade. It not only arouses wonder in us, but the mystery element in life invites us to live life to the full (Fox 1972:33). Inextricably connected with the mystery of life is *death*, which Fox calls: "life's inevitable mystery" (Fox 1972:34).

Creation-centered spirituality presents God as life and his presence is experienced everywhere in nature. "Rebirth in nature is a recurring mystery, the repeated cycles of growth and death as manifested in animate nature: trees, wild-life, flowers, the symbols of passionate life we find in the sea, waterfalls and rivers, the immensity of mountains, all these are also experiences of mystery" (Fox 1972:36). Enjoying the mysteries of life in the now moment is what brings about the ecstatic direct experience of God. Every experience of beauty is an experience of God and all artistic expression is sharing in the image and likeness of the creation (Fox 1972:xx). Each experience is unique. Jesus himself had deep mystical experiences, and what he had to say to his disciples came from his own direct experiences of God. For this reason he could teach his disciples to be intimate with the Father (Fox 1988:67).

The *human person* is also portrayed as a mystery of life, not because humanity bears within it the mystery of life, death and nature, but because the human person is the authentic meeting place of God (Fox 1972:38). "To be truly a person is to be a person with God". Fox maintains that God is especially experienced on the level of the 'True self', the level of being the unique image of God (Fox 1988:64). Matthew Fox adheres very strongly to this biblical insight, he encourages all of humanity to rediscover the biblical injunction that we are all created in the image of God and that we should return to our primordial origins which are in God (Fox 1980:55). Relying on the insights of Meister Eckhart, Fox asserts that the 'true self', or the 'inner person' is "the soil in which God has sown his likeness and image and in which he sows the good seed, the root of all wisdom... the seed of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4) (Fox 1988:65). The true self according to Fox is nothing less than the Cosmic Christ, the mystic inside each of us.

The creation-centered tradition understands mysticism primarily as our entering the fullness of the mystery of our existence, the gift and blessing of creation itself. To enter into the mystery we must be able to let go of our personal egotistical concern and to develop our sense of wonder at creation and at God the Giver of all Creation. In a selfish existence there is no room for ecstatic or direct experiences of God (Fox 1976:133). True ecstasy is the very opposite of an 'ego-trip' and this, above all, means *forgetting ourselves*.

5.6. The ecstatic breakthrough as direct experience of God.

As stated previously, Fox allowed much of Eckhart's work to influence his own understanding of a direct experience of God. He uses much of Eckhart's terminology to bring home the central message of creation-spirituality. One such term is the '*ecstatic breakthrough*' into God. According to him, the actual breakthrough of the human person into God gives the person a direct experience of God as well as a direct likeness to God. This implies that we enter into our "inner self" where God is most at home (Fox 1980:163).

To make sense of the experience of ecstatic breakthrough requires an understanding of Fox's interpretation of Eckhart's anthropology. The creation-centered tradition celebrates the awesome news "that humans are divine , that we are endowed with divinity, with beauty and dignity, divine life and grace and a divine responsibility to be co-creators with God" (Fox 1982:18). As humanity shares very intimately in the nature of God, it is endowed with the capacity to experience God '*directly*'.

The first experience in the breakthrough is a self-awakening by which we realize our nearness to divinity and the Godhead. At the exact moment of breakthrough the person experiences total unity with God, the feeling that "I and God are one" (Fox 1980:303). The breakthrough Fox describes as "*our breakthrough*, a breakthrough in

our consciousness, an awakening, an eruption into the fact that we are one with God" (Fox 1980:303). The actual breakthrough goes beyond boundaries and images. In this experience of ecstasy the soul looks at God and God looks at the soul, from face to face. The breakthrough is the moment of transformation, of being transformed into the image and likeness of the divine. It is described by St Paul as "we with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect; this is the work of the Lord who is Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). The actual breakthrough gives the person a direct experience of God as well as a direct likeness to God.

Depending heavily on Eckhart, Fox describes the actual breakthrough as the moment we break into our most primal origins, having been there from all eternity. "In it we break into our primal origins having once been there from all eternity. In it we break into the silence that has preceded all birth from all eternity" (Fox 1980:305). Using Eckhart's terminology he describes the experience as that of touching "the goodness behind goodness, the mystery behind mystery, the God behind God" (Fox 1980:305). It is our 'birth' into divinity, a discovery of our own divine origins. "The soul looks at God and God looks at the soul, as transformed into one image" Fox 1980:305).

Time does not seem to exist in our breakthrough into the Godhead.

In the experience we obtain true knowledge of God without the help of any intermediaries. It is a direct knowledge of God's effectiveness in the soul, it occurs without any means, image or likeness (Fox 1980:306). The experience "affords a direct knowledge of God, *without image, without mediation, without likeness*. It is at the level of depth that we become as God is and God as us" (Fox 1980:185).

This process requires from each person the courage to let go of all that operates as obstacles towards a direct experience of God. What is required from the human person is to form a 'space' for God to breakthrough and in so doing allowing one's soul to meet God. The soul, says Fox, is like God, ineffable and experiencing God through the soul is to make contact with this divine spark by emptying ourselves or by letting go (Fox 1980:108).

To experience God without image, without mediation, without likeness implies that God must be loved mindlessly, free from all mental activities. Fox states that if the soul has intermediaries, it has neither oneness nor simplicity. One should love and experience God as He is, apophatically, a-not-God. By projecting onto God our notions of Him we are in fact 'destroying' God (1980:179). Nothing that we imagine or comprehend in this life can be a proximate means of union with God. All that we know in our human capacity is nothing compared with God.

Christians believe that in creation "we exist and have our being in God", but by means of our breakthrough into God, we *know* and *experience directly* that we are in God. A difference of a deeper awareness is brought about by means of the breakthrough: in the experience of ecstasy all dualism dies, all separation ceases, union takes over (Fox 1980:300). The direct knowledge of the eternal life is revealed in the soul's foundations where no image reaches us except God Himself with His own Being. "For I am certain of this that neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, nor any created thing, can come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39).

5.7. Various ways of experiencing God directly:

Fox argues that there are various ways of experiencing God directly namely the *via positiva*, the *via negativa*, *via creativa* and *via transformativa*.

5.7.1. *The via positiva or kataphatic way.*

The 'via positiva' Fox characterizes as the way of affirmation, thanksgiving and ecstasy (Fox 1983:33). To experience God kataphatically implies being earthy and sensuous (Fox 1983:60). Since creation-centered spirituality welcomes the earth as a blessing which glorifies the power of God, the 'via positiva' adheres

to panentheism. Panentheism, argues Fox, is the way of seeing the world sacramentally in every creature who lives. Other sacraments, he claims, receive their creative power from this primary sacrament (Fox 1983:90). "The sacramental consciousness of panentheism develops into a transparent and diaphanous consciousness wherein we can see events and beings as divine" (Fox 1983:90). He advises that we must learn to penetrate things and find God there as a panentheistic spirituality expresses itself primarily in images and symbols of God.

5.7.2. *The via negativa or the apophatic way.*

The creation-centered tradition also embraces the 'via negativa', in which one is urged to let go of symbols or images. Fox argues that there can be no 'via negativa' without the 'via positiva'. "The depth of nothingness is directly related to the experience of everythingness" (Fox 1983:130). He maintains that the kataphatic God, the God of the 'via positiva', and the apophatic God, the God of the 'via negativa', is after all the same God.

Fox, relying on Eckhart for his exposition of the apophatic way, stresses that this way requires that we "let go of all meditations, all images, all likenesses, all projections, all naming..." (Fox 1983:136). Eckhart, in exploring the apophatic way, claims that we should love and experience the hidden God as a "not-God, not-mind, not-person, not-image...." (Fox 1980:181).

5.7.3. *The via creativa.*

Since the creation-centered spiritual path values both the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*, it celebrates the union of the two in the '*via creativa*' (Fox 1983:175). In the apophatic and kataphatic ways, "the God of light and the God of darkness, the befriending of pleasure and the befriending of pain, are themselves dialectical" (Fox 1983:212). By admitting both experiences into creation-centered spirituality, a third path, the '*via creativa*', has been established. This way values both light and darkness, naming and unnamings, images and no images, nothingness and creativity. Creation-centered spirituality affirms the interpenetration of the two ways in the spiritual journey by asserting that direct experiences of God have elements that are both apophatic and kataphatic. To experience God '*via creativa*' presumes the radical transformation of society and people; it requires a new civilization and a new creation where justice and compassion will reign (Fox 1983:248).

5.7.4. *Via transformativa.*

As observed above, Fox claims that the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*, when entered fully culminate in the *via creativa*, but he acknowledges that "not all creativity is for the beautiful" (Fox 1983:247). '*Via transformativa*' "invites all persons to recover their role as instruments of the New Creation, agents of justice

and transformation in a salvific history of renewal and rebirth of justice and compassion" (Fox 1983:299). The 'via transformativa' also serves as a great reminder of our responsibility for the universe, it reminds people that they have been empowered to be instruments of transformation. "We will truly be co-creators in this process of transformation" (Fox 1983:256). The establishment of the new creation means transforming all social injustices and inequalities as well as all forms of oppression and corruption. It means restoring God back to creation, and creation to God (Fox 1983:290).

To create the New Creation means entering into a transformation process, a task which is God's as well as humanity's. Fox points out that the work of transformation was started by Jesus, and the latter's insistence on social transformation, and on how he and others were to be instruments for compassion and justice, brought him to die on the cross. Fox warns that those who follow Christ, "trusting in their prophetic vocations as he did in his, will very likely be treated in a similar fashion" (Fox 1983:303).

There exists, therefore, strong evidence in creation-centered theology for both the apophatic and kataphatic ways of experiencing God. The kataphatic way emphasizes a definite similarity between God and creation and that God can be reached by means of creatures, images and symbols, because God has manifested Himself in creation and in salvation history.

God is also known apophatically, i.e. by forgetting, negation, without images and symbols and in darkness. All created things are limited and fall far short in comparison with God and is regarded as nothing. Creation-centered theology does not play the one approach off against the other as it contains both apophatic and kataphatic elements alike.

