

Bernadette Roberts & the No-Self

by: Douglas Lockhart

Until the rug (my 'self') had been pulled out from under me, I never realized how utterly dependent I was upon getting around under my own steam – steam of the mind and emotions, that is, not physical steam. It seems we possess an endless array of subtle energies we don't know we have until they are gone – although later, I was to see clearly how these energies are, in fact, the self's defenses against its own annihilation.¹

Bernadette Roberts: *The Experience of No-Self*

The Jesus Problem

The Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann observes that mysticism tends to dissolve the traditional forms of religion and worship, and the writings of Bernadette Roberts confirm this point. In fact I would go so far as to say that her writings on the stages of spiritual awakening stand out as the most revolutionary contribution made by a contemporary Christian to this discussion since Meister Eckhart's time. Christian mystics of the past (Eckhart excepted) could be said to have only partly described their transcendent experiences in comparison with this contemplative's record. It may even be that she has experienced states of consciousness far in advance of those described in the traditional literature, for the states or stages laid down by Roberts eclipse the language of traditional mysticism and carry us, step by step, towards an appreciation of what to be spiritually awake means in terms not heard before in a Christian context. But it is a challenging journey at every turn, for to wake up inside the Christian paradigm in the way Roberts has is to run the risk of being thrown out. The path of theology so well traveled by Christian contemplatives gives way, in Roberts' case, to "an unhinging of every idea or belief we cling to regarding the structure of the world, the self, and God; an unhinging for which there are no substitutes, no life-preservers and no changing in midstream."²

Bernadette Roberts' core claim is that she now lives in a condition of mind in which no trace of subjective feelings arises; she is utterly without emotional responses. Now that is quite a claim; it challenges the folksy notion that mystics spend most of their time in an ecstatic state, a state of bliss. As she also claims to have transcended what she calls the 'reflexive self' (the reactive conscious mind),

we have a double whammy, for that suggests no reflective or associative thought processes going on either. On hearing such claims, some critics have considered Roberts to be suffering from a pathology, but not friend and confidant Father Thomas Keating. For reasons we will explore later, this priest accepts Roberts' claims at face value, and thinks them indicative of a personal transformation beyond that of classical Christian expression, a stage that clarifies several important points in relation to writings by Christians mystics in the past.

Already acquainted with mystical experience by the age of fifteen, Bernadette Roberts eventually left the cloister, married, and had four children. But it is an experience had fifteen years later that concerns us, for it was then that she broke through into what she describes as an experience of having no self, an experience in which the self as a subjective experience ceased to exist. The libraries, bookstores and people she consulted helped hardly at all, there being no similar account on record culminating in "a complete falling away of the affective life."³

Before going into this in practical terms, we should perhaps listen to her on the subject of Jesus, the Church, and the Christian religion in general, for her insights suggest that she has gone well beyond the Jesus story as it has come down to us, a "going beyond" that lifts the whole story onto a new plane of understanding. And all from an experiential base no less, an interaction with interior processes known to underpin Christian mystical experience, but little understood outside of the theological language that has attempted to explain them.

In the context of waking up spiritually, Roberts' evaluation of Jesus is of particular interest. She says, "I have often thought of Christ as one who fell outside his Jewish frame of reference when he saw the truth in it and went about setting the record straight."⁴ The truth was to be found in Judaism, but an embroidery of religious thinking had obscured its shape and meaning. Jesus had "fulfilled the Scriptures (done it all), realized the truth, and set out to open the eyes of those still within this frame of reference."⁵ These words not only throw new light on the meaning of the term "fulfilled the Scripture", they also reveal Bernadette Roberts' courage in rattling the literalist cage with regard to how Jesus perceived himself. In Roberts' view this was not Jesus setting himself up as a *fulfillment* of Scripture, it was writer's code for someone who had gone through all of the necessary states and stages prefacing *loss of the affective self*. He had fulfilled the Scriptures in the sense of seeing the process of transformation through right to the end – the end of everything we understand as human. And her interpretation of Jesus' death on the cross is of the same ilk, for it rejigs the Christian paradigm and redefines Redemption as a *giving up of the self*. This is not salvation for the soul through Christ's death on the cross, and neither is it a giving up of the self in the sense of dedicating the self to God; it is to literally lose the limited, self-seeking self altogether.

