

# **‘Mountains and Mountaineering: their Spiritual Significance’**

**The Revd Philip Parker**

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## **Mountains or mountaineering?**

It may be controversial to claim that mountaineering has a religious significance, but that mountains do is universally recognised. Their visual form makes them natural symbols of religious aspiration. *‘I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help’* (1), sings the **Psalmist**. More than any other natural phenomenon, mountains suggest the soaring of the human spirit and its expansion into new worlds. *‘It was no accident’*, claims **Arnold Lunn**, mountaineer, skier and religious thinker, *‘that the Gothic revival coincided with the new-found enthusiasm for mountain scenery. The trite comparison between a Gothic spire and an Alpine aiguilles is not so shallow as it seems...’* (2)

## **Holy mountains**

Holy mountains are to be found almost everywhere, from **Croagh Patrick** in Ireland to **Machapuchare** in Nepal. But **Mt Kailas**, situated on the Indian/Tibetan border not far north of Gurla Mandata, is perhaps the single most important example. Hindu and Buddhist mythologies have long made use of a symbolic mountain, Mt Meru, whose rivers are said to provide the life-giving waters of the earth. Four rivers are needed, to water the four quarters of the globe. It is a remarkable fact that four of Asia’s great rivers – the Sutlej, the Bramaputra, the Indus and the Karnali – all rise in the region of Kailas, which has come to be regarded as the real-life Mt Meru.

## **Mountains symbolise a ‘way’**

Mountains have never stood for formal religion or for religious dogma so much as for **the challenge of the individual’s spiritual development**. In other words, they have stood for the esoteric tradition of spiritual evolution brought about by following a ‘way’. Much religious thought implies a belief in hierarchy, in good and evil, higher and lower, superior and inferior, and it is an obvious step to represent such spiritual differences by differences in altitude. Different parts of the mountain

stand for different stages of development (exactly the same symbolism is found in Hindu and Buddhist temple architecture), the summit itself representing the goal, enlightenment, at which all aspects of the spiritual search converge.

This symbolism has been discussed by Marco Pallis, an active explorer and climber of the 1930s who was also a religious scholar. His book, *Peaks and Lamas*, recounts expeditions to the Gangotri and Kailas regions of India, Sikkim and Ladakh; the Gangotri, is of religious significance as the source of the Ganges. But it is Pallis's subsequent book, *The Way and the Mountain*, which discusses the symbolism both of the summit and of the route to it, which is of greater interest here.

The image is as follows: Any mountain possesses many routes, each starting from a different place and each having a different character and set of problems. Clearly, no-one can follow them all. But that is not important. The important thing is to reach the top, and to do that one must choose a way; *one must make a commitment*. One must also have faith that the summit actually exists; it may not be visible at all at the beginning of the climb. Pallis argues that in all these ways the mountain is an excellent symbol of the spiritual challenge facing man. He is not arguing that actually climbing mountains is a spiritual progress, but that the route to the top is a symbol of such a thing.

### **Mountaineering – spiritual?**

But though we may doubt the religious significance of **Hilary on Everest** or **Bonington on Annapurna**, mountaineering in the wider sense certainly *can* have religious significance, although not all mountaineers would agree – cf Joe Simpson in *Touching the Void*.

### **Mountain pilgrimages**

For centuries mountains have formed the goal of religious pilgrimages and a pilgrimage is a physical activity, not a work of imagination.

**Croagh Patrick** attracts many thousands of people every year, who climb to the summit, many of them barefoot, on the last Sunday of July. The difficulties to be faced on a pilgrimage to **Kailas** are considerably greater; hunger, passes blocked by snow, swollen rivers, bandits. To make it even harder the most devout proceed by performing *parikrama* –

a technique of self-abasement and humility involving prostrating oneself on the ground repeatedly for the whole duration of the journey. On Kailas it takes 15-20 days to get round the mountain in this way, compared to a normal walking time of 2-3 days. Judged from the state of mind in which religious pilgrimages are meant to be made, that extra two or three weeks is not wasted time, whilst attempting to complete the course in a single day, a feat known as *Chhokar*, is to be deplored. Practitioners of *Chhokar* are liable to find themselves dubbed *Khi-koor*, 'he who runs round like a dog'; clearly not complimentary.