Ecstasy has two dimensions to it: it is an experience of the infinite and the intimation of the finite. These dimensions occur simultaneously in ecstasy. By means of ecstatic experiences, transformation occurs in the person which results in a gracious openness to all persons.

5.8. Evaluation.

In reviving the undiscovered paths and forgotten themes of creation-centered spirituality, Matthew Fox dares to think new thoughts for our present age that are, in fact, old. For example the idea that creation is a blessing and that humanity experience God in nature. To put the old at the service of the new can be regarded as a positive effort towards understanding life as a blessing. Although his perspective is in many respects refreshing, he virtually negates the fall/redemption tradition of Augustine and tends to generalize the use of ecstasy as a direct experience of God.

His decidedly experiential approach to spirituality advocates not only a horizontal relationship with God, but aims to steer the understanding of ecstatic experiences away from the belief that an experience of God is an elite privilege reserved for a chosen few. In so doing, he regards ecstatic experiences as readily available and potentially everyday events. Although this can be perceived as one of the chief merits of his work it can, however, also be argued that by definition ecstasy is an extraordinary experience, open to all, but which transcends routine, everyday experiences. By describing ecstasies as common experiences, readily available to all, it is obvious that Fox's use of ecstasy is based on a different understanding to that which is traditionally associated with mystical contemplation. The traditional ecstatic union with God implies that the person is in an exalted spiritual state whereby the spirit or soul experiences God directly. In this context direct vision of God, however obscure and vague, provides the person with direct knowledge of God. In making bold expressions and departing from the traditional understanding of ecstasy, could Fox imply that direct contact with God in the ecstatic experiences of nature, friendship, sports etc. does not necessarily require an exalted spiritual state, but a change of attitude towards creation? If this be the case, it could be ascribed to the fact that Fox's interpretation of prayer and ecstasy combines neglected elements in the Western religious tradition with contemporary resources in psychology and theology. By implying that ecstasies are readily available Fox, also hopes to revive the mystic in each of us and to

counter-act the rise of what he calls pseudo-mysticism in forms such as nationalism, militarism, technology, consumerism and fundamentalism. By writing in popular style, using images and symbols which express a contrast to the language of traditional prayer and spirituality, Fox hopes to communicate with contemporary people. The question is, however, do these ecstatic experiences which Fox describes as direct experiences of God fall under the category of religious experiences?

Whether it is recognized as such or not, it is a foregone conclusion that a *direct experience of God is a religious experience* as it involves an encounter with God which is by nature, according to Fox, usually very profound and transformative. An ecstatic experience, so rightly defined by Fox as "stepping outside of oneself", does not necessarily amount to a direct experience of God. The essential qualities of awe and fascination in an ecstatic experience can be sensed without any conception of God. It can be the aesthetic contemplation of nature in which one is confronted with the overwhelming sense of beauty and majesty. No specific cognitive claims of being in the presence of God or a supernatural reality would necessarily be associated with such acts of contemplation. If this is correct, then there are ecstatic experiences related to creation which are not necessarily explicitly religious experiences.

For a creation ecstatic experience to amount to a religious

experience there would need to be at least two states of consciousness required: a state of reception and a state of direct awareness of God. Direct experiences outside religion e.g. sexual experiences, unity with nature, are profoundly unitive experiences in which the self has merged with reality, leaving nothing in between, seem to 'qualify', according to Fox, as direct experiences of God. The question is: are they implicitly understood as religious experiences? If so, what exact quality determines the religious dimension of the experience?

A religious experience is described by Clarke as "any direct existential awareness of the presence or activity of an ultimate, absolute transcendent dimension of reality, especially the more intense forms of unitive awareness of the transcendent which have traditionally been called 'mystical' experience" (Clarke :511). Before Fox can claim that all natural ecstatic experiences are direct experiences of God, he must first provide the criteria whereby the ecstatic experience can be perceived as a religious experience. Fox, however, does not present the reader with any such set of criteria. Thomas Aquinas, for example, talks of three degrees of ecstatic experiences and he only defines the third degree and not the others as that which includes "the direct contemplation of divine essence". This is determined by the fact that the experience has a transformative effect on the whole personality of the individual. Fox does not make the divine action in a natural ecstatic experience quite clear, neither does he state

the effects that would be produced if there is a divine action present. It would thus be true to say that not all creation ecstasy experiences are direct experiences of God. The experience could possess similar characteristics to religious experiences, but there ought to be some definite quality that determines the specific religious nature of the experience. For an ecstatic experience to be termed a direct experience of God, would imply that the ecstasy is of a deeper dimension than that caused by nature, sport and friendship.

Natural ecstasies or direct experiences of God, as presented by Fox, are experiences that happen 'naturally', that is to say, without any tactical or artificial means to bring about the experience. Friendship, sports, nature, sexual enjoyment, art are depicted by Fox as natural ecstasies by virtue of the fact that they provide a sense of individual forgetfulness. It can be argued that an experience of forgetfulness, judged by its own merits, is not a direct experience of God, unless it is accompanied by some form of 'higher consciousness' that transforms the experience into something outside the ordinary. Despite Fox's claim that an intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence accompanies a direct experience of God, it can nevertheless be argued that we do not possess an innate awareness of God's presence in all our ecstasy related experiences. It is not enough to have an ecstatic experience marked by forgetfulness and call it a direct experience of God as ecstasy ought to be the culmination point of religious

experience whereby union with God and knowledge of the Divine, though ineffable, are directly realized. It seems that Fox applies the traditional meaning of ecstasy to contemporary experiences without the experience necessarily subscribing to the intensity which would be required to make the experience ecstatic.

Fox emphasises that in creation-centered spirituality a direct experience of God includes the senses and the bodiliness of human nature, but one may ask, does he do so at the expense of the transcendent element so peculiar to a religious experience? According to Tillich, modern people have not yet overcome their need for transcendence, and for this reason they continue to seek it in secular contexts such as sports, drugs, alcohol etc. Because ecstasies essentially concern the mind and what lies beyond it (1987:13), it can be deduced that some form of transcendence is required. Fox does not make it clear how one is to determine the transcendent element of natural ecstasies.

According to Fox's use of the term "ecstatic breakthrough", it is not always clear whether *ecstatic breakthrough* constitutes a *specific moment within a natural ecstatic* experience of God, or whether 'ecstatic breakthrough' and 'natural ecstasy' are simply one and the same thing. Neither is it clear whether ecstatic breakthrough forms part only of the kataphatic way to God and not of the apophatic way to God. If the ecstatic breakthrough is a *specific moment* in the natural ecstatic experience, it can be

argued that actual moment constitutes the direct experience of God and that for a natural ecstatic experience to be justly termed a direct experience of God, it ought to have a specific moment of ecstatic breakthrough. Fox, however, in describing the actual ecstatic breakthrough into God, relies heavily on the work of Meister Eckhart. He also embraces both the 'via negativa' or apophatic way and the 'via positiva' or kataphatic way as for him the two ways coincide in a direct experience of God. If this be the case, then it would make sense that the natural ecstatic experience and ecstatic breakthrough are in accord and that they amount to one and the same thing.

One of the positive factors in Fox's approach to spirituality is that a direct experience of God is an integral part of life, it is grounded in this world, it is at home with the physical and related to art, language, politics, economics, education and sexuality. It is not just a part of prayer or contemplation, but profoundly part of our social, political and economic situations as well. In this case, ecstasies or direct experiences of God are world-transforming events wherein God is positively recognized as an important dimension of all aspects of our life.

The everyday ecstatic experiences of creation, as proposed by Fox, presupposes a world that is unmarred and pristine, untouched by the conditions of sin and sinfulness of humanity. Although Fox makes a valiant presentation of creation as fundamentally good and as a

blessing, one cannot deny that humanity's sinfulness would allow direct experiences of God only to occur in rudimentary forms. Could it be that Fox's understanding of a direct experience, which requires a radically new creation wherein direct knowledge of God without mediation and images is possible, an experience that knows no limits and embraces the whole universe, is unrealistic? Although in creation-centered spirituality the ultimate goodness of all creation is accepted, it cannot be denied that evil and sin are discoverable at every level of development. It can be argued that Fox's creation-spirituality minimises the destructive role of evil in creation. Granted, the fall/redemption doctrine as developed by Augustine might need reconsideration; nevertheless, its roots are in the biblical insight that our evil choices have a history. Despite the fact that Fox has shifted the emphasis on redemption to our role in the redemptive task, redemption still appears to play a minor or very subdued role in Fox's creation-centered theology. Jesus, for him, came not to wipe out original sin, but to call us to our divine task. Even though Fox accepts that this is, in itself, redemptive, and although it seems that he does not mean to undervalue the demonic tendencies in human nature, he still does not stress adequately enough our need for redemption. It could be that traditionally our need for redemption separated us from the earth and did not empower us to purify the earth, but it does not necessarily mean that our adherence to a creation-centered perspective will suddenly free us from all conditions of human sinfulness. Fox might argue that he does not imply this and that

direct experience of God does not transform a person beyond sin, but he is merely defining such an experience in more accessible terms.

6. EXPERIENCING GOD DIRECTLY IN GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ'S THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION.

6.1. Introduction.

The departure point of liberation theology, according to Gustavo Gutiérrez, is deeply rooted in an authentic experience of God's presence in history. Liberation theology is the spiritual experience of the poor; in fact, it is described by Gutiérrez as a manifestation of the coming of age of the poor and oppressed people (Gutiérrez 1988:xxviii). The lived experience of deprived, exploited and marginalized people, forms the setting in which liberation theology tries to read the Word of God, and determines the presence of God in the historical process in which people are engaged. God is encountered in history, the field in which human beings have the chance to attain fulfilment as persons.

Liberation theology champions the cause of the poor and oppressed, and tries to liberate the gospel from captivity to the ideology of the ruling class, an ideology which distorts the gospel by turning it into a justification for oppression. Suffering and oppression are not new in human history, they are as old as humanity itself, but liberation theology interprets suffering and oppression differently from the way it was done in the past. It becomes a hermeneutic to be used in understanding the Gospel. However, God is experienced as supporting his suffering people, by changing history and overthrowing unjust societies. Liberation theology not only calls for an improvement in living conditions but for an end to

oppression. In fact, it is calling for a radical transformation of social structures and the eradication of all injustice.