The basic question being asked by Roberts is this: Did Jesus give up his self so that the rest of us could have eternal life, or did he do something quite different? Did he, perhaps, give up his self to “show us the lengths to which we must go in order to see?”⁶ Now that is not standard teaching; it is a quite different interpretation from the one generally offered. And the introduction of the term “see” adds a further dimension to its already challenging implications. It is in fact a reshaping of the language of orthodoxy: Redemption does not hinge on Jesus as Savior; it is conditional in relation to a person’s spiritual growth and maturity. Not just any old maturity, spiritual maturity. We are being asked to go beyond our traditional ideas about Jesus and God and “see” in a new way. This seeing does not have to entail spectacular visions or a grand finale of love and bliss. Such experiences constitute the lower end of the contemplative’s interaction with reality, and may have nothing whatsoever to do with God at all.⁷

According to Roberts, a good example of this kind of seeing can be detected in Jesus’ statement that he had nowhere to lay his head. She suggests that this means Jesus could no longer focus his attention on anything, that he had reached the stage in his contemplative life where there was “nothing to which his mind could be either perceptually or conceptually attached.”⁸ This is an extraordinary explanation for what seems like a statement of simple fact – Jesus was without a place to live. But we should not reject her interpretation out of hand; whether it actually applies to Jesus hardly matters, for it reveals what Bernadette Roberts means by “seeing”, and what she means is that Jesus was no longer attached to submerged forms of conscious thinking. He had, as the Gospels attest, freed himself from that kind of mental engagement.

Integration and Disintegration

Speaking of the affective, emotionally based self and its integration, Roberts tells us that integration of the self eventually gives way to a disintegration of the self; that is, we can’t arrive at the condition of having no-self unless we first achieve a whole self.⁹ But this whole self and its creation are only half of the story, the half we seem to be in charge of. The other half is not under our control; for on accomplishing a relative integration of the self and its parts, we inadvertently set in motion an opening out into a higher system that begins to dismantle the affective self. Having access to only incomplete contemplative testimony, theologians are at a loss to fully understand or follow the twists and turns of this situation. And in relation to experiences of ecstasy and bliss associated with mystical states, Roberts informs us that the disintegration of the self should not be equated with a falling back into an infantile state,¹⁰ a state described clinically by Erich Neumann as *uroboros incest*. The disintegration of the self “is a forward, not a backward, movement,” she says categorically, and as such heralds a wholeness that is beyond the reach of our emotions.

Optimum stability or integration of the affective system governing our emotions is therefore necessary for the process of expansion beyond the affective system to take place. And presuming, as Roberts does, that the fulcrum between self and no-self is housed in our perceptions, then a true integration of the self necessitates, a *perceptual balancing act between self and world*. She goes on to describe this balancing act as “maximum access to the still point – which is a point not of this system but discoverable through it.”¹¹ “Unity” is not the keyword; the keyword is “disunity”. There is a dualistic gap in our perception of self and world that, if we are to successfully shed affective limitation, has to be plumbed. Our feelings and our emotions are at once the problem and the answer, the spanning of the gap between “subject” (ourselves) and “object” (the world) a perceptual balancing act that allows “seeing” to erupt.¹² Oddly enough, Roberts refers to this kind of seeing as “a seeing which *is* the resurrection itself,”¹³ and that again pushes the Jesus story well beyond anything presently understood.

The path of mystical theology so well traveled by Christian contemplatives did not, Roberts found, contain the fundamental elements she needed to explain her condition. It contained only “the usual descriptions of love and bliss, lights and energies, God within and the true self,”¹⁴ not what this explorer of the spiritual domain required to offset her very understandable fears as sense of self disappeared. And to complicate matters further, as the experience of having no sense of self became a permanent condition, out of this condition formed a growing dismay at the Church’s theologically constructed belief system about Jesus. For these beliefs, once held so dear by Roberts, and in so many ways instrumental in her transformation, did not properly reflect the realizations she had come to by way of that transformation. Being caught up in words, in definitions, in theological explanations and constructions that obscured more than they revealed, we ran the risk of swapping “the river of truth” for an approach path to that river. The approach path might well reach the river, but it could easily become an impediment by way of ideas dogmatized beyond their intrinsic worth. And so, on reaching the river, and entering it, it was our responsibility to help straighten out some of the path’s unnecessary convolutions.