Historically, harsh discipline and even the threat of death have often been regarded as central to pilgrimage. The Buddhist scholar **John Snelling** has pointed out that pilgrims were often dangled head downwards over precipices and left to die if they lagged behind. '*Clearly, the ultimate fears need to be invoked in order to bring about that pitch of seriousness that spiritual change requires.*' (3)

(Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Alan Bennett and Jonathan Miller famously poked fun at the concept of the mountain pilgrimage in their **Beyond the Fringe** sketch *The End of the World*: action!)

Religious pilgrimages still take place, though rarely with the sort of stringency once adopted as a matter of course. The modern 'pilgrim' is the western tourist; and can tourism ever be a serious religious affair? In *The Sacred Mountain* Snelling describes following the trek to Everest Base Camp in the early 1970s. This was a modest enough undertaking, but Snelling feels it had religious significance for him. There were a number of well-defined stages:

- The seemingly endless crossing of **forested valleys and ridges** before one gets into the valley of the Dudh Kosi;
- The **Khumbu area** of the Sherpa people, and their main village, Namche Bazaar;
- And finally the high moraines of **Base Camp** from which the successful trekker can gaze up at the mountain – '*as solid and imperturbable as a great sage in deep meditation*'. (4)

Snelling believes that it was exerting an attraction on him even during the walk's worst moments, and he was affected by the hardships, the

effort that had to be made, and the dangers. He got lost in the mist in the upper Khumbu, became rather frightened, and went to bed in a yak-herder's hut full of confused feelings and remorse at having *'trespassed upon the preserve of the gods'*.

It is easy to sneer at this little adventure and dismiss parallels between Snelling's three week holiday and the religious quest as fanciful and absurd. But mountain symbolism, when experienced in the flesh, is affecting. Trekking in the mountains can certainly lift the human spirit; who is say it cannot teach religious truths?

### **Lessons learned: acceptance and humility**

Thirty years ago the Everest trek was already becoming overcrowded and at about the time that Snelling was walking there the American writer Peter Matthiessen was making far more remote journeys in areas of Nepal further west, where he was overtaken by that sense of vision which empty mountains inspire. His record of the expedition, ***The Snow Leopard***, is deeply religious in tone. What does this mean? That mountains convey a sense of reality behind ordinary existence, and that we are normally 'asleep' to the fundamental things in life; but also that there are things greater than ourselves and that life requires the discipline of **humility**.

Mountains can humble us by making life dangerous. This is not something that is usually associated with walking, but Matthiessen's expedition is of the small, shoestring variety and is far from the tourist trail; under these circumstances *'...the penalty for error makes me mindful as I walk among these mountains, heeding the echo of my steps on the frozen earth.'* (5)

The root of Matthiessen's experiences, which are only half-communicable, an exploration of the inner mind, is that **mountains teach acceptance**. Some time before the expedition began he had lost his wife from cancer, and his need to learn acceptance – of his wife's death, of everything – becomes symbolised by the leopard. The Snow Leopard; what is that? A rare Himalayan cat which few have seen or a symbol? Well both, but also a lesson in acceptance. Matthiessen's book carries a drawing of this rarest of animals on the front cover, but in three months he failed to catch even a glimpse of one. Only the mountains

and the old Lama of Shey Gompa who inhabits them can teach him wisdom; the acceptance of *what is*.

*Have you seen the snow leopard?  
No! Isn't that wonderful? (6)*

Not succeeding, which to us is failure, can only seem wonderful with a change of outlook. That can happen if one escapes the tyranny of passing time for a moment and feels instead that eternity is not in passing time but at right angles to it. (That is the significance of Bourdillon's 'moments', of Raymond Greene's *Moments of Being*, of Life is Now!) The Buddhist traditions in which Matthiessen takes such an interest are forever telling him it is so but the Himalaya makes him feel it too. In such moments the transient is eternal and so its terror overcome. And unless we succeed in transcending that terror we will be back to Tom Lyon's fear, life as '*a desperate caricature of fear and grasping*', in which, '*having in effect lost the whole world, nothing less than the whole world would suffice for security.*' (7)