The operative questions in liberation theology are: how is God experienced in a concrete situation characterized by poverty and oppression and how do the poor experience God in the midst of suffering and deprivation? Liberation theology has a "horizontalist" approach to experiencing God directly. This approach takes the form, first and foremost, of experiencing God in intimate solidarity and direct contact with the poor, our neighbour, who is the visible reality which reveals God to us (Gutiérrez 1988:115). It allows us to break out of a narrow, individualistic viewpoint and see with more Biblical eyes that human beings are called to meet God insofar as they constitute a community, a people.

Like all theologies, liberation theology draws its strength from the Bible. The God experienced in the liberation process is the God of the Bible, a liberating God who intervened in history in order to break down the structures of injustice. He is a God who liberates slaves (Exodus), caused the rich to fall, and now raises up those who are oppressed. In the Exodus and Christ events, God revealed himself as one who sides with the poor and downtrodden, in order to effect their freedom. The experience of God by the poor in the context of oppression is that God will not remain aloof from any situation of oppression because 'He' sides with the poor. This

God is experienced as One who is not blind to injustice and oppression; He is the Biblical God who offers Good News to the poor (Gutiérrez 1983:xi).

Gutiérrez maintains that because a direct encounter with God, in historical circumstances, is the point of departure of liberation theology, it requires us to look insatiably for deeper insight into divine justice. He goes on to declare that far from wishing suffering for humanity, it is God's will that humanity should appreciate life to the full (Gutiérrez 1987:65).

The spirituality of liberation is a profoundly biblical spirituality which allows God's saving act in history to penetrate all levels of human existence. A direct encounter with God, according to Gutiérrez, requires from each Christian a generous solidarity with the poor, preceded by a profound personal experience of conversion; and followed by a sincere commitment and prayerful reflection on the life of the poor (Nouwen 1984:xix).

There are thus two aspects to Gutiérrez's liberation theology regarding a direct experience of God. The one is from the perspective of the poor, deprived and marginalized and the other from those committed to the cause of the poor. The way the poor experience God directly is not quite the same as the experience of those who experience God *in* the poor, but the two aspects form part of the same process, similar to two sides of a coin. The poor

experience God in the process of liberation while those Christians who are committed to the liberation of the poor experience God horizontally, i.e in and through the poor since, according to Gutierrez, God is manifested concretely in the poor.

6.2. Experiencing God directly.

Intrinsic to human nature is the innate desire for entering into communion with God (Gutierrez 1988:44). Gutiérrez makes it quite clear that the physical conditions of poverty and human misery do not alter the elements of human nature. Gutiérrez views the human person's orientation towards God, as a constitutive element of the human spirit, and every act of knowing implicitly contains the desire to know, and experience God, face to face. He regards the one and only vocation we have in our concrete historical situation, as our calling to union with God. The search for union with God not only governs the entire process of liberation theology, but constitutes the very heart of everyone's experience of God. Gutiérrez says that "we cannot separate the disclosure about God from the historical process of liberation (Gutiérrez 1988:xviii).

According to Gutiérrez, the human person is defined by relationship to God. The human person, though flesh and blood, is also a spiritual being, "because of the presence of God and the Spirit is the deepest part in each of us" (Gutiérrez 1984:64) and love for

God, in this context, is related to love of neighbour (Gutiérrez 1984:64). The body as flesh designates the human being in its external aspect, but because it possesses the possibility of living according to the spirit, it is a spiritual body, the temple wherein God abides (Gutiérrez 1984:66,67). God is present and active in each person's life.

The actual direct experience of God in liberation theology as articulated by Gutiérrez, has nothing to do with abstract opinions, convictions or ideas, "but it has everything to do with the tangible, audible and visible experience of God, an experience so real that it can become the foundation of a life project" (Nouwen 1984:xiv). Gutiérrez, drawing deeply on scriptural sources, says that "what we have *heard* and *seen* and *looked upon* and *touched* with our hands, these are direct and immediate experiences of God that are communicated in order that others, too, may have the joy of encountering the Lord" (Gutiérrez 1984:45).

The encounter takes place within the context of a person's life and if the experience is authentic it will reflect that context. Gutiérrez regards the spiritual experience as the place where the revelation of God becomes a reality. This encounter with Jesus Christ noted by Gutiérrez has similar qualities of intimacy present between friends as illustrated in Jn 15:15 (Gutiérrez 1984:33).

The encounter with God, says Gutiérrez, is also marked by the fact that the individual has first been experienced by God and not the other way round. What Gutiérrez intends to be understood is that the human person is not at the helm of a direct experience. According to Gutiérrez, the prerogative to initiate a direct experience belongs to the Lord Himself: "no one can come to me unless the Father allows him" (Jn 6:65). The invitation comes directly from God: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (Jn 15:16). It is an invitation to be intimate with Jesus and to follow his ways. Every person's spiritual journey is in fact "set in motion by a direct encounter with the Lord" (Gutiérrez 1984:42). The direct encounter with God equips the human person with the spiritual strength to answer the call "follow me", to reflect on the experience and to discern the mission of Christ entrusted to him or her.

Another significant factor in a direct experience of God is a profound awareness of God breaking through into our lives. The experience results in a deep conversion experience. The experience, due to its profound nature, remains forever a detailed memory. It is described by Gutiérrez as intense moments with the Lord in which the spiritual life is constantly nourished (Gutiérrez 1984:42).

A characteristic of a direct experience of God, in Gutiérrez's opinion, is that the experience does not occur in isolation, but is a community experience. It is an experience for the benefit of the

whole community, the church, not only for the individual. " A spiritual experience, then stands at the beginning of a spiritual journey. That experience becomes the subject of later reflection and is proposed to the entire ecclesial community as a way of being disciples of Christ" Gutiérrez 1984:35). It leaves an indelible mark on the memory and imagination of the individual and the church as a whole as having been privileged in a moment of grace, the discovery of life, both with the Lord and with our brothers and sisters (Acts 2:41-47).

The spiritual encounter which Gutiérrez advocates is defined in terms of the Jewish people's quest for an encounter with God. He argues that although we may set out to experience God directly in our spiritual journey, like the Israelites, "the encounter was already a reality at the beginning of the journey" (Gutiérrez 1984:77). Gutiérrez uses the wellknown quote of Augustine to illustrate this point: "You would not seek me if you have not already found me" (Gutiérrez 1984:77). "It is precisely because of the anticipated encounter with God that the movement of quest could begin" (Gutiérrez 1984:77). It is, however, the direct contact with the poor and their concrete experience, expressed in our intimate solidarity with them, that the direct experience of God occurs usually in the form of a personal conversion.

Implied in this personal conversion to the Lord is a conversion to the neighbour, the poor, the exploited in whom the image of God is

most defiled (Gutiérrez 1983:204). Gutiérrez defines conversion as "a radical transformation of ourselves"; it means thinking, feeling and living as Christ who is present in every exploited and alienated person (Gutiérrez 1988:113,115).

6.3. Direct experience of God in prayer.

A direct experience of God may be the point of departure of our spiritual life, and of liberation theology, but it does not simply remain a point of departure. According to Gutiérrez it becomes a "permanent wellspring of life" (Gutiérrez 1984:37). Although Biblical testimony is clear that the encounter with God results from divine initiative, for this to become effective we must consciously open our being in prayer to the deliberate presence of Jesus in our lives.

In times of loving encounter with God in prayer and commitment, we enter ineffable depths and areas where words are incapable of communicating what we are experiencing. At this level of effective prayer we are fully engaged in a loving experience of God (Gutiérrez 1987:xiv). In the encounter God is present to a person as he was to Job when the latter had a direct experience of God. "The direct dialogue at last granted to Job have left him with no choice but to acknowledge humbly and joyfully an encounter that has changed his life: "I once knew you only by hearsay, now my eyes have seen you" Job 42:5 (Gutiérrez 1987:85).

Job, as noted by Gutiérrez, came to realize that there is "another way of knowing and speaking about God. His previous contact with God had been indirect, by " hearsay " through others (his friends, for example); now it is *direct, unmediated*" (Gutiérrez 1987:85). Gutiérrez, in elaborating on Job's experience, says that the latter savoured the Pauline "face-to-face" encounter with God in which faith, hope and love abide, "but the greatest of this is love" (1 Cor 13:13). The experience changed Job's life and attitude towards suffering forever as he has thereafter resigned himself to contemplative love (Gutiérrez 1987:85).

The direct experience can be a costly and painful one as illustrated by Job. It brings one to humble submission and acceptance of the fact that God is Lord of one's life and of the entire creation. Gutiérrez maintains that a direct encounter with God is an obvious outcome to a person of prayer. Once God is experienced in such a profound manner one cannot continue to live one's old, sinful and selfish life. Although many difficulties remain, the horizons have been expanded. We begin to see the way whereby we meet God and others. The direct experience provides us with better understanding and represents a "high point" in contemplative speech about God. The direct experience of God allows the transcendence of individual experiences. It provides a new awareness, particularly because it is accompanied by feelings and experiences of solidarity with the poor (Gutiérrez 1987:88).

6.4. Experiencing God directly in the concreteness of history.

One of Gutiérrez's central assertions is that God is a liberating God, revealed primarily in the concrete historical context of the liberation of the poor and oppressed. History is thus the concrete locale of human encounter with God and the context in which God reveals himself and becomes present in events and in people, especially the poor (Gutiérrez 1983:20). The God that is experienced in history is the Biblical God who takes sides with the poor and liberates them from slavery and oppression (Gutiérrez 1983:7). God incarnated 'himself' into history and bore the mark of the poor, 'He' incarnated 'Himself' into the popular struggles for liberation as well as into the hope of the exploited.

The Bible often refers to God as a hidden God. Gutiérrez states that the presence of God in history makes itself known in an unobtrusive way that necessitates spiritual discernment. To substantiate his insight he cites Biblical examples: "For I am God, not Man, I am the Holy One in your midst" (Hos 11:9; Is 6:3). He is a God who dwells within the human being with a contrite heart (Is 57:15) in the bosom of his people (Gutiérrez 1983:19).