The problem with the mystical record was that the accounts it contained were not “sufficiently personal or detailed to fill the gap between theory and practice,”¹⁵ a problem lamented by professionals in other disciplines. To journey beyond the self was to journey beyond theological frames of reference and encounter areas of theological sensitivity that, as in the past, one tried to avoid. With the Spanish Inquisition breathing down his neck, St. John of the Cross had been unable to tell the full story of his contemplative life, and the outspoken Meister Eckhart had found himself censured by his Church for trying to do just that. Faith had to shift to “seeing” for this kind of thing to be understood; the whole point of religion was

to point to something beyond religion.

This ex-nun is forthright in her summation of the overall problem facing the Church. She says the real tragedy of the cross was not that people did not understand Christ's suffering, but that they did not understand him at all.¹⁶ The understood him, his disciples had not understood him, the Church founded in his name had not understood him, and in the final analysis we too did not understand him. Our capacity to think of him in either historical or contemplative terms had been overlaid with interpretations based on notions that were, to say the least, inadequate. We looked at him, but did not see him, listened to him, but did not hear him. All we saw and heard was the Christ of childhood, the Christ of theology, the Christ of the Church's imagination, the Christ of blind faith. The man of flesh and blood was no more; his search for God, his finding God and his losing God had been transformed into a magnificent, but deadly tale to pacify our fears. Or, as Roberts puts it, "Someone had to stretch the human limits to find out if there was any truth beyond the self, any life beyond this one, or any God beyond belief."¹⁷

Bernadette Roberts believes Jesus died on the cross discovering the answers to these questions. A contemplative by nature, she believes this man of intelligence and passion eventually went beyond self and passion, beyond God in the sense that his attachment to the religiously constructed idea of God faded into nothing. Making the claim that she has no God in the same sense as Jesus had no God, that they are companions in "a great mistake,"¹⁸ Roberts then talks of the tragedy of those who have believed in him without ever coming to an understanding of what his life and death meant.¹⁹ And so she equates "seeing" with "resurrection", and in doing so aligns herself with the equally radical views of Father Sylvan. Christ had expected a resurrection, she says, but it did not take place. Instead of resurrection and glory he had experienced nothingness.

The Affective Network

The main problem for Bernadette Roberts is the Church's acceptance of emotion as ultimately necessary for the appreciation of truth. Though separate from the cognitive processes, the affective life so infiltrates the cognitive life that the two seem to be inseparable. But they are in fact two separate systems that have become muddled. It is at this point that Roberts' observations get really interesting, for she asserts that the sense of subjective, emotional energy associated with self-consciousness actually constitutes the self: we do not *have* an affective life, we *are* an affective life. Our idea of having a self, although backed by a feeling of separateness and interiority confirming individuality, is in fact no more than the effect of the *entire affective network of the body* registered cognitively.²⁰ Sandwiched between our interiority (the subjective) and the world at large (the

objective), we claim the sensation of physical energy as our own, assume that emotion is an expression of the self, and live accordingly. And we're proud of our affective lives. We're only human, we say, meaning that some outburst of emotion marks us out as different from, say, a robot. For who would want to be a robot and not be able to *feel* alive?

But what if we are mistaken about the nature of the self? What if our affective systems veil rather than reveal what we are? What if experiencing life in such a possessive manner is in fact at the low end, not the high end, of the awareness scale? What then? And how do we go about this transformation of the affective self when our feeling-energies are constantly headed in the opposite direction? These are just some of the questions that arise from a reading of Roberts' text, and they force us to reconsider some of our pet notions about what it means to be a human being. Her observations afford us a glimpse of something that may lie beyond the scope of the evolutionary process as it is presently understood, and her writings challenge us to explore this "something" as best we can.

