Raynor Johnson: An Assessment

by Geoff Forster

Raynor Johnson (1901-1987) has made a remarkable contribution to science, parapsychology and spirituality, and to their interaction. I had a slight personal acquaintance with him, and this, coupled with a careful reading of his books, has led me to believe that a personal assessment of the man and his work may not be without merit.

After receiving his doctorate from the University of London, Johnson taught physics and worked for a time with Ernest Rutherford at the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge. In 1934 he emigrated to Australia to take up the position of Master of Queen's College, one of the colleges attached to Melbourne University. Academically, he was a University physicist specialising in spectroscopy, and during my undergraduate science course at Melbourne University I encountered him both as a lecturer in Physics or Natural Philosophy, as it was then quaintly called) and also in the science/religion series, which he conducted as an extracurricular activity. The latter of course were forerunners of his subsequent books.

After I read his book *Imprisoned Splendour,* 1 sought to contact him and he graciously gave me two interviews. I learned then that he was planning to write a book on mysticism, based largely on the mystical

experiences of everyday people, so I undertook to seek out cases for him. I also have some fragmentary correspondence with Johnson, including a discussion of radionics or radiesthesia (a phenomenon parallel to dowsing). Johnson decided not to pursue this; I had encountered some dramatic cases of its effectiveness, and had been exploring it, but after a while, being in isolation in this interest, I dropped it.

My interest in his work remained, however, and in 19771 addressed the Melbourne Existentialist Society on his writings. Later, in 1985, I gave a paper on his contribution to mysticism to a conference of the Australian Association for the Study of Religion. Thus far my personal involvement. Now to what may be called his psychic and spiritual writings.

The first of these, *The Imprisoned* Splendour, was published in 1953. It contains an extensive coverage of the data of natural science; a thorough treatment of psychical research, with an exploration of the survival issue; then the nature and significance of mystical experience are explored. Frequently the topics are enriched by appropriate quotations from the great English poets. The final chapter explores "The purpose of human life", and stresses the importance of finding this. The following very profound lines -taken from 'Prayer For The Past', a poem by George MacDonald - are quoted:

For are we not at home in Thee,

And all the world a visioned show;

That, knowing what abroad is, we

What Home is too may know?"

Johnson's next book, *Psychical Research* (1955) was published in the 'Teach Yourself series. After a brief history of parapsychology, the main areas of the subject are treated, including the issue of survival. A concluding chapter addresses the significance of psychical research for science, medicine, philosophy and religion. The book revealed Johnson's typical comprehensiveness, clarity and persistently questing attitude.

Watcher on the Hills, a study of mysticism, appeared in 1959. It is based, to a large extent, on thirty-six cases of actual experience, most of generally unknown individuals, but including cases of notable men such as C.S. Lewis and Arthur Koestler. Johnson felt that, while there was much scholarly material on mysticism, the need to explore examples of experiences related to everyday circumstances was necessary. As well as an evaluation of mystical experience, the book also contains commentaries on various methods of expanding awareness, such as psychedelic drugs, yoga and certain mental techniques. Also, there is a section on anaesthetics, which incidentally included a child-birth experience of

my wife, adjacent (much to her fascination) to a similar case of Winston Churchill (except that his wasn't during child-birth!). Finally, an excellent overview is given of the significance and relevance of mysticism.

He suggested the following criteria for evaluating an experience:

1. Does it lead to an enhanced quality of life?
2. Is it consistent with (though not necessarily supported by) reason?
3. Is it unifying and integrative?

To which I would add: Does it stimulate or at least encourage, a life of dedicated service?

Before this, in 1957, Johnson had published *Nurslings of Immortality*, which is arguably his greatest book. To a large extent this is an exposition of the philosophy of E D Fawcett (1), based on the idea that ultimate reality is an outworking of Divine Imagining. For the sake of clarity and precision, special terminology is of necessity introduced. Topics explored under this frame work include the scientific outlook; the nature of God; evil and suffering; time, causation and freedom. There is also some superb material on the afterlife, based largely on the ideas and experiences of F W H Myers, as conveyed via the automatist Geraldine Cummins. In a

thoughtful chapter, the question whether contemporary religion is meeting our needs is discussed. The book begins with the *need* for an adequate philosophy of life, and concludes with both a lofty panorama of the scheme of things and also helpful wisdom in living in the here and now. Overall, a grand book, worthy of close study and careful reflection.