Gutiérrez points out that Christ makes himself present precisely through those who are "absent" from history, those who are not the great ones of the world, not the respected or the wise and those not understood (Lk 14:15-24). The "absent" says Gutiérrez, are the

poor, the hungry, those who weep, the despised (Gutiérrez 1988:157). God became poor in Christ by taking on human life; by becoming part of human history, he took on a poor life (Gutiérrez 1988:113). In Jesus we meet God and in the poor person we meet Jesus.

The struggles of the common people for liberation provide the matrix for a new faith and a new life, both to be achieved through a new kind of encounter with God and other human beings.

The Biblical God is thus close to human beings. He is perceived as a God who communes with and is committed to his people. The active presence of God in the midst of His people, which is one of the most enduring promises of the Bible, forms an integral part of the liberation promises which the poor cling to cohesively (Gutiérrez 1988:106).

Gutiérrez says that God is experienced as the God of the living, whose purpose in entering human history is to dispel the forces of death and to call forth the healing and reconciling forces of life. To know God as liberator, in biblical terms, means to do justice and to love. "What does God require of you but to do justly, to love mercy (compassion) and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). The poor have discovered that the God they worshipped for centuries is a God who wants to liberate them from the hidden forces of death. They came to realize that God would not allow them to be destroyed in a situation of injustice and loneliness. According to

Gutiérrez, we only understand the radical nature of God's liberation in and through Christ from the viewpoint of the poor (Gutiérrez 1988:111).

6.4.1. The encounter with God by the poor.

The initial stages of a full encounter of God by the poor is often marked by bewilderment, complaint, frustration and the feeling of being trapped in a life of misery. God is often perceived as the 'enemy' (as in the case of Job), but at the same time also 'friend'. At times the poor feel that God is distant and unconnected with their life. They interpret their suffering as an abandonment by God, but by their own direct encounter with God as liberator, their spiritual attitudes are transformed. Those who believe that God became human, cannot separate the experience of God with an experience of oneself (Gutiérrez 1983:51).

Gutiérrez intends it to be known that the theology of the poor emanates "from the spiritual movements of the poor, which is frequently social movements as well" (Gutiérrez 1983:94). This he says "is significant, for the life and reflection of the poor always have a contemplative and mystical dimension - a dimension of protest and social transformation" (Gutiérrez 1983:94). The faith experience of the poor is in fact based on God's direct love and care for the poor. "God loves them simply because they are poor, because they are hungry, because they are persecuted" (1983:95).

What is primary, says Gutiérrez, "when it comes to God's special love for the poor, is literal, physical poverty" (Gutiérrez 1983:95).

According to the Beatitudes the poor can testify to God as the defender, the protector, the liberator of the poor. The poor do not experience an easy God; the God they experience is the God that loves them precisely because they suffer so many hardships. The poor, maintains Gutiérrez, are faced daily with the mystery of God (Gutiérrez 1983:95), the mystery that is summed up in "Your ways are not my ways, and my thoughts are not your thoughts" (Is 55:8). When God's presence in concrete reality is directly experienced in the form of some liberation act, the poor person's experience of God changes to that of liberator, healer and reconciler. For the poor, the direct and convincing experience of God is one which reveals the mystery of God present in and through some concrete event (Gutiérrez 1983:52).

One of the immediate results of an encounter with God is that it gives strength to the poor in their struggle, even when practical ways of the alleviation of poverty and misery are not always visible (Nouwen 1984:xv). A direct encounter with God affirms the poor person's dignity in Christ. In the experience they claim their identity as children loved and respected by God. The direct experience gives them the strength to be faithful in their struggle against the injustices around them. They experience the presence of

a living God, a God who suffered on their behalf and who does not want them to suffer oppression and deprivation.

The spiritual experience of the poor is an encounter with the Lord Whom they possess already. Direct experiences of God are experiences of love, which transcend all motives and merits (Gutiérrez 1984:110). The experience provides the poor with the conviction that God is definitely on the side of the poor and, as a result, the poor trust that all suffering will and must be overcome (Gutiérrez 1983:95).

6.4.2. Experiencing God directly in the poor.

Gutiérrez states that God is humanized and made more accessible in the poor person. He maintains that in order for us to get to know and love God, we must come to grips with the concrete situation of the poor. (Gutiérrez 1983:96). "In the concrete historical situation we encounter God in the poor in solidarity with the struggle of the oppressed " (Gutiérrez 1983:98). He implies that in our dealing with the poor we experience God in a direct and concrete way "...those committed to the poor, experience God who is simultaneously revealed and hidden in the faces of the poor - Matt.25:31-46" (Gutiérrez 1984:38). He emphasizes that our entering in the world of the poor can be a long and painful process, but it is there that we find the God of whom theology is called upon to speak. Authentic speaking about God, for Gutiérrez, is built upon

a direct encounter with God.

Gutiérrez argues that the poor constitutes a *people* and a *world*. He maintains that although the world of the poor is a complex world, it possesses an inherent dignity precisely because it is made up of human people (Gutiérrez 1973:xxi). Being poor "is a way of living, thinking, loving, praying, believing and hoping, spending leisure time and struggling for a livelihood. Being poor today is also increasingly becoming to mean being involved in the struggle for justice and peace, defending one's life and freedom, seeking a more democratic participation in the decisions made by society, organizing 'to live in an integral way' (Peubla, 1137), and being committed to the liberation of every human being " (Gutiérrez 1988:xxi-xxii).

The *poor as a people* are described by Gutiérrez as human beings just like all other people, but they suffer more than other people. They are victims of oppression, misery and they suffer deprivation of the most elemental human rights. They are scarcely aware that they are human beings as the unjust social, political and economic structures have made them outcasts and rejects. Although God cares for all people, Gutiérrez makes it clear that God cares more for the poor and the suffering; features of Christ are reflected more in their faces. It is only through concrete deeds of love and solidarity that our encounters with the poor person become effective encounters with Christ (Mt 25:40). In encountering the

poor person we encounter Christ and conversely, our denial of love for, and lack of solidarity with, the poor is tantamount to a rejection of Christ. It is thus through concrete encounters with the poor and dispossessed that we encounter God (Mt 25:31).

6.4.2.1. *Matthew 25:31.*

Liberation theology presents God as the God of the poor and our experience of God is expressed in our concrete relationship with the poor. For Gutiérrez the encounter with Christ "the Lord of History" in the poor is supported by his interpretation of Mt 25:31-46. "Insofar as you did this to one of the least of my brothers and sisters you did it to me". (Mt 25:40; Gutiérrez 1983:21;1988:113). God is discovered in the poor, the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, in the least of our brothers and sisters. Christ himself is present in the poor and "whatever you have done for one of them you have done for me". Gutiérrez is of firm belief that we encounter God in the poor since the poor is the visible reality which reveals God to us (Gutiérrez 1988:115).

These poor, whom the Lord loves, are loved by God simply because they are poor and not because they are morally superior or have greater spiritual insight (Gutiérrez 1983:xi). The poor bring Christians into direct experience of God in whom the poor already live. Gutiérrez does not romanticize poverty. On the contrary he regards it as evil and sinful. He perceives the task of Christians

as that of being in solidarity with the poor, not to exalt their poverty, but to find ways to combat poverty, in the hope that it may be overcome. Poverty is a sinful situation which causes a breach of fellowship between God and human beings and between human beings themselves.

6.4.2.2. The horizontal approach to God.

The modes of God's presence in human history determines the form of our encounter with God. Those who participate in the praxis of liberation, that is to say, those *committed* to the cause of the poor, are directly placed at the very heart of the concrete, "conflictional" history in which we meet Christ, who reveals God and who reveals our neighbours to us as brothers and sisters (Gutiérrez 1983:38). An involvement in liberation is the result of a profound conversion experience, and is the locus of a spiritual experience in which we encounter God and the poor person alike. Liberation theology would insist that our personal claim of knowing God, must be proved by doing justice and by being in solidarity with the poor person who is oppressed and exploited. Gutiérrez maintains that, according to the Bible, there is no authentic worship of God without solidarity with the poor (Gutiérrez 1983:51). Liberation theology therefore stresses that the human person is the living temple of God, and hence the understanding that we meet God in our encounters with others.

This horizontal approach to God and Christ in the poor person constitutes an authentic spiritual experience of a very concrete nature. Gutiérrez describes it as a "life in the spirit, a bond of love between Father and Son, between God and human beings and between human beings and human beings"(Gutiérrez 1983:95). The assertion that an encounter with Christ in the poor constitutes an authentic spiritual experience is expressed by the following statement: "It is a life in the Spirit, the bond of love between Father and Son, between God and human being, and between human being and human being. It is in this profound communion that Christians involved in a concrete historical liberation praxis strive to live - in a love for Christ in solidarity with the poor, in faith in our status as children of the Father as we forge a society of sisters and brothers, and in the hope of Christ's salvation in a commitment to the liberation of the oppressed" (Gutiérrez 1983:53).

This experience with God occurs as a profound communion among Christians involved in a concrete, historical liberation praxis. Encountering the poor reveals to us who God is. The poor not only tell us about the Kingdom; they also unite us with God and secondarily and derivatively, tell us about ourselves and the role of the poor in the kingdom of God (Gutiérrez 1983:95). "To mock the poor is to insult the Creator" (Prov 17:15).

6.5. Conclusion

The greatest challenge which Christians face today, according to Guitiérrez, is to learn to encounter the Lord in the poor. The challenge is to live a hope-filled and joyous faith within a love that creates solidarity with the oppressed and their hopes and struggles with a view to their complete liberation (Guitiérrez 1986:9). A direct experience of God in liberation theology forms part of a movement to God through human persons. It involves a conversion to Christ through being converted to the needs of the oppressed. "Both movements need each other dialectically and move toward a synthesis. This synthesis is found in Christ; in the God-Man we encounter God and humankind. In Christ humankind gives God a human countenance and God gives it a divine countenance" (Gutiérrez 1988:119).

Gutiérrez does not for one moment believe that the sinful situation of poverty comes directly from the hand of the Creator. Neither do the poor, he argues, for they know that the world is too awful, too distorted, too unjust and too oppressive to be the kind of world that God ordains it to be. On the contrary, they look upon it as made so by humanity. To deliver the poor from their poverty and to restore to them their dignity as human beings, is part of the process of human salvation. The encounter with God in the poor is accompanied by concrete works; the two aspects cannot be separated as both form part of the necessary steps towards the encounter with Christ himself.