Swapping "Belief" for "Seeing"

In the larger scheme of things self as an affectively governed system may only be temporary.²¹ So it can be said that it is self we have to overcome, not sin; our endless shortcomings are due to the mixing of affective and cognitive perceptions underlying our sense of self. Caught in the trap of having a self governed by negative and positive emotions, indeed composed of these very emotions, we seek forgiveness when we should in fact be attempting to "put an end to the very need to be forgiven."²² An enormous task, one might think, but not so; there is a way out of the dilemma and it has to do with swapping "belief" for "seeing."

But there's work to be done. Contemplatives scan the continuum of being looking for the still point, and on finding it they focus their gaze on it and allow it to pull them into ever greater stillness, a stillness that eventually turns into a *standstill*. This is how Roberts describes the process, and she adds: "In this way, the still point acts as the greatest inhibitor of the affective continuum... it gradually immobilizes all movement along the continuum."²³ And she delivers a warning to those who, because of devotional proclivity, ruin the experience of stillness and possible standstill because of emotion. Referring to this as "affective overflow," she suggests concentrating on the still point alone, and that, I imagine, means ignoring affective identification with Jesus.

The language she uses is of interest here, for her choice of words reveals not just a methodology but a system of comprehension that helps further refine the methodology described. For instance, she refers to the still point as an "unlocalized spot" within ourselves where we have the chance to run into God.

And then she cracks the cosmic code by saying that this unlocalized spot is at the *center of the affective continuum*. So in effect our affective system is not only that which underpins our sense of being a self, it is also that through which we can transcend self. That is what having no-self means in raw terms; it means going beyond the limitations of both our seesawing emotions and our reactive minds. *Feeling* our way to the heart of our affective system through deep-end evaluative feeling, we encounter a stillness of such intensity that it causes the affective system to collapse in on itself.

Reflexive Mind

The sheer volume of detail on the transcendent state makes Bernadette Roberts' books impressive: she does not hold back on what she knows, and she knows a lot. Well aware that she is on a slippery slope as far as orthodox Catholicism is concerned, she does not resort to camouflaging her material; she chooses instead to speak with the authority one would expect from someone who has gone beyond the limitations of the affective life. In *The Experience of No-Self*, and in *The Path to No-Self*, she describes her experience of ego-transcendence and explains with facility that it doesn't matter whether our reactions are positive or negative, for in the world of reflexive (reactive) mind the one can so easily become the other that their apparent exclusiveness is often no more than an illusion.

Describing reflexive mind as at best "a temporary mechanism for developing a certain type of intelligence, an intelligence we must eventually learn to live without,"²⁴ Roberts focuses in on an important question: If the affective life falls away completely, what happens to positive emotions like charity, sympathy, compassion and love? The answer she supplies is that for those who make the journey beyond emotion and feeling the need to practice virtue vanishes – virtue remains, but it is a natural state of being arising out of emotional neutrality. This suggests that our normal, affective-governed state of consciousness is not as "normal" as we think it is. A necessary stage in our evolutionary growth it may be, but it is in fact a quite dangerous stage of growth where love and hate, compassion and cruelty are only a few pulse beats away from one another.

Having been informed that the falling away of the affective system invariably signaled a psychotic condition, Roberts points out that it is the affective system that actually causes psychological illness, and that it is this same system that underpins all human suffering. Contrary to what might be expected, the experience of having no-self, and therefore no affective system, is not an inhuman or insensitive state, but rather a highly sensitive and responsive state due to the fact that the cognitive faculty is intact and beyond emotional bias. Unhitched from the affective system, the cognitive system functions in a new way; that is, it remains continuously awake in and to the present moment, so stripping compassion of self-

interest and love of ego-clutching. The affective self, on the other hand, linked as it is to a feeling of personal being, cannot escape from its drives, motivations, values and goals. And as these components of the self automatically give rise to memories, desires and expectations, and these in turn fan out into perception and thought, our feelings of contentment, peace, boredom, tiredness or loneliness are virtually unavoidable.²⁵ Swayed by what is happening around us, and in us, we succumb to the slightest change in our emotionally charged natures.