In 1964 there followed *The Light and the Gate*, which consisted of four sections, exploring the life and ideas of a person whom Johnson admired, followed then by an essay on a theme arising out of each exploration.

One section dealt with Revd Leslie Weatherhead, a close personal friend. The accompanying essay explored the future of religion, and various related issues requiring consideration. Another dealt with his Australian friend Ambrose Pratt - of particular interest to Australian readers such as myself. The accompanying essay related to the claim that Johnson had made contact with the discarnate Pratt via the automatic writing of Geraldine Cummins, a claim which in my opinion warrants full endorsement. In both parts of this section, profound and stimulating metaphysical ideas are explored, including the nature and significance of mysticism. The connections with his earlier book *Nurslings of Immortality* are fascinating.

I shall not enlarge on the other two sections, which deal with the Irish poet George William Russell (A.E.) and the Buddhist monk,

the Venerable Sumangalo. In both cases much thought-provoking wisdom can be found, and there is a remarkable exploration of the esoteric nature of sound attached to the Sumangalo biography.

Two of his later books that largely involve recapitulation and elaboration of previous themes I shall pass over, but The *Spiritual Path*, which appeared in 1971, should be noted. This begins with features involved in seeking the path (including the human lot and the goal of life), some important teachings on the path (including trust in God, and the relevance of the paranormal and of the intellect), and finally some disciplines of the path, including breathing, diet, meditation and dream interpretation. Characteristically there is much spiritual wisdom, together with some quite controversial passages. Felicitous inclusions from the great poets are given.

There remains one issue which must be addressed before I come to an overall assessment of Raynor Johnson: his deplorable endorsement of 'The Family' (2), an extremely unpleasant New Age group that engaged in peculiar experiments in social engineering. He was closely involved with this group from the mid- 1960s onwards: an involvement that could be charitably accounted for by the onset of senile decay. An attempt to explain it in terms of Jungian psychology can be dismissed by applying Oscam's razor. Quite likely, a severer verdict is appropriate[2]. However, I do not

believe that this regrettable aberration ultimately negates the value of his writings.

Without question, Johnson has made an outstanding contribution to our understanding of the relationship of science with religion and spirituality. His familiarity with parapsychology is immense, and his interpretation of its intrinsic significance and of its relevance for and bearing upon science and also spirituality, is a valuable legacy.
As regards Christianity, while acknowledging the good in Buddhism and Hinduism, Johnson clearly maintains the significance of Christianity in important respects. Concerning the death of Jesus, he is essentially Abelardian, and certainly not of the penal-substitutionary viewpoint. As regards the person of Jesus, Johnson acknowledges his divinity (Arian rather than Athanasian), but his viewpoint here is expressed in terms of his complex cosmology. Regarding mysticism, he writes with real authority, and would endorse Karl Rahner's belief that the future of Christianity is located here. His interpretation of mysticism is, again, influenced by his complex cosmology.

One point that will bother many Christians is Johnson's consistent advocacy of karma and reincarnation. However, a minority of Christians would endorse the view attributed to Dean Inge that this doctrine is "both credible and attractive", and certainly reincarnation has been explored in our own Fellowship *(e.g.* David Christie-Murray's excellent treatment in *CP* of March 2003).

His lofty vision of the human drama and its place in the original scheme of things is original and daring, and his works present profound spiritual wisdom as well as being enhanced by the enriching quotations front the great poets that he frequently gives. In addition to all this, Johnson's exploration of Imaginism', the little-known and under-rated philosophy of E.D. Fawcett, is an important achievement that merits wider consideration.

1. Edward Douglas Fawcett (1866 - 1960) was a many faceted man. In addition to being a keen and talented mountaineer he was a novelist, poet, philosopher and author of a series of books on 'Imaginise - the name he gave to his highly individual philosophical system. His major works on this were *The World as Imagination* (1916); *Divine Imagining* (1921); *The Zermatt Dialogues* (1931) and *The Oberland Dialogues (1939).*

2. 'The Family' was founded and led by an Australian Yoga teacher, Anne Hamilton-Byrne, and was based in the outskirts of Melbourne. It taught an odd amalgam of Hindu and Christian ideas and Hamilton-Byrne was believed by members to be a reincarnation of Jesus. Their wickedness lay, however, in the abuse of psychiatric patients and in the physical and

psychological abuse of children whom Hamilton-Byrne had 'adopted' in an illicit mariner. It was not until 1987 that police action finally stopped this criminal behaviour and the group gradually disintegrated.