### **Lessons learnt: inspiration and comfort**

Whether we are walking or climbing, mountains both **comfort and inspire us**. We are affected – uplifted – by them, and we firmly believe the effect to be a good one, though we cannot explain why. As the mountaineer and writer **RLG Irving** put it, we have the conviction '*that in simply being among mountains and exercising our physical energies and our faculties of appreciation upon them we are moving along a road whose ultimate end is good.*' (8) And however objectionable it may be to our rational side, many would echo these words of **Leslie Stephen**:

*If I were to invent a new idolatry... I should prostrate myself, not before beast, or ocean, or sun, but before one of those gigantic masses to which, in spite of all reason, it is impossible not to attribute some shadowy personality. (9)*

Stephen is responding as human beings have so often responded: with animism (to attribute a soul to inanimate objects). He wasn't a pantheist (the belief that God is identifiable with the forces of nature and natural substances), but he felt more emotional reaction to high places than could reasonably be attached to mere lumps of stone.

Born in 1832, **Leslie Stephen**, tall and thin and forever smoking a pipe, was an important Victorian figure. There were early concerns for his health, which remained poor until he went to Cambridge where he took a degree in Maths. He became a don and took holy orders, the academic life and a cleric's collar being more closely tied than they are today, but eventually resigned his Fellowship because of religious doubts. He moved to London and began a distinguished career as a critic, editor and essayist. As editor of the *Cornhill* magazine he was influential in encouraging Robert Louis Stephenson, Thomas Hardy and Henry James amongst others. His daughter was the novelist Virginia Woolf. He founded the *Dictionary of National Biography* and was its first editor.

But Stephen was also a leading light in the 'Golden Age' of Alpine climbing, perhaps the leading light. His record is certainly superior to Whymper's, and in the 1860s and '70s he crossed key alpine passes and made first ascents of several major peaks, particularly in Switzerland. The finest were the Schreckhorn – '*was there not some infinitesimal niche in history to be occupied by its successful assailant?*' (10) – and the **Bietschorn**, one of the difficult high peaks in the Alps. Finally, in the *Playground of Europe* Stephen was to produce one of mountaineering's finest literary expressions.

Stephen's abandonment of his Fellowship and holy orders was a rejection of orthodox theology and the church, not an abandonment of religion. Being a man of religious temperament, he could never 'abandon' religion. But he did come to believe that religious seriousness and religious dogma were not the same thing. Failing to find spiritual satisfaction in the church of his day, he looked instead to mountains, and in this respect was no different from thousands of others before and since. On the other hand, the intellectual difficulties this created for him were considerable for a man of his background, and more worrying than we can easily appreciate today.

Stephen stands for religious experience, and though he wrote about them supremely well, he did not find the great 'moments' of mountain experience any more easy than anyone else. We might be tempted to think of the Alps in Stephen's day as virtually empty and therefore ideal

for his purposes, but in his view they were already becoming too crowded and noisy, and in his later years he turned his thoughts increasingly to winter, when the whole region *'becomes part of a dreamland and access might be attained to those lofty reveries in which the true mystic imagines time to be annihilated, and rises into beatific visions untroubled by the accidental and the temporary'*. (11)

### **Objections to mountaineering's spiritual significance**

(1) The English are often accused of being most **reticent about the most important subjects** – sex, politics, religion – and that was certainly true of many Victorians. The idea that mountaineering has a religious significance has never found easy acceptance among English writers and many of the mountaineers who have gone into print have carefully avoided any direct reference to religion or religious experience. Yet their books show them to have been concerned with the great questions of time, reality and intense living which are fundamentally religious questions. This was true of Stephen; it was also true, I think, of men like **Shipton and Tilman**. Theirs was a private search certainly, but then serious religious thought has never been much impressed by public relations. And this contributes to the unease with which mountaineering has traditionally looked on publicity and popularisation, as well as on any overtly religious interpretation.

(2) Another problem, perhaps, is that religion suggests altogether **too much seriousness**, even fanaticism. When people object to a religious interpretation of mountaineering it may be this that they are really objecting to. 'Mountaineering isn't a religion!' they say, meaning: 'it's only a pastime; don't take it so seriously.'