6.6. Evaluation.

One of the positive characteristics of Gutiérrez's use of the "direct experience of God" lies in his presentation of God as a Reality which is fully involved in the human situation. Yet at the same time it can be argued that, by Gutiérrez not presenting God as an abstract, transcendent God that exists "above" the world, his theology lacks the vertical dimension of transcendence and hence he is not adhering to the full biblical message. By presenting God as siding with the poor, the outcast, the oppressed victims of injustice, Gutiérrez is concentrating on the horizontal relationship with God and in this context a direct experience of God is deeply entrenched in the human situation. According to this understanding, the scope for a direct experience is very wide and it is a possibility open to all; direct experience is thus not an elitist and individualist experience, and no longer is it only aimed at the interior life. Despite the availability of the experience as presented by Gutiérrez, there are, however, inherent exclusivisms in this approach. By his constant stressing of God's identification with the poor, the inevitable question is raised: does Gutiérrez's approach exclude the rich and the powerful from a direct experience of God? Is a direct experience of God, as presented in liberation theology, the privilege of the poor and oppressed and to those committed to the cause of the poor and the powerless? Is this not another form of injustice? Are there only two groups of humans in the world i.e. the rich and powerful versus

the poor? Is there not a large number of middle-of-the-road people who are not strictly 'poor and oppressed', but are by no means 'rich and powerful'?

Although it is abundantly clear that Gutiérrez's theology is completely and unambiguously in solidarity with the poor, he does not however, wish to exclude the rich and powerful from a direct experience of God. Preferential option for the poor is not meant for the purpose of excluding others. A direct experience of God, like the offer of salvation, is open to all God's people but, according to Gutiérrez, God can be experienced far more easily in and by the poor, precisely because of God's more obvious identification with the lowest and the poorest. Gutiérrez is firm in his belief that God's complete solidarity with the poor is revealed in His eternal, unmediated, complete and distinct presence in history through Jesus who, in turn, worked for the liberation of the poor. Gutiérrez's God is not found in the midst of ontological reflection, but in the midst of the poor. Gutiérrez's emphasis on God's identification with the poor provides a direct experience of God in liberation theology, within a concrete and revolutionary content. The experience is also characterized by dramatic practical consequences, such as complete conversion towards the poor and the cause of the poor. In this light it seems that it is more the extreme radical implications of liberation theology which place a direct experience of God 'out of bounds' for the rich and the powerful, rather than the possibility of a direct experience

itself. The rich may fear that they have too much to renounce, but in liberation theology there is no compromise, the two aspects go together: direct experience includes the inevitable conversion experience.

By making a preferential commitment to the poor and oppressed a necessary condition for a direct experience of God, Gutiérrez is running the risk of absolutising and idealizing the poor. It is quite clear that for Gutiérrez a direct experience of God occurs through a direct experience of the poor and the marginalized. In this context, it is well to keep in mind that the initiative for a direct experience belongs to God and to confine a direct experience of God to the liberation context is to forget that liberation must serve the poor and not vice versa.

The possibility of experiencing God is there for all but, according to Gutiérrez's argument, God is closer to the poor and the suffering. Surely God is a God of all people and does not take sides. Gutiérrez's belief that God takes sides is based on biblical belief, and "siding with the poor" is more a *means* of overcoming the obstacles created by the materially powerful, by those who oppress the poor, than a form of injustice. The biblical God is a God that works through people and historical events so that His people can experience Him. Gutiérrez at no stage claims that the poor are sinless: on the contrary, all people are sinners and in need of redemption, but not all people are victims of an unjust

society and not all are dehumanized by unjust economic and political structures. The direct experience of God, as advocated by Gutiérrez, is one that occurs not in the midst of monastic silence, but it in the midst of pain and suffering. In this sense holiness and suffering are not new phenomena in Christian spirituality and thus not new and peculiar only to liberation theology.

Another positive attribute in Gutiérrez's approach to an experience of God, is that the call for liberation is deeply grounded in scripture. He reads the Bible as a powerful witness to a God who acts on behalf of the poor in order to liberate them. It is argued that Gutiérrez is very selective in his use of scripture and that he favours certain books and themes which recount the liberation of Israel. In particular, he selects the Exodus and the Resurrection events as pivotal points in God's actions of liberation. Both events are steeped in various direct experiences the Israelites and the disciples had of God and Jesus respectively. Gutiérrez's selective use of the scriptures does not mean that other themes in the Bible are not important, but he re-reads the scriptures from the perspective of the poor. By his selective use he shows explicitly that a direct experience of God forms part of our insertion into the liberation process.

A direct experience of God is described by Gutiérrez as an experience of God which occurs without intermediaries, but the direct encounter advocated by him takes place by means of the poor,

and our activities with the poor, which could be regarded as a form of mediation. From his exposition it can be perceived that Gutiérrez talks of various kinds of direct experiences of God with different characteristics: the first being that of the poor and the oppressed, the second the experience of those committed to the poor and the third is the direct experience of God that takes place in prayer. These three direct experiences do not occur in isolation, but they imply one another. In at least two of the three kinds of 'direct' experiences, God is experienced through 'something'. In the case of the poor person the experience of God takes place through the "experience of liberation" and, in the other experience, God is experienced through the "poor person". How exactly God is experienced directly through the poor person and how this differs from experiencing God through any other person, is not clear from Gutiérrez's writings. To see God, or experience God, in the poor, implies that the seer or the experience must be gifted with some kind of 'supernatural' ability or grace to see God directly in the person. Gutiérrez, in fact, concentrates more on the results of the experience of God rather than on the direct experience itself.

Although Gutiérrez tries in his theology to shy away from the dualism that separates action from reflection by stressing the contemplative dimension as an essential dimension of Christian existence, it is not clear from his writings how this balance is achieved. To discover the balance between action and reflection has

been a struggle since the beginning of Christian spirituality, and Gutierrez does not stipulate what exactly in liberation theology would guarantee the best chance of success.

Solidarity with the poor and fighting for their cause is, for Gutiérrez, only authentic when it starts with a direct encounter with God. This experience is integrally linked with a conversion experience which results in identifying totally with the poor. Without the required reflection on the experience, the direct experience is thus not brought to its natural and spiritual completion. It seems that Gutiérrez connects all these characteristics to a direct experience. If this is the case then the direct experience of God is not a "once and for all" experience, but a process or a number of experiences which brings the experience to completeness. The question remains: can one have a conversion experience without a direct experience of God?

7. COMPARISONS AND CONCLUSIONS.

What emerges from the research on how Karl Rahner, Morten Kelsey, Thomas Merton, Matthew Fox and Gustavo Gutiérrez use the term 'direct experience of God,' is the great variety of insights, the striking similarities and the diverse perceptions of the concept 'direct experience of God'. Another factor which also emerges very clearly is that, even though direct experience of God is biblically rooted, the nature and understanding of the term are largely products of the theologians' respective theological and philosophical perspectives and their social contexts. Their distinct differences are accentuated by their particular context and purpose in writing. It is also obvious that behind each of their respective observations and perceptions there exists a number of significant epistemological assumptions that need to be unpacked if some measure of clarification of the term 'direct experience of God' is to be obtained.

7.1. Typology of the respective approaches.

The obvious differences among the five theologians regarding the concept 'direct experience of God' lie in their individual approaches. As each respective theologian's approach has a specific character it is possible to classify them into different types which distinguish them from each other.

7.1.1. A philosophical-theological approach.

Karl Rahner works from a *philosophical-theological perspective* and for this reason his approach to the concept 'direct experience of God' is predominantly a *theoretical explanation* of the existence and availability of a direct experience. In this approach metaphysical justification is used to support the theological understanding of a direct experience of God. He employs the Heideggerian notion of an existential to explain his faith conviction that direct experience of God is an intrinsic and universal dimension of all human existence.

Rahner insists that metaphysics directs us to an understanding of the unthematic experience of God we already have. This approach is, however, not a world denying approach as human experience is a determining factor in Rahner's theology; nevertheless it does not consider very seriously the historical and social structures of experience which suggest the practical and narrative structures of the idea of God. In the context of this transcendental theological approach a direct experience of God is a *private experience*, which conflicts with the views of God that God is experienced in collective human existence.

Peculiar to Rahner's approach is his presentation of direct experience of God as both unthematic and thematic. This exposition is inextricably linked with his theological anthropology which

presents the human person as spirit in the world. In this philosophical approach, God remains unknown and concealed, the infinite horizon which is glimpsed in the knowledge of concrete things.

The philosophical underpinnings do not make it easy for the ordinary person of simple faith to relate to this particular presentation of a direct experience, but it does, however, provide an excellent explanation as to *how* a direct experience of God is an *existential constituent* of our human existence, whether one is aware of it or not.

7.1.2. The philosophical-psychological approach.

Morton Kelsey's approach focuses on the inner life of a person in the hope of opening the person to the *spiritual dimension of reality* in which God is experienced. The presentation of a direct experience of God in this context involves the hidden assumption that the spiritual dimension of reality transcends the physical world as well as the human mind. It is this dimension which makes direct experience of God possible.

His approach not only advocates a return to belief in the spiritual dimension of reality, it also encourages contact with this vast and complicated spiritual domain, hence the call to adhere to the world-view of Plato and the weighty reliance on contemporary

psychological insights. Kelsey's approach appeals for the expansion or greater awareness of the spiritual reality and allows for the possibility of God to be experienced via the less developed functions like the imagination, dreams and mental activities such as images and visions.

This philosophical-psychological approach, which is predominantly in favour of the kataphatic way to God, values an experience of God via images which are supposed to remove the obstacles which separate rational activities from a person's depth. These images, symbols, dreams and visions are the means which provide access to the spiritual dimension. This is in stark contrast to Merton's approach, which is predominantly apophatic. Whereas in Kelsey's approach God can be reached by means of images and symbols, for Merton God is known by dark, silent, contemplative love.