Meister Eckhart

What remains when the affective nature is stilled raises serious moral and philosophical questions. Bernadette Roberts enlists the help of Meister Eckhart, the 13th century German mystic as “one who has made the journey and crossed over,”²⁷ This is an important fix in terms of the quality of her contemplative life, for it challenges both the novice and the expert to reconsider what Eckhart was at pains to say in relation to the self. Noting that the Spanish mystics brought their contemplative experiences into line with the mystical speculations of Thomas Aquinas, Roberts reminds us that this famous German was, by contrast, considered outspoken to the point of censure. Speaking of man’s essential oneness with God, Eckhart incurred the wrath of the inquisitors. And all because, in essence, this penetrated the truth of being and moved beyond speculative theology. Eloquent where the great churchman Thomas Aquinas was silent, Eckhart revealed what some theologians considered to be theologically improper, that each of us is essentially, and not just accidentally, capable of union with God.²⁶

In essence, this is Eckhart’s answer to the question: Was Jesus literally God or not? If essentially one with God as a result of his contemplative explorations into God, then Jesus was God in that he eventually shed his nature in favor of God’s nature. “I and the father are one,” as a statement, inadvertently set the course of theological exposition in the wrong direction, but it was never meant to mislead. And so the mystery of “incarnation” surfaced, and the question of Jesus’ identity hardened into the view that he had always been God. Yes, union with God was possible in terms of the affective life brought to the correct contemplative pitch through dark nights of the soul, bliss and ecstasy; but union in terms of identity for ordinary people was considered a spiritual impertinence. Roberts breaks with this tradition and says, “These are two different experiences: union before the breakthrough, identity after the breakthrough.”²⁷

Meister Eckhart was pulled up on a heresy charge for preaching all of what he knew to the people, so allowing them to intuit that dogma could be transcended. But he was a wily old fox, for not only did he transcend the limitations of theology, he also made himself impregnable to the accusation of error. Intellectually overpowering those who thought him suspect, he opened their eyes

to the fact that even language has a transcendent dimension. And so, in one of his fragments he says that God is love because he is above love and affection,²⁸ and in another that pious practice is never so perfect that it cannot become an obstacle to spirituality.²⁹ This is another way of saying that God has no affective center, and as such is identical to the self of a human being within whom the affective center has ceased to operate.

Loss of the Infantile God

Theology is an attempt to make sense of God and his wishes; it is an attempt to fathom the divine mind. Content to accept the theoretical framework built around God by theologians, most Christians remain oblivious to the fact that such constructs are often based on a distorted reading of historical events. Theology has of course existed side by side with profound religious experience for many centuries, and often resides in the same person as a determining impetus towards having such experiences; but theology should not be thought of as ultimately capable of explaining or encompassing such experiences. As a mode of interpretation allied to preconceived doctrines, theology is expressive of a grand network of religious ideas wedded to history and culture, but it remains forever outside of its capacity to fully explain mystical illumination and union. Why? Because any system of religious ideas built upon elements of historical distortion must, by its very nature, calibrate the mind towards serious difficulty. Such an outlook may carry the naive believer some distance, but in the end there is no escaping the repercussions of ideas that limit rather than expand our spiritual horizons. Too great a certainty in relation to inelastic doctrines and the kind of history that backgrounds them gets between us and ultimate reality. It is for this very reason that most Christians never get anywhere near the mystical level – their idea of Jesus and God and life is simply immature; it has remained at the infantile level of hallowed fairy tales.

The historian of religion Karen Armstrong touches on this when she admits that the God she grew up with belonged to her childhood, and remained quite undeveloped. This God did not keep abreast of her growing knowledge in other disciplines. In spite of having been a nun for years, she had never as much as glimpsed the God described by the mystics. Why? Because it was Jesus who was talked about, not God. Considering herself a failure because she had no contact with a source beyond herself, she was eventually driven to ask how anyone could know for certain that Jesus was God. She puts the whole business into sharp relief when she says, “Did the New Testament really teach the elaborate – and highly contradictory – doctrine of the Trinity or was this, like so many other articles of the faith, a fabrication by theologians centuries after the death of Christ in Jerusalem?”³⁰ Facing reality through the tension created by this fundamental question, her eyes were opened to the possibilities inherent in mystical

transcendence.