Still, this can be misleading. There is a persistent belief that British mountaineering has been moulded by gentlemen, who were gentlemen because they refused to take things too seriously. But this is nonsense. It is true that there is a long and important tradition of eccentric amateurism, but it is wrong to think that this ever excluded seriousness. In reality mountaineering has always been taken seriously, even fanatically, by the British as much as by anyone else, and the real objection has not been against seriousness but professionalism and narrowness – different things altogether.

(3) A third objection is against **looseness of thought in a theological sense**. Mountain mysticism is a widely-felt emotion, much expressed in mountaineering literature, but a mountain is presumably an inanimate object, whereas mysticism implies communion with an active power to which, of course, one then gives the name God. On this view, a mountain might conceivably be a symbol of God's power – it might be a Cathedral – but it is not, and can never be, God himself.

Leslie Stephen has often been accused of mistaking the altar for the deity. But Stephen was happy to admit the fault. To him, making distinctions between God, his symbol, and objects which encourage spiritual sensations, was not the important thing. What was important was not analysis but experience. The mountaineer who talks about religion is simply trying to express his feelings; he is talking in a tradition which tries to make religion human, not something for clever theological argument. Stephen knew only too well the intellectual argument against 'mountain mysticism', but was determined not to let arguments spoil his experience.

### **The visionary power of mountains**

Most mountaineers are existentialists by temperament. Consider, for example, the visionary power of mountains. Discounting trivial meanings of the word – unreal, vague, fantastic – we are left with the serious meaning: 'that there is another reality' behind this superficial work-a-day world, that the 'windows' of perception are occasionally opened to us, and that in such rare moments we see.

Now, that mountaineering can produce true visionary experience is not in doubt. It is only their interpretation which causes discussion. So whilst **WH Murray** seems to interpret 'another reality' literally and writes:

*I came down from the summit filled with the acute awareness of an imminent revelation lost... Something underlying the world we saw had been withheld. The very skies had trembled with presentiment of the last reality; and we had not been worthy. (12)*

for David Craig the new reality is all in the mind, and his reaction to Murray:

*'No, no, no,' I want to say to him. 'You had been worthy of the mountains, by being up there at all. No world was withheld; all there was to see, you saw.'* (13)

Or as Victor Saunders expressed it more recently: *There is no pot of gold, only the rainbow.* (14)

But in answer to all this the reaction of most mountaineers is likely to be: does it matter? The value of mountaineering springs not from interpretation but from first-hand experience of the new and the unchanging. When McGlashan, a psychiatrist, calls his book *The Savage and Beautiful Country* he means the human mind. When Aldous Huxley refers to '*darkest Africas... unmapped Borneos and Amazonian Basins*' (15) he too means the human mind.' But when Arnold Lunn, a mountaineer, speaks of *The Undiscovered Country* we cannot be sure whether he means the human mind or the outside world, but suspect that he means both. And this is the faith that all mountaineers share and that all analysis must eventually return to: that action and imagination are connected; that the undiscovered country of the mountains gives access to the undiscovered country of the mind.

### **Religious interpretation of mountain experience**

A religious interpretation of mountain experience is encouraged by a change in the climate of western religious thought. It is often claimed that this change consists of a move away from our own Christian traditions towards a greater sympathy with the East, and there is certainly a great contemporary interest in eastern thought, not least among mountaineers. **Doug Scott** is a well-known example.

It is also true that the mountain form and mountain pilgrimage is more securely rooted in the religious symbolism of the east than it is in Christianity. But the important distinction is not between East and West, but between the conviction that God has revealed himself in history and that he does so in our own individual experience through the natural world.

Or, to put it simplistically, which comes first: the theology or the experience? Traditionally it has been the theology – otherwise how could there be some sort of consensus and agreement? But nineteenth century writer, **William James** in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and more recently **Don Cupitt** in *The Sea of Faith*, would argue that the religious experience of the individual comes first and the theology follows it.

Theology becomes the creative act of each individual, a personal code which, as Cupitt freely admits, may be perilously close to a secular, as opposed to a religious, humanism.

*Religion is to theology as the performed symphony is to the musical score; a musical notation is doubtless a very clever invention and a most useful thing, but the score is after all only a set of instructions for performing music. (16)*

The music is the important thing. So too in religion, religious experience is what matters and dogmas, laws, rituals and rites are merely to get you there, he argues.