7.1.3. *The contemplative-mystical approach.*

Thomas Merton's presentation of a direct experience of God emphasises the *vertical* and direct relationship with God. It focuses on the *transcendental element in humanity* and the direct experience occurs by eliminating all that is 'false' within the human person.

This apophatic approach to God stresses the transcendence of God. However, it also stresses that the human person is made in the

image of God, thereby providing a bridge between the human and the divine. This approach to God is well established in the traditional understanding of contemplation, but Merton utilizes psychological insights to it, though differently from the way Kelsey does. The goal of contemplation is to experience God directly and this occurs in the inner sanctuary of self-awareness which he calls the *center*: the deepest part of the soul where God is to be found. God is experienced directly through the 'God-element' in oneself. It is for this reason that Merton's approach insists on the elimination of all that is false within the person. The 'false-self', which prevents a direct experience of God, is the everyday self and it is the self which depends on fabricated images. This 'false-self' is understood to hide reality, the reality of God, of self and of the world, and the direct experience demands the abandonment of defences. As this approach insists that God can only be experienced by the true-self, it recommends restoring within ourselves the image and likeness of God. In this instance Merton and Fox share the same belief: that of returning to our primordial origins.

Contemplation in this approach operates like depth psychology and takes the person into the inner sanctuary of self-awareness, the 'true-self', where God is encountered directly. Typical also is that this approach to a direct experience of God eschews thinking and imagining. Although it is not a world-denying contemplation, the approach goes beyond analytical reflection. The experience is beyond concepts, words and thoughts.

7.1.4. *The creation-centered mystical approach.*

Matthew Fox's approach to a direct experience of God is rooted in his brand of mysticism which inclines towards creation. In this approach God is experienced primarily in *everyday events and interpersonal relationships*. A direct experience of God is an *ordinary experience* which takes delight in the *natural* things of life, is concerned with justice and advocates a return to the earth and all that relates to the earth.

This approach presents us with mysticism not only in creation, but also in people and with a God who is not separate from the world. As this type of mysticism is expressly designed to counter contemporary secularism, this approach to a direct experience of God focuses people's attention on the 'primal sacraments' of sea, land, wind, life and the universe itself. A direct experience of God is presented as an *ecstatic union* with creation and its nameless mysteries. Another singular factor in this approach is that because Fox values equally the kataphatic and the apophatic ways to God, which consequently culminates in the *via creativa* and which in turn presupposes the *via transformativa*, it implies that the ecstatic breakthrough into God is not as rudimentary as it might appear to be. It is accordingly subjected to a number of presumed pre-conditions.

Fox's approach to a direct experience of God can easily be

perceived as very 'worldly' due to its appreciation for all that is natural. The fact that his presentation does not stress sufficiently the necessity of redemption, and his failure to provide adequate acknowledgment of the element of evil as an intrinsic part of creation, marks his approach with a certain sense of 'isolation'.

The creation-centered approach, as presented by Fox, is in contrast to Kelsey's overt dependence on psychological data. Indeed, Fox blames psychological categories, which he terms pseudo-mysticism, for the reduction of spirituality. He maintains that psychologized religion is religion that has lost its mystic center. Creation-centered theology presents a direct experience of God as an ecstatic experience expressed in the natural experience of forgetting, justice-making and compassion.

7.1.5. *A liberative-transformational approach.*

The novel datum of Gustavo Gutiérrez's approach to a direct experience of God is the necessity of a *concrete* involvement in the historical life of the poor as well as a personal commitment to their liberation. A direct experience of God in this approach is in *collective human existence* and the relationship with God is *horizontal* in the sense that direct experience of God is rooted in the situation of the poor and oppressed and our commitment to the poor. It focuses on the necessity for a person to incarnate

him/herself in the complex world of the poor, in a situation of broken relationships, pain, poverty, suffering and deprivation. This *practical and physical* approach makes the 'abstract' God of the philosophers concrete as God is presented as a living, personal and liberating God who sides with the poor and abides in the poor.

While this approach vindicates God's justice in action, contemplation is not discarded, but is presented within liberative action. Here, direct experience of God also takes the radical form of critical reflection on praxis in the light of the Gospel. Contemplation has, therefore, profound practical implications in this sense that it takes place in the midst of political, social and economic activity. The transcendent element is reached through human and historical mediation. This mediation, which is necessary to experience God, is not merely instrumental but is real love for humanity.

In this liberative-transformational approach a direct experience of God is manifested concretely by *conversion*, by an option for the poor, in a commitment to participate in the struggle for liberation. In this sense, a direct encounter with God is efficacious for the transformation of the person and for the secular reality. It witnesses a paradigm shift from a practice of service to the poor to a practice *in the midst* of the poor.

7.2. Defining a 'direct experience of God'.

By examining the concept 'direct experience of God', as used by the five selected theologians, it is obvious from the absence of a literal description of a direct experience of God as well as a definition, that most of them operate from an *assumption* that a direct experience of God is a generally understandable phenomenon. In the case where a definition is attempted, it is done so by means of listing characteristics.

Without the availability of a generally accepted definition of a direct experience of God, it is not easy to determine which characteristics to include and which to exclude for the purpose of analysis as well as for the construction of a possible definition. Nevertheless, the first essential step in the attempt to construct some type of working definition is to find one single characteristic common to all five theologians which will furnish a unifying element for the construction of a definition.

To select a common characteristic from the great variety of characteristics which are provided by Rahner, Merton, Fox, Kelsey and Gutiérrez is problematic but not impossible. In selecting the single common characteristic, one is constantly aware that it overlaps in endless variations. It is, therefore, most likely that a possible working definition of a direct experience of God would consist of an assortment of prominent characteristics.

Before commencing the construction of a possible definition of a direct experience of God, it is well to determine the generally accepted position of direct experience of God.

7.2.1. Can one experience directly?

Despite the fact that the five selected theologians operate from the premise that a direct experience of God does occur, it is well to bear in mind that the phenomenon itself is a matter of debate, in particular between philosophers and scholars of mysticism, between the constructivists and the perennialists.

7.2.1.1. The "constructivist-perennialist" argument.

Steven Katz, John Hick and Terence Penelhum, argue for what is called a constructivist theory based on the claim that *all* experiences, including religious and mystical experiences are intentional, mediated and shaped by a person's beliefs, concepts and expectations (Forman 1990:3). They are firm in their perception that an unmediated, pure, direct experience of God does not exist.

This constructivist view emerged in response to the "perennialist view" of people like William James, Evelyn Underhill, William Johnson and Walter Stace, who maintain that mystical experiences represent an immediate, direct contact with an (variably defined) 'absolute principle'. They claim that it is only after that immediate contact with the absolute principle that the direct

contact is interpreted according to the tradition's language and beliefs (Forman 1990:3,4). The perennialists claim that interpretative categories such as concepts, beliefs, background-sets, do not enter the transcendental experience.

According to Robert Forman (a perennialist), the perennialists' views came into disfavour due to the broad paradigm shift in the humanities and social sciences towards constructivism. According to the constructivists' paradigm all experiences, religious, mystical, artistic are formed, shaped, mediated and constructed by terms, categories, beliefs and backgrounds which the subject brings to the experience. This notion, says Forman, has become so dominant that it has taken on the status of a self-evident truism (Forman 1990:4). This notion is also challenged by other scholars who are perennialist-inclined, such as Stephen Bernhardt and Huston Smith.

7.2.1.2. The problem of the state of consciousness during a direct experience of God.

One of the problems regarding the credibility of a direct experience of God has to do with the person's *state of consciousness* during the experience.

Steven Katz, a constructivist, maintains that to have a direct experience implies having a '*pure state of consciousness*' and consequently he rejects the idea of a direct experience because

that he does not acknowledge the existence of a "state of pure consciousness". He says he does so for empirical reasons and he claims that due to our human nature we are not capable of having a state of pure consciousness. He claims that an experience of God, whether we describe it as a religious experience or a mystical experience, is an '*ordinary experience*' because it is *mediated* by elements picked up from the context in which the experience occurs, for example, the religious tradition in which the individual finds him or herself.

W.T. Stace, a perennialist, distinguishes a number of consciousnesses: waking consciousness, dreaming, dreamless sleep as well as what he calls "mystical consciousness" (Stace 1960:88). Stace differentiates the state of consciousness that goes with everyday waking life from mystical consciousness by claiming that everyday waking life consists of sense images, thoughts and feelings, which he calls "the sensory-intellectual consciousness". He maintains that mystical consciousness involves no experiential elements of the kind just mentioned. It is an experience beyond the senses, beyond understanding". The mystical consciousness does not seem to be conscious of the world. Stace attributes the state of mystical awareness to what he calls the '*essence*' of a direct experience which is "pure unity...undifferentiated unity" (Stace 1960:88).

According to the selected theologians of this research, i.e.

Merton, Fox, Rahner Gutiérrez and Kelsey, it is evident that there is an awareness that a *certain change* in consciousness does occur at some time within a direct experience of God. It is, however, not always clear whether the change in consciousness is the cause of the direct experience or whether it forms part of the experience. Merton (pp116, 122, 131, 132, 133, and 134) writes about a *transformation of consciousness* and Kelsey writes about the *transformation of ego-consciousness* (pp68,70,72,74). Fox writes about a *forgetting* (pp145,149,159,161) (a term he borrowed from Meister Eckhart) of the major cognitive and effective structures when God is experienced directly, and Gutiérrez writes about a direct experience of God in the form of a *conversion* (pp177,180,181,182). Rahner, on the other hand, appears not to be in favour of "transformed states of consciousness", but acknowledges that the experience can have a transforming effect on a person (p60).

Regardless of the fact that both the perennialist and the constructivists have persuasive arguments for and against a state of pure consciousness, it is not conclusive that there is such a phenomenon of pure consciousness. A possible observation is that a *pure state of consciousness* is an 'ideal' type of consciousness peculiar only to the 'mystical type' of direct experience of God. What emerges very definitely from the work of the five selected theologians is that a *different state of mind*, other than that of the ordinary, does form part of the direct experience of God.