The problem here is that our conception of God can remain at the infantile level without our realizing it, and that suggests that loss of this God, hard as it may seem, is probably the best thing that could happen to us. Some people wake up automatically to the fact that their God is infantile; most do not. Some people notice out of the corner of their eye that Jesus has usurped God; most remain blissfully unaware that they have substituted a human being for God. Others are aware that they have lost all sense of God, but may not be aware that the reason for this loss is their conscious or unconscious rejection of Jesus as a divine substitute. In losing Jesus, they lose God as well, just as those who have *too much* Jesus lose God for exactly the opposite reason. Loss of God is noticeable in the first instance because of the emptiness felt, and in the second overlooked because that emptiness has taken on an emotional (affective) overlay that clouds the senses. Whatever we think God might be, he is forever fluctuating as an experience, and for a great many may well have been snuffed out altogether.

Exploding the Mystery of Christ

The nature of Truth is that it does not stop; it has no beginning and it has no end. This places religion, *all* religion, at the disposal of Truth, but does not mean that religion, whatever its makeup, is in itself Truth in final form. There is simply no religion big enough to hold Truth in its entirety (or any philosophy for that matter); it exists *beyond* our Truth stories. As Roberts intimates in *What is Self?*, a study of the spiritual journey in terms of consciousness, “the revelation and mystery of Christ has (to be) exploded to reveal and include all Truth.”³¹ This is not to suggest that *all* Truth can ever be revealed; it is to direct her readers to the fact that truth filtered through the human mind can always be superseded. Our truths, however big, have to be exploded; they have to be understood always as interim truths on the road to our *becoming* Truth. “Believing” is *not* “becoming”; it is merely a stage in our spiritual growth, a stage dependent on the *size of the gap* that lies between us and God as Ultimate Reality, or Truth.³² Or, as James Hillman so accurately put it at 5.1, we have to see things *in* depth and *as* depth. The only thing we can say about Truth *as* depth is that it goes ever deeper. Our Truth claims may be useful, but they do not in any final sense exhaust Truth. To believe that they do is to be caught in a state of spiritual stasis. All very well, you might say, but is this woman to be trusted? Is she in her right mind to claim that she has gone beyond her mind and her emotions?

A discovery I made when preparing this essay was that the philosopher Jacob Needleman (see my essay 'The Enigmatic Father Sylvan' this site) had interviewed Father Thomas Keating when preparing to write his book *Lost Christianity*, and that this same priest had written a supportive review for *The Experience of No-*

Self by Bernadette Roberts. Keating's review left no one in doubt as to the book's qualities.

One of the most significant spiritual books of our day. One of the best books on this subject since St. John of the Cross. An amazing book, it clarifies the higher regions of the spiritual path.

St. Joseph's Abbey in Massachusetts is where Needleman interviewed Father Keating, and his description of what he found there resonates closely with the spiritual overview of both Bernadette Roberts and Father Sylvan (see my essay 'The Enigmatic Father Sylvan' this site). There is a distinct sense of connection between these characters, and it is a connection that reverberates in their carefully chosen words and statements. And as Father Keating later moved to St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, and in the acknowledgments to *What is Self?* Bernadette Roberts speaks of sharing in the monastic life of this particular community, I think we can assume ongoing contact.

According to a lecture given by Father Keating during Needleman's stay at St. Joseph's, the plight of Christians today is that they have been robbed of the art of contemplative prayer. This was due to a movement away from prayer as *an act of listening* at the end of the Middle Ages, to that of prayer as a conscious self-disciplining of the ego. A general decadence in morals and spirituality had set in, and this change in emphasis was designed to combat the deterioration in standards.³³ And so the Church's traditional teaching faded and was replaced with "serving God" rather than "experiencing God", and the *lectio divina* (the capacity to listen at ever deeper levels) disappeared to the back of the Christian mind where it became not only suspect, but was even considered *unholy*. In Keating's view, losing this art cut Christians off from their own depths; they were left stranded in upperworld thinking where outer action and analytical thought, strengthened by Renaissance attitudes, came to dominate human behavior. Individual spiritual experience was out, rote religious expression and scientific exactness was in. Applying the analytical faculty to the spiritual life, and to prayer, the "art of listening" was progressively replaced with the highly organized, speculative thinking of the theological schools.