Many mountaineers take the same view. Experience and how to obtain it is more important than trying to express it or explain it. In mountaineering either you reflect on nature or nature provides the sort of horrifying experience that forces the mind awake and **makes** you think. But in both cases, the mountain becomes a god. For, just as God is both gentle and terrifying, so too can be the mountains.

We are more likely to be sympathetic to the ‘mystical’ mountain writer if we realise that these key experiences are probably impossible to express accurately in words, and the writer’s intention is simply to remind us that they exist. It is man reaching for the moon, and no-one can do that unflinchingly. The great are those who manage it at all.

What is important in mountain writing is not to conform to a given style but to convey one’s experiences and emotions to the reader, and few would dispute the claim that the experiences and emotions that mountaineering provides are often religious in kind. What is a mistake, however, is then to build explicit intellectual beliefs around them on the

basis of sentiment. For example, it is all too easy to allow a feeling of ‘oneness with the surroundings’ – a genuine experience – to develop into the view that the natural world is innocent, more specifically that those who live close to nature are innocent.

Part of the problem is that the West’s Romanticism is not primarily religious; it is primarily an intellectual movement and a movement in art, separate from a robust theology of the natural world. The inevitable result is that the love of mountains begets all sorts of vague mystical philosophies with notions of pantheism and nature worship, rather than a serious mountain theology.

Eastern thought would seem to be more developed in this respect, with formidable philosophies of man’s place in nature existing for thousands of years. Here, the picturesque and the sublime are deep in religious thought about man, his nature, and his place in the world, whereas in the West our delight in picture postcard scenery is liable to be only an aesthetic and as a result perilously shallow.

And mountaineering literature reflects these difficulties. There is plenty of religious feeling in it but it is vague and it is difficult to know what it means. We hardly have the language for it; we certainly don’t have an agreed approach.

### **Francis Edward Younghusband**

Both the truths and the pitfalls of a religious interpretation of the mountains and mountaineering are illuminated for us by **Sir Francis Edward Younghusband**, soldier and Himalayan explorer.

After a full life spanning the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, that included daring journeys through Central Asia, political appointments in Tibet and India and the chairmanship of both the RGS and the Mount Everest Committee, he became completely absorbed in a vocation that was to grip him for the remainder of his life. This was nothing less than the attempt to understand the spiritual dimension of the human condition, to recognise it in all the religions of mankind, however diverse, and to encourage the world to follow his example and work for universal love and understanding.

There is no doubt that Younghusband's experiences of Tibet and of Asia generally affected him deeply. Alone on the mountain after signing his treaty with the Tibetans, he felt buoyed up on a wave of elation which would do very well as an example of one of Boudillon's 'moments':

*I felt in touch with the flaming heart of the world. What was glowing in all Creation and in every single human being was a joy as far beyond mere goodness as the light of the sun is beyond the glow of a candle. Never again could I think evil. Never again could I bear enmity... (17)*

These experiences could have been recorded by any number of modern mountaineers – Joe Tasker, for example, who died in 1982 just below the summit of Everest attempting the unclimbed NE ridge with Pete Boardman. The rewards the mountains offer have not changed in the slightest. But with Younghusband the exhilaration is allowed to become something more, to become an intellectual position about the world rather than a purely emotional reaction, and to feed a growing belief that all peoples can understand each other and come together whilst maintaining the integrity of their own particular faiths.

But Joe Tasker would never have fallen for that! In the World Council of Faiths which he founded in the 1930s, Younghusband aimed to bring together not just different Christian denominations but all religious systems. 'The man', wrote one of his obituarists, 'was greater than his message.' Perhaps; or the message was greater than the men?

Younghusband wrote some 30 works of religious philosophy, and time and again he used not only mountains but mountaineering itself as a symbol of the spiritual quest, and the way he did so is both interesting and questionable.

He writes in the 'Forward' to Frank Smythe's *Kamet Conquered*,  
*The struggle of man with the mountains continues apace. Man reels back again and again. But again and again he returns to the onslaught.*

This is typical Younghusband prose. But he ends the same introduction,

*We may be certain also that, in pitting himself against the mountain, man will himself have added to his stature and be better able for loftier living.*

This is a major claim, and it is what makes a consideration of Younghusband important.