Whether this occurs before, during or after the direct experience, is irrelevant. There is no unanimity among the selected theologians as to *what* the state of consciousness is, but the state of consciousness does provide the experience with the 'special ineffable quality' which is indispensable to a direct experience of God. What can be concluded at this stage is that there is something *special* and something *different* regarding a person's state of consciousness in a direct experience of God.

7.2.2. *Love as an essential element of the essence of a direct experience.*

As mentioned above, the first step in the construction of a working definition of a direct experience of God, is to try to determine what belongs to the *essence* of a direct experience of God as presented by the five theologians. To do this, it is important to select a single characteristic which is very pronounced in the work of them all and thereafter determine whether the one quality they have in common will encompass the essence or furnish the necessary unifying element for the construction of a definition.

The one single, indispensable quality or element which pervades the descriptions of all five theologians with remarkable consistency is that a direct experience of God is *an experience of love*, an experience in which God and the person unite in love. Love is the single most common factor among all their various descriptions of

a direct experience of God (see Kelsey pp70,76, 80; Fox pp144,148,154; Merton pp109,111,114,118,119,121,126; Gutiérrez pp179, 180; Rahner pp49,55).

It is therefore reasonable to conclude that for these theologians, love belongs to the *essence* of a direct experience of God. As love is the most common element which pervades the various characteristics, it can, therefore, furnish the fundamental element necessary for the construction of a definition of a direct experience of God.

7.2.3. *A direct experience as a 'loving union with God'.*

According to the research, there are various states of unity with God, and in the various states of union there is a wide variety of 'spiritual sensations' involved. What emerges clearly is that the union with God is an *experienced reality*. This union is not a union with God's being or nature. In the light of the research, it is a *union in love*. The encounter in love between God and the human person is described in the research as '*losing oneself in God*', '*merging with God*' and '*fusing with God*'. The union is described as being so intimate that there seems to be no longer any distinction between the person and God, despite the immeasurable difference (Fox p154; Merton p111,112,113; Rahner p41; Gutiérrez p179). Yet the difference between God's nature, which is uncreated, and our nature, which is created, is at all times an acknowledged factor

within the research with regard to the experience of loving union.

Understanding the phenomenon of encountering God in loving union can only be done, says Wiseman, by drawing comparisons with the nature of love between two human beings (Wiseman 1990:241). Rosemary Haughton in her book Love says, "love is love, whether human or divine. The same thing is going on in both cases" (Haughton 1970: 179-181; see the same notion in Gutiérrez p.6). The psychiatrist, Dr Gaylin, in his book Rediscovering Love says that capacity of love which he has found essential in human love is the 'capacity for fusion' i.e. "the merging of the self with another person or ideal, creating a fused identity" (Gaylin 1986:100; see Fox on this issue on page 163). The very same phenomenon had been observed by Sigmund Freud which he in turn described as follows: "at the height of being in love the boundary between the ego and the object threatens to melt away..... the man who is in love declares that 'I' and 'You' are one and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact" (Freud 1955:21,64,65).

Ruusbroec, the Dutch mystic, claims that a contemplative experience of fusion can be described as 'being God with God'. A very daring statement to make, says Rahner, but admits that one can only talk about it if one has experienced it (see Rahner p57). The common description of this 'loving immersion' in God, according to the research, is always an ineffable, blissful and fathomless experience (see Fox p155; Kelsey p77; Merton p119; Gutiérrez p183).

What has been determined so far is that love belongs to the essence of a direct experience of God. It is clear, therefore, that a direct experience of God cannot be a 'loveless' experience.

7.3. *The form of a direct experience.*

Another problematic factor in the understanding and possible construction of a definition of a direct experience of God is that not one *form of experience* can be singled out as the essential way whereby God is directly experienced. From the various forms of a direct experience of God which are presented by the five theologians, there are some noteworthy common elements, while simultaneously there is also enough evidence to establish how different they are in their points of similarities. It is, therefore, critical to acknowledge that there seems to be a number of ways whereby God can be experienced directly. For example, Merton uses the term 'direct experience of God' in reference to *contemplation*; Fox in reference to *natural ecstasy*; Gutiérrez in reference to the *poor and history*; Kelsey in reference to achieving contact with the *spiritual dimension of reality*, and Merton and Rahner in reference to our *self-transcendence*.

7.3.1. *Mysticism as a form of experiencing God directly.*

While most of them refer to *mysticism* as a form of experiencing God directly, it is well to understand that, according to the research,

a direct experience of God is not reducible to a set of mystical experiences, but that mystical experiences form part of a broader range of 'direct experiences of God'.

While *loving union with God* is the underlying and unifying phenomenon of the various forms of experiencing God directly, the mystical form possesses its own features.

According to Kelsey (pp74,75), the mystical experience is part of the journey within, to the core of one's personality where God, the great mystery, dwells. For Fox (p155,156,157,158,159) the mystical form of experiencing God forms part of the mystery dimension of creation. For Merton,(pp122,126,129,135) the mystical experience occurs within the framework of contemplation, but it is not identical to it. In this instance the mystical experience takes place in the transcendent dimension of our being - the soul - which is mystery. While Rahner (p58) acknowledges mysticism as a dimension of the mystery of our everyday events he, too, acknowledges the existence of mysticism in a transcendent form.

To sum up the findings regarding the *form* of a direct experience as presented by the five selected theologians: they seem to be sufficiently dissimilar to one another to make it impossible to speak of one type of direct experience as if it were an especially single phenomenon; rather, a direct experience can take on many forms.

7.4. A direct experience of God as an unmediated experience.

Integrally connected with the theme of a direct experience of God as an experience of *loving union*, is the assertion that the experience occurs without the help or hindrance of intermediaries. Here again, although the basic idea of a direct experience as an unmediated experience is shared by all five theologians, the sense in which "unmediated" is understood differs (Fox pp154, 155, 162; Merton 112,127,128,129; Gutiérrez 184, 198, 199; Rahner 51; Kelsey 100).

The concept 'mediation' is defined by S.King as the presence of something which comes between the subject experiencing and the object experienced. To have an unmediated experience indicates an experience free of all the influences of ideas, concepts, words, philosophies and religious traditions (King 1988:276). In the light of this understanding a direct experience takes place *without intermediaries*.

Katz, a constructivist, states quite emphatically that there is NO such a thing as a pure (i.e. unmediated) direct experience. He asserts that no ordinary form of experience, nor any mystical experiences "give any indication or grounds for believing that they are unmediated. That is to say, all experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways. The notion of unmediated

experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty" (Katz 1978:26). He goes further by stating that he believes that this is true even with regard to "the experiences of those ultimate objects of concern with which mystics have intercourse, e.g. God" (Katz 1978:26).

Katz substantiates his assertions by mentioning a diverse group of elements that serve as mediators in a direct experience of God e.g. concepts, symbols, memory, apprehension, expectation, language and the accumulation of prior experiences. While he is emphatic in his belief that human nature requires that our experiences be mediated, including mystical experiences, he unfortunately does not define 'mediate'. He uses the term 'mediate' for the concept which stands between the information and the perception of it. He talks about a filtering process whereby all experiences are processed. Obviously, for him, a direct experience is a so-called 'pure' experience, the result of a 'pure' state of consciousness.

Brakenhielm, on the other hand, asserts that there are direct as well as indirect experiences of God. He describes a direct experience as an experience in which there is "no difference between the experiencing subject and the experienced object" (1985:21). The direct experience of God as reported by mystics, is described "as a unitative experience in which the person has merged with the ultimate reality *leaving nothing in between*" (my italics) (1985:21). Nevertheless, Brakenhielm does claim that most religious

experiences are indirect as there is a difference between the subject and the object and that there is a chain of intermediaries present between the object and the subject. He makes an important claim that, despite the presence of intermediaries, we are still in a position to experience the object provided that the intermediaries do not distort the qualities of the object. Brakenhielm also claims (and this is significant), that the experiences which occur *through intermediaries* are also "*direct of God*" (my italics). In this context he qualifies '*direct*' as *psychologically direct* and not as *ontologically direct* (1985:22). By '*psychologically direct*' Brakenhielm means that when the experience occurs one recognizes the experience as there is a certain sense of familiarity about it. The experience possesses the quality of what he calls "psychological immediacy" which can be contrasted with the immediacy of reflective inference (Brakenhielm 1985:22). Brakenhielm illustrates psychological directness by explaining that when one has often read about a person and then suddenly meets him or her face to face, one has a strong experience of psychological directness, even if there are still intermediaries present between the person and one's experience of him or her (1985:22).

What emerges clearly from the perceptions of the selected theologians in the research, i.e. Rahner, Merton, Fox, Kelsey and , is that they do not deny the presence of intermediaries. What has been established is that a direct experience can occur with or

without the help or hindrance of intermediaries be they symbols, concepts, visions, creation, etc. However, they do state, that all forms of mediation are transcended in some way or another in a direct experience. This does not mean that the intermediaries cease to exist, or that they are abandoned for the duration of the direct experience. In the light of the actual experience of God, the directness of God's presence and the person's awareness of God's immediacy renders the intermediaries insignificant and functionless. This forms a link with Rahner's theology of symbol. As explained by him, a real symbol has an intrinsic, ontological relationship to what is symbolized so that it makes it present. For example, the humanity of Jesus is the real symbol in which the reality of God becomes present and finds expression. The human body, in the same way, is the symbol of the soul. God's being is such that it comes to expression in space and time. God is experienced exactly where we are, here on earth. To experience God in symbols therefore is to experience the reality of God present in the symbol.

In the event where intermediaries or structures are employed to facilitate a direct experience of God, Forman claims that there is a process whereby structures which mediate experiences can be progressively deconstructed within the experience (Forman 1990:186). The progressive deconstruction of mediators, he claims, is part of a spiritual process, particularly in contemplative prayer. This deconstruction can lead to "pure consciousness", hence

to a direct experience of God. He asserts that in the deconstruction process one can reach a point where the person no longer experiences phenomena through the categories of space and time (Forman 1990:186).

To illustrate this very point, Salie King cites examples from secular experiences where one can give oneself up completely to the present moment. This can happen in the experience of physical exertion, in listening to the sound of music, to the present moment of singing or to the sense of wonder in nature. King says there is no sense of a separate self, it is just the event in which one is lost. One remains conscious in the experience, but it is a different sense of consciousness (King 1988:277).