Jacob Needleman records Father Keating's lecture matter-of-factly, then in an aside draws our attention to Evagrius Ponticus, a 4th century spiritual master officially condemned by the Church for his views about Christ's nature. Influenced by Clement of Alexandria and by Origen (also condemned), Evagrius introduced the term *apatheia* to his pupils, and although usually translated as "apathy", this term is, for Needleman, better served when translated as "without emotions" or as *freedom from emotion*. Also termed an intermediate state of the soul, or bridge, *apatheia* as freedom from emotions becomes for Evagrius a

decisive turning point for the Christian.³⁴ And so we are introduced to a grocery list of evils to be avoided: passionate thoughts, gluttony, impurity, avarice, sadness, anger, vainglory, pride, and even the desire to give up. Then, suddenly, like a slap on the face, we are directed to something that leaps beyond the usual Christian attitude to such weaknesses: the fact that the arising of those weaknesses in our nature can be cancelled out, not in struggling to stop them arising, but in not allowing them to *linger on and take root after they have arisen*. Ordinary as this may sound, it is in fact a lightning-strike realization that offers us the key to bringing our low-level responses under effective control. How? By waking up to the fact that the *impulse towards weakness is not yet an emotion*, and as such has not sufficient energy to overpower us. Disturbing thoughts, ambitions and desires frequently arise in the mind, but they can be avoided if we are regularly present rather than absent to ourselves. We may not have a beeper to remind us to wake up, but with a little practice in self-presencing we can intercept and cancel out many of those weaker moments *as they arise*.

Christianity's problem since *listening ever more deeply* to our own depths was exchanged for trying to *consciously discipline ourselves as an act of will* has been just that, an exchange that has cost us our capacity for sustained spiritual growth. And prayers directed at the ceiling don't really help; if anything they must convince more quickly than anything that trying to shake off emotionally-charged reactions once they've taken root entirely misses the point, the point being that human nature isn't changed through asking for it to be changed, or by morally gritting our teeth in the face of our own weakness, but by piercing down into the depths where the tangled roots of our natures lie fully exposed. We have a vital part to play in this process, but it has nothing to do with being "good" in the sense of morally correct behavior. It has to do with opening ourselves up to forces within psyche that may have an unsuspected evolutionary base. If Bernadette Roberts and Father Sylvan are at all correct in their descriptions of how inner reality works, then we may have to redraw our whole map of what it means to be a human being.

References and Notes:

- 1) Roberts, Bernadette, *The Experience of No-Self*, Shambhala, Boston, 1984, p 32.
- 2) Ibid, p 107.
- 3) Ibid, p 181. At this point Roberts reveals herself to have experienced something beyond "fusion of opposites" and what she terms "the maintenance of a balance between the poles of difference and variation." The first part of this statement clearly differentiates what she has experienced from fusion experiences in the sense of *Participation Mystique*, and the second part helps define what is

actually going on when a contemplative moves into the contemplative space. As can be seen at 16.3 in relation to the researches of the psychologist Robert Forman, and the observations of P.D. Ouspensky, such a balancing act may well constitute the springboard from out of which the no-self experience evolves, and Roberts confirms this point. This is made clear on page 175 of *The Experience of No-self* when she says: “Supposing that the fulcrum on which the continuum rests is the cognitive system, we can see that the process of integration is a balancing act wherein the ultimate goal is maintaining an equilibrium against all to the contrary.” Optimum stability lies between the two systems; it is there that the contemplative gains maximum access to the still point. The balancing act is necessary, but it is superseded when the still point is penetrated.