What evidence is there that mountaineering makes man 'better able for loftier living'? The primitive life-style which Younghusband knew so well from his travels was forever pitting itself against mountains, and he believed it had value. Probably we would agree. But when Younghusband talked about pitting oneself against the mountain he meant that mountaineering *as a pastime* added to man's stature and improved his spiritual possibilities. He did not mean native peoples living among the mountains, but Westerners coming from the other side of the world. This is why in his later years he was so vociferous and untiring in promoting attempts on Everest. From a position of influence in the committee room of the RGS, Younghusband wanted the mountain climbed, and he wrote confidently of the spiritual benefits to be derived from it. He had no doubts.

But the truth is that there is little time for spirituality at 28,000ft in a Norfolk jacket and tweeds, and many early Everesters, not just Mallory, had little time for Tibet. The situation is no different today. High-altitude climbers are often egocentric and narrow-minded individuals who behave abominably to each other and care for nothing but getting to the top. The spiritual pilgrimage argument begins to look rather thin.

Mountaineering and the spiritual quest were connected in Younghusband's mind in two ways:

1. In the first place, **mountaineering could be a symbol**, the physical challenge a metaphor, of the spiritual challenge facing us. As his biographer put it,

*The principle of bodily acclimatisation to high altitudes was the symbol of a far diviner principle: the acclimatisation of the human spirit to the realm of the eternal. (18)*

It is interesting to note here that throughout his involvement with Everest affairs Younghusband consistently supported a policy of slow physical acclimatisation as the key to climbing at altitude. He was not keen on the use of bottled oxygen, even when most of the mountaineering establishment supported it.

2. But secondly there was the **actual experiencing of mountains and mountaineering**, and here Younghusband's view that mountaineering is almost bound to be spiritually 'good' looks much more dubious. It gave rise to an equally shaky educational ideal. *The contemplation of any great mountain has an elevating influence upon a man* (19), he wrote. Well, sometimes. His conclusion? That efforts should be made to seek out the finest mountain views in the Himalaya and make them known to the general public.

Now, this is outdoor education with a vengeance, and outdoor education has never been an altogether happy business, because despite its high ideals and many fine achievements it also epitomises the aphorism that we destroy that which we most love. No-one has yet to discover how the mountains can be popularised without also being ruined; certainly Younghusband did not.

No doubt if we all went to the mountains with an enlightened attitude we would not destroy them as much as we do; but if we were not ignorant and foolish there would probably be no more need to go anyway. Lunn was surely right when he wrote that

*Though the individual mountaineer is entitled to claim that he is a better man than he would have been if he had never climbed, he should not imply that he is a better man than those who detest all forms of active and dangerous sport. Samuel Johnson was no ascetic. He disliked mountains and detested solitude, and was seldom happy outside the congenial atmosphere of London, but he was a better man than most mountaineers. (20)*

Everest: would climbing it degrade it in some way, destroy a symbol which was better left untouched? We often feel that way today about untouched areas of the world and such feelings have, perhaps, a spiritual

meaning. The religious temperament is appalled that in the modern world everything can be touched; nothing is sacred any more. People with a need for the sacred, often look to satisfy it in the mountains, but it is becoming a more and more difficult search.

Younghusband's view was rather different.

*The mountain now stands there proud and erect and unconquered. And the faint-hearted peoples around it fear to approach it. They have the capacity of body to reach the summit any year they liked. But they are lacking in spirit. All they attain to is painting of pictures depicting the fierce anger of gods repelling the English who dared to approach them. For all that the mountain is doomed. Man knows the worst about it. He knows exactly the way in which he can creep up it. He knows the extremes of frost and snow and tempest that defend it. But he knows also that the mountain remains stationary in capacity for defence while he is increasing in capacity to conquer. (21)*

Younghusband was perfectly happy that thousands of men and women had climbed Mt Blanc, and he saw no reason to feel differently about Everest. To Younghusband there simply wasn't a problem here. But I wonder if he would feel the same if he was alive today.

