

Scared ? Sacred

Mystics, theologians, skeptics and scholars including those such as Rudolph Otto (1946) and Ninian Smart have discussed and tried to explain the unexplainable. Experiences described as being profoundly holy mystical or ethereal, transcending the normal experience of living. These encounters have been defined by Ninian Smart as being apart of an Experiential Dimension in that he is describing an element or one of 7 aspects of a world religions he has expanded on. The incidents used here, are two dream visions and are to be examples of this religious dimension. One from the Lakota a 1st Nations culture and will give an example of a numinous experience. The other from a Taoist and Asian perspective will be the mystical perspective. Both are very similar in a number of ways, in that they represent to the viewer a vision, a dream, a land, ancestors, and a life-changing event. But the emotional and psychological effects are very much in line with the experiences described with the numinous and the mystical.

Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) coined the word numinous in an attempt to describe what he felt was at the heart of religion. As an encounter of something that is - a mystery that is fearful, awe-inspiring, yet fascinating and drawing you to it as well prophetic. (Smart 2000) Otto also said that for one to completely understand the numinous event one would have had to also have one. Smart though disagrees and feels one can get by with experiencing something similar. Otto also felt that to have a sense of worship and reverence was a large part of the emotional element to the encounter.

Ninian Smart states that *"there is also another kind of religious experience - the mystical..."* Though it is as important as the numinous it is different in that is non-dual, it is quiet and a merging with what could be considered *"pure consciousness"* (Smart p.58)

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So there is no 'wholly other' to worship. Smart states that the importance of this is due to *"a person sees the permanent, the impermanence of the world of objects is seen; when a person achieves the highest welfare, the truly unsatisfactory and suffering quality of ordinary life is known"*. (Smart p, 59) He goes on to state that with this new awareness the person returns to the mundane world with more compassion and understanding. Smart has found that this experience also differs in that it can be found to occur during a deeply meditative state of being, sleeping might also be argued to be 'deeply meditative' as well. The numinous one the other hand can happen out of the blue so to speak and a technically a meditative state of being is not required.

One example of a numinous experience comes from a story told by Black Elk of a dream vision, going to a sacred land and encountering the spirits of the 6 directions. It had a very powerful impact on him, so much so that he could not even speak of it until he had become an adult. The experience formed his future actions and the choices he made for himself and his people. Black Elk had experienced many tragedies in his early life. As a child he had been present at both the Battle of Little Big horn and the massacre at Wounded Knee. (Crawford 2005)

Suzanne Crawford in relaying the story states that *"Against that background of traumatic historical events, Black Elk at the age of nine received the first of a long series of sacred visionary experiences that set him upon a lifelong quest to find the means by which his people could mend "the broken hoop" of their lives,This first of many vision experiences was of terrifying Thunder Beings.... Shaken by his experience, Black Elk could not bring himself to reveal the vision until he reached the age of seventeen.*

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(Crawford 2005) Black Elk later in life eventually becomes a healer and holy man within the Lakota culture, doing the sacred dances to the 6 great ancestral spirits that he worships.

The story related has all the basic elements of a numinous religious experience. In that it is dual he is separate from the Thunder beings, the 6 guardian spirits, which inspired awe and terror, but he could not stay away from and continues to encounter in his ongoing visions. He eventually follows through with their prophetic requests. He worships and honors of them, through the sacred dance (Ghost Dance) and healings he performs. The mending of 'the broken hoop' within his people. The visions he had were also prophetic in that he was told the future of his people and what he could do to help them.

In a Taoist version, it is of a similar type in that it is a dream vision, is a story told of the Yellow Emperor in Lieh-tzu. It is also a dream of seeing a sacred land where an ancestor who had become an immortal now lives, Hua-Hsu, the mother of the 1st emperor. (Graham p.35) It is a land filled with many spirits and much beauty. *"...he dreamed that he was wandering in the country of Hua-hsu.In this country there are no teachers and leadersno cravings and lusts; all men follow their natural course.....they neither love nor hate."* (

The emperor, *"when he awoke he was delighted to have found himself and calls for"* his ministers proclaiming to them *"Now I know that the utmost Way cannot be sought through the passions. I know, I have found it, but I cannot tell it to you."* He

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continued to rule the country for another 28 years, now completely satisfied that all was well with him and his people.

This mystical experience in this example also relates the elements Ninian Smart has stated as apart of the Experiential Dimension. It is non - dual though he sees many other beings he experiences them as being one with them, there is no me and them it just 'is'. There maybe a sense of - to honor and respect, but nothing to worship or give a ceremony or praises to. A purity of consciousness, a Yin and Yang to existence but that it was one and in balance, and it was an enlightening experience that is indescribable to others, that changes his way of seeing the world and his place in it.

In relating the encounter of experiential dimension there is often a couple of situations that arise that are consistently similar in nearly all cases. The first nears a sense of frustration at what seems to be best described ironically as either a verbal or cognitive inability, or possibly even a lack of words, no language is suitable to accurately describe either the mystical or numinous experiences within this dimension. The second thing that is noticed is a change in consciousness. A new knowledge is given, one that could be considered, an indisputable awareness of contact with the sacred other. A power that is best illustrated as sacred and holy. This sense of knowledge is what sets the experience apart from what could be generally considered a 'religious' experience like when going to sacred place or being at ceremony that is particularly moving. But inevitably these words or descriptions come nowhere near the reality of it.

In conclusion though both were dream visions and both leaders were under a sense of personal duress over their worlds, land and people. They both were given

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answers to their problems and new incite into their worlds, but their encounters with the experiential dimension were radically quite different. Black Elk could not speak of it out of a sense of awe and terror, the Yellow Emperor could not wait to tell someone else of it. He also had a sense of awe but at peace, but also a lack words to properly describe it too. The numinous was prophetic and changed the course of Black Elk's life. Yellow Emperor life changed as well but not because of prophecy but because he could see the benefit of the changes that needed to be made. All in all, a result of a dream vision, this experience changed the course of not only their lives for the better, but that of their people as well.