4) Ibid, p 116. This is an interesting observation. It suggests that Jesus had to do exactly what we in our own age are now trying to do in relation to Jesus himself: detect an underlying truth in Christianity that has become scrambled almost beyond recognition.

5) Ibid.

6) Ibid, p 112.

7) Ibid, p 104.

8) Ibid, p 61.

9) Ibid, p 174.

10) Ibid, p 173. Experiences of ecstasy and bliss may preface an eventual falling away of the self as Roberts describes, but if they continue, and intensify, they will most likely form a regression to the infantile state. In the first instance the self “falls away”, in the second it disintegrates due to emotional intoxication.

11) Ibid, p 175.

12) Ibid, p 131.

13) Ibid.

14) Ibid, p 181.

15) Ibid, p 106.

16) Ibid, p 119.

17) Ibid, p130-131.

18) Ibid, p 130.

19) Ibid.

20) Ibid, p 170. This is perhaps one of the most important observations made by Roberts concerning the nature of the self and the role of emotion. We do not *have* an affective life, she tells us, we *are* an affective life. Our feeling of separateness and interiority is *the effect of the entire affective network of the body registered cognitively*. True? Untrue? Father Sylvan seems to agree when he says, “Ego is the systematic affirmation of emotional reaction.” (*Lost Christianity* p 191). The psychologist Jaak Panksepp (see 11.2) helps confirm this point when he says: “Every moment of our conscious lives is under-girded by feelings, and... if the biological infrastructure of those intrinsic value-signaling systems were destroyed, one’s sense of self would degrade.”

21) Ibid, p133. Christianity fully understands this point but has lost track of it. Putting an end to our “need to be forgiven” is perhaps our next greatest challenge.

22) Ibid.

23) Ibid, p 176. What a mysterious thing this “still point” is. Where is it? What is it? How do I find it? And what do I do when I do find it? Answer (1) It is the point where you become utterly still within yourself, and wait. (2) It is the point between *this* and *that*. (3) One does absolutely nothing.

24) Ibid, p 182. It is through an examination of the type of intelligence we have that we come to realize the nature of our problem. We are at the mercy of a cognitive system that can’t stop doing what it is biologically predisposed to do: register the world through the senses and cause us to respond in such a manner as to safeguard ourselves as the perceiver. This system does not rest; it is constantly online.

25) Ibid, p 180.

26) Ibid, p 200.

27) Ibid. This is a contentious issue; it is a mixture of bad theology and distorted history that confounds attempts to unravel it. Suffice to say that if the history of the 1st-century is disentangled from its later theological overlay the character and intentions of the man Jesus fall into a quite different configuration.

28) Eckhart, Meister, *A Modern Translation* by Raymond B. Blakney, Harper &

Brothers, Publishers, New York, 1957, p 248.

29) Ibid, p 252. Here again is confirmation of Bernadette Roberts' contention that self and the affective system are one and the same. God, Eckhart tells us, has no affective center, so if the affective center of a human being is brought to a "standstill", to use Roberts' term, then there is in essence no difference between the one and the other. This of course suggests that God as a "being" is a mistaken concept. God is not some kind of super being beyond human conception; he is rather the equivalent of "being" or "is-ness" in the ontological sense. Hence the contemplative's journey into the center of "being", a journey that carries him/her firstly into a confrontation with the limited self and its emotionally based reactions, then towards the still point of being, then through the still point into a direct apprehension of being (is-ness) and the true nature of identity.

30) Armstrong, Karen, *History of God*, Mandarin, 1994, p 256.

31) Roberts, Bernadette, *What is Self?*, (as above) p 127. Christians need not be alarmed at the idea of Christ being exploded. What we're dealing with here is a metaphor. It is our limited idea of truth that has to be exploded. What the conscious mind has built around Jesus must by its very nature be limited and misleading, so we have to make a descent into the self, into being, into our heart of hearts (the still point) to touch upon what he himself touched upon. This is what Father Sylvan means when he directs us to chase Christ out of our minds.

32) Ibid, p 126.

33) Needleman, Jacob, *Lost Christianity*, Element Books, Wiltshire 1990, p 129.

34) Ibid, p 137.