In claiming 'it doesn't matter' Younghusband was envisaging summit climbers not as *prima donnas* but as representatives of all mankind merely fulfilling what had been prepared by their predecessors. But this was naive. It is not his personal experiences one would quarrel with, but what he read into them. The mystic vision which came to him through mountaineering was 'living at lightening velocity' – a good phrase, as good as the 'intricacies of thought enough to fry the circuits of a computer' coined more recently by Greg Child. He was fascinated by scientists' and philosophers' speculations on the connection of diverse things, the all-pervasive influence of every object, 'cosmic consciousness.' Like the mystics, he saw not the differences in religious creeds but the similarities in religious experience of all races and times. But he read into the primitive mind innocence, and into mountaineering a potential for enlightenment and bringing native peoples and western visitors together, which now seems too optimistic.

## Conclusion

‘The aim of the mountaineer’, Bernard Amy has written, ‘is to take the place of the Zen Sage’. This may be true of mountaineering in the widest sense, it may be true of the ascetic wanderer, and it *can* be true of modern mountaineering. There is, for example, time to contemplate. Those endless weeks spent at Base Camp or sitting out storms – one of the attractions of expeditions is that they can be a very convenient excuse for doing nothing but sitting and thinking. The mountaineer is sometimes given that time which Blake insisted was the prime requisite of spiritual insight. And there are those ‘moments’ when the silence of the mountains presses in and combines with our own elation to produce a feeling of eternity in the present, and we understand a little better the words of William Law: man was put in this world for no other purpose than to rise out of the vanity of time.

But the average climbing experience is less highfalutin’ – not because it is selfish, but because it is narrow. That is precisely why traditional mountaineering fear fanaticism; it narrows the game, and so destroys the possibility of spiritual seriousness. Mountaineering produces a glimpse of spiritual possibilities. **Doug Scott** put it well. After his successful ascent of Everest with Dougal Haston in 1975:

*I came down with ambition fulfilled, and an empty space for noble thoughts and feelings; but I knew that space would soon be swamped back in the city – it had happened before... (22)*

And that is the only religious value that mountaineering can confidently claim. Life opens up a little, and one sees the possibilities not just of achievement but of a grander form of life. But for that life to be lived? That is a very different thing.

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- (1) Psalm 121:1
  - (2) Arnold Lunn: *Alpine Mysticism and 'Cold Philosophy'*, ch.9, 'Mountain Jubilee'
  - (3) John Snelling: *The Sacred Mountain*, ch.9
  - (4) John Snelling: *The Sacred Mountain*, ch.1
  - (5) Peter Matthiessen: *The Snow Leopard*, 1978, p230
  - (6) Peter Matthiessen: *The Snow Leopard*, 1978, p225
  - (7) John Lyon: *A Mountain in the Mind* in 'The Mountain Spirit'
  - (8) RLG Irving: *A History of British Mountaineering*, ch.19
  - (9) Quoted by Lunn in *Alpine Mysticism and 'Cold Philosophy'*, 'Mountain Jubilee'
  - (10) Leslie Stephen: *The Playground of Europe*, ch. II(1)
  - (11) Leslie Stephen: *The Playground of Europe*.
  - (12) WH Murray: *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* from 'Mountaineering in Scotland', Ch 22
  - (13) Quoted by David Craig: *Native Stones*, ch.19
  - (14) Victor Saunders: *Elusive Summits*, part 4; Hodder & Stoughton, 1990
  - (15) Aldous Huxley: *Heaven and Hell* (1956), p.9
  - (16) Don Cupitt: *The Sea of Faith*
  - (17) Francis Younghusband: *Vital Religion: A Brotherhood of Faith*, John Murray (1940)
  - (18) Quoted by Seaver: *Francis Younghusband*, ch.22
  - (19) Francis Younghusband: *Everest – The Challenge*, ch.9
  - (20) Arnold Lunn: *Alpine Mysticism and 'Cold Philosophy'*, 'Mountain Jubilee'
  - (21) Francis Younghusband: *The Doomed Mountain* from 'The Epic of Mount Everest', ch.24
  - (22) Doug Scott: *A Bivouac on Everest*, Mountain 47 (1976); 'The Games Climbers Play', Ken Wilson, ch5