The particular mode of a direct experience, be it an aesthetic experience, communion with nature, aspects of intimate interpersonal relations or non-ordinary states of consciousness, is a relatively insignificant element of the experience itself. What is also clear, however, is that a direct experience of God cannot be compared with intense experiences like dreams, visions and subjective feelings. These are mediums which can help towards facilitating the experience but if one becomes fixated upon the phenomena, they can become an impediment to a direct experience of God.

What has been established is that:

Firstly, there is the type of experience in which intermediaries such as symbols, images, concepts, ideas, visions and dreams do help to *facilitate or create* the makings of a direct experience. This forms part of the kataphatic way to which Kelsey subscribes. In this type of direct experience the person is aware of the *mediated quality present* in the experience. The person experiences a strong sense of psychological directness (Brakenhielm's term), also referred to by Rahner as 'mediated immediacy'.

Secondly, there is the type of experience in which intermediaries are present but become defunct as the direct experience of God, in this instance, does not 'depend' on them. In other words, the intermediaries are relegated to a form of 'secondary awareness' and the actual experience of God is uppermost and of 'primary or immediate awareness'. This is part of the apophatic way to which Merton and Fox subscribe in which the *mediated quality is present but is transcended*.

Thirdly, is the type of experience which is linked to the *mystical* perception that no intermediaries are present in a direct experience of God. It can be argued that some intermediaries must still be present, but in this case the *unitive nature* of the experience provides the self with the 'sensation' that nothing is left in between the person and God. In this experience the *mediated quality seems to be non-existent* as the intermediaries have been absorbed into the intensity of the experience. In this instance, it

is almost impossible to differentiate the God-dimension from the mediatory-dimension; both seemed to have merged into the complexity of the experience.

7.5. Human unworthiness and direct experience of God.

Human unworthiness, the prominent biblical theme which functions as a restraining factor in claiming direct experience of God, is contrasted by the selected theologians' frequent appeal to the divine element in humanity as a credible basis experience God directly. Human nature, according to the research, shares in God's nature and has the inner capacity to experience God directly. God as presented by Fox resides in the unconscious dimensions of our being. Rahner presents the human person as spirit in the world, destined to experience God because it has transcendence in its make-up. 's theology is supported by the belief that the human person is the concrete embodiment of God. Kelsey's appeal for faith in the spiritual dimension of reality includes the spiritual in humanity, and Merton advocates the restoration of God's likeness in our being if we are to be truly human.

7.5.1. Human unworthiness and the 'anthropocentric shift'.

The perception modern people have of themselves in relation to God is, according to Moltmann, the result of an "anthropocentric shift" from the ancient *cosmocentric world* of Plato (the one to which

Kelsey wishes to subscribe). According to this worldview, the individual understood himself or herself as a member of a human society and the human society understood itself as a part of the divine cosmos of the natural order (Moltmann 1988:67). In the medieval, *theocentric world* of Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas, humanity and nature, society and cosmos were ordered around God. God was regarded as the absolute and perfect Being. During the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment, humanity increasingly made the human person the measure of all things and the center of the world. The world of nature was de-divinized, secularized and made the material of the human will (Moltmann 1988:67). This re-interpretation of the world became rooted in anthropology since the human being judged all by homocentric criteria. Nature was subjected to humanity; heaven was denied; modern people became detached from their original integration into nature and religion. These perceptions landed modern humanity in an apparent identity crisis, and it is to this anthropocentric shift that modern theologians respond. Under these anthropocentric conditions modern theology became credible only as anthropo-theology. Rahner, Kelsey, Fox, Merton and operate in this tradition, and in the light of the anthropocentric shift, the human person is perceived as sharing in God's nature. To be truly human is to share in the image and likeness of God and human self-transcendence, which is part of human nature, makes direct experience of God a universal experience.

7.5.2. *The direct experience brings about radical transformation.*

Another prominent feature and point of agreement, which emerges from the research and which is also a strong biblical theme, is that direct experience of God culminates in a reshaping or remaking of the person. In fact, there appears to be a marked correspondence between the authenticity of a direct experience and the transformation which occurs in the person (see 1.4.1; 1.8.1; p177,183,187; Kelsey p71,88; Fox p161, 165, 166; Merton p116, 122, 131,132 and Rahner p60).

The idea of transformation is also intimately linked to the idea that a direct experience of God is an experience of intense, loving union. Wilber maintains that, in a normal state of separateness, the person produces that egoism which is the source of conflict, aggressiveness, selfishness, hatred, cruelty and various forms of evil. The significant element in a direct experience is that separateness is abolished by the deep experience of love. Love is the quality that produces the transformation in the person and, significantly this love is not stagnant or self-centered, but flows out to others. Rahner (p60) states that the person is filled with the audacity to love likewise.

Love and compassion are the two prominent feelings which accompany direct experiences of God (see Fox p155) as well as feelings of peace, joy and blessedness. If in their essence direct experiences

contain love, the tendency to change cannot but be towards the good. As explained by S. King, one brings one's entire self to the experience and in the experience one encounters one's values, one's selfhood, and this constitutes the meaning of the experience (King 1988:275). The inevitable result is a transformation of the personality.

In the light of the analysis, one can say at this stage that a likely definition of a direct experience of God is *a conscious experience of intense loving union with God* which is so powerfully meaningful and valuable that the person is radically transformed thereby.

7.6. The ineffability of direct experience of God.

The ineffability of some direct experiences of God is another common characteristic among the selected theologians, particularly when they refer to the mystical form of direct experience of God. Kelsey for example cites William James (p78) in stating that the *nature* of a direct experience is ineffable. Fox (pp155,162) says the direct *experience* is as ineffable as God is ineffable. Merton (110,119,128,135) describes the experience as wordless, beyond speech and concepts. Gutierrez (p185) maintains that in the loving encounter with God words are incapable of *communicating* the experience as the person enters *areas* that are ineffable. According to Rahner the *depths* of the thematic experience is an

experience of ineffable *nearness* to God (p55). W.T. Stace maintains that the claims that a direct experience of God is in principle ineffable, are as old as the church itself.

7.6.1. *The precise nature of an ineffable experience.*

Is a direct experience ineffable because the experience is transcendent, or because it touches the person very deeply, or because God is incomprehensible or because language is inadequate to reproduce the experience?

As already seen from the research all five selected theologians use the description in various ways: they use it in relation to *God*, to the *experience*, to the *area* where God is experienced and to the impossibility of *relaying* the experience.

The first element that makes a direct experience of God ineffable is the aspect of *undifferentiated unity*. Stace says the experience is wholly unconceptualized and therefore wholly unspeakable and it is essential that this must be so. He says that: "You cannot have a concept of anything within the undifferentiated unity because there are no separate items to be conceptualized" (Stace 1960:297). He claims, however, that upon reflection one ought to be able to put the experience into words. This is possible because, when one remembers the experience one is in a state of consciousness, which he calls sensory-intellectual consciousness, which is different

from the state of consciousness one has during the direct experience of God (Stace 1960:297).

Following the premise that in the direct experience the person 'merges with God', that our whole being is submerged in an experience of total unity, Brakenhielm also claims that this, in itself, cannot render impossible an act of reflection after the experience is over (Brakenhielm 1985:34). He says that, although no concept is wholly adequate to describe religious experiences, "it is wholly unjustified to claim that the religious experience or the object of the experience is beyond conceptualization" (Brakenhielm 1985:34).

Ken Wilber also maintains that it is the deep experience of loving unity that is the ineffable aspect of the direct experience and that it cannot be converted into words (Wilber 1979:46). He maintains that "the structure of any language cannot grasp the nature of the unity more than a fork can grasp the ocean" (1979:55). He asserts that in a direct experience of God there is no awareness of any boundaries as it is a non-verbal experience. The fact that we cannot put the experience into words is because our language is a language of boundaries. Words, symbols and thoughts in themselves, he says, are boundaries (Wilber 1979:45). The person who experiences God directly has to speak of a reality which lies beyond names, forms, thoughts and divisions. What a direct experience shows is that there is no separate self standing

apart from the experience not even language.

What can be concluded so far is that the ineffability of a direct experience is intrinsically connected with the experience being an experience of intense loving union with God. Peter Donovan says that it is common even in secular experience when we experience an emotion so intense that it is normally too difficult for us to put it into words. Words are not the same as experiences and so cannot completely capture or replace them (1979:32). Despite the fact that a direct experience can leave us breathless with ecstasy, one cannot conclude that human language is entirely unsuitable for expressing and interpreting religious experiences afterwards. According to Donovan "it is not impossible to apply some kind of concept to that which is encountered, but that no concept can be applied without acknowledging that the possibility for its replacement remains permanently open" (1979:33).

What can be established is that while one is in the process of experiencing God, words such as 'ineffable', 'unknowable' and 'mystical' are inconsequential; it is only when the experience has become a memory that these terms become functional. Stace says that it is only when we remember an experience that concepts arise for us to describe it and not during the experience itself (1960:297).

It can, therefore, be concluded that while the experience is in

process it is ineffable because it is an intrinsic quality of the state of being in loving union with God. On reflection, one could endeavour to describe the experience as best as one can, but it is an accepted fact that language will never completely capture the reality and total value of the experience. So, in this sense, the experience is also 'ineffable'. Shannon says we have no 'God language', only human language which will always be inadequate to describe our experience of God. Our language about God is 'special' as it is always symbolic and metaphorical (Shannon 1992:12).

7.7. Conclusion.

Foundational to the variety of theological approaches to direct experiences of God is the theological insistence that God is intrinsic to the experience of humanity. The writings of the contemporary theologians confirm the reality of God in ordinary human experiences and suggest that a more acceptable understanding of God, which take fuller account of direct experience, be allowed to surface. Their apparent diversities are firmly rooted in their particular interpretations of the Bible, in their respective philosophies, in their use of the social sciences and their purposes for writing. It could be argued that it should be a central task of theology today to work towards a more full and serious consensus regarding direct experience of God. Notwithstanding the diversity of our perceptions of direct experience of God, it is evident from the research, that by virtue

of our humanity and our affinity to God, we shall always possess an infinite openness to direct experiences of God.

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