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The Sound of a Small Whisper: Ordinary Religious Experience

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Abstract: An ordinary religious experience does not entail an overwhelming sense of the Divine; it is not a “numinous” experience. It is instead easily ignored. In a phenomenological psychological inquiry into such a religious experience, both the *noema*, the “what” experienced, and the *noesis*, the mode of givenness of the experience, manifested themselves in distinctive ways. The paper examines a simple experience of having been guided in making a decision. The guidance was recognized only at the moment of realization. The realization revealed the decision to have been part of a larger drama that transcended the immediate experience. The “world” of this moment of realization included sensing that the sky above—as an “elemental”—was a dome, with allusions to the Noah story. Even at the time, this perception was not experienced as literal, but as symbolic. The social, historical, and theological contexts for the possibility of this experience receive attention. Theological as well as psychological reflection indicate such an experience continues to happen, in memory and thought, and even in action, long after the initial moment. Essential to the meaning of the experience is an admonition to transcend egocentricity.

Keywords: phenomenology, religious experience, elemental, numinous, symbol, illusion

Elijah was on the lam, hiding in the desert, awaiting the voice of the Lord: “There was a strong and violent wind rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the LORD—but the LORD was not in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake—but the LORD was not in the earthquake; after the earthquake, fire—but the LORD was not in the fire; after the fire” (1 Kings 19: 11-12), there was the sound of small whisper, “a still small voice.” In what follows, I describe an experience of a small whisper.

1 A religious experience

Some years ago, we had an older student studying with us. I will call her Delma. She enrolled to finish a degree that she had begun in the 1950s before a growing family prevented her completing it. Delma was in her 60s, taking classes with much younger students. One summer, when she and a few other students were taking a class to get a jump-start on their senior theses, she became seriously ill. After hospitalization, one of her daughters took her to another city to help her with recovery. I lost touch with her.

Then, after a few years, an email came from another daughter, who said that her mother desired, despite some disability, to complete her degree. My Dean was supportive of the plan we worked out, and the first step was for Delma to complete her thesis. The topic was loneliness. Her daughter took her dictation and typed up a draft. When the daughter sent it to me, she said that she had learned much about the hardships of her mother’s life and that working on the thesis had brought them closer. Not only working on a thesis, but working on the experience of loneliness was particularly important. When I received the draft, my first inclination was to sit on it for a while, as there was no rush at this point in the semester. Nevertheless, for whatever reasons, I did not delay reading it and sending it back for corrections. They came in short order

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and, again after being tempted by procrastination, I reviewed the thesis and wrote back that it was an acceptable draft. Not soon thereafter, I received another email from the daughter, who said that she and her mother had celebrated the accomplishment. And that the day after, her mother had died.

The moment was bittersweet: Despite significant difficulties, Delma had completed something that meant a lot to her; nevertheless, she did not get to walk across the stage and receive her diploma in the presence of her family.

Lingering melancholy might have been the end of her story for me. However, walking across campus shortly after getting that news, it dawned on me that if I had delayed in reading and responding, Delma would probably have died before finishing her thesis, and she and her daughter would not have had their moment of triumph. Things had not worked out as I had hoped, but all was not lost. Delma had accomplished something she had wanted to do, and there was, I sensed, a reconciliation in her family. This dawning consoled my melancholic mood.

Then I realized that something had prompted me not to procrastinate. That something, it occurred to me, had been, so it seemed, the sound of a small whisper not to delay. I had the strangest sense of being in a drama that went far beyond what I could know, and that I had played but a small role in something larger. It was a clear day and at that moment, the sky appeared as a dome encompassing the earth. I saw, felt rather, that ancient depiction of the heavens. I now felt that someone had spoken in that impulse not to delay. It is difficult to describe the feeling of that alien presence in my life. I shuttered to think that I had been really close to ignoring that impulse to act. I was grateful for the impulse and relieved I had responded to it. I knew that in other circumstances I had not done so.

The moment passed; it faded “into the light of common day.” Mine was no Road to Damascus experience, no conversion. It gave me no certainties about the nature of the cosmos; it was a subtle awareness of what William James described as “the ‘more’ with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected.”¹ Whose loneliness was for a time relieved?

2 Phenomenological reflections

Phenomenological investigation can begin with one’s own experience, and that is what I have done, to learn at least my own biases in this area. I would call the experience one completely compatible with secular interpretations. First, I could have said that the impulse not to procrastinate arose simply from subconscious thinking, which had grazed the threshold of conscious awareness. The impulse did emerge from the subconscious (using James’ terminology), but it did not seem to originate there. I could also say that the impulse not to delay arose because I was aware that Delma was not in the best of health. I could add that I felt an ethical obligation to her because of her past efforts, and because she had overcome serious obstacles. So the impulse not to delay a reply to her thesis was not really foreign to me; only the urgency I felt to read it. Quite spontaneously, I interpreted the experience in the moment of realization as an “experience deemed religious.”² The religiosity of the religious experience was the sense that I had been guided, that I had responded to something that at the time I did not recognize, but later experienced as guidance. Second, I could have concluded that the moment of clarity was actually a simple association of ideas: the unusual set of circumstances (accepting the thesis and Delma’s dying) was a coincidence. However, because of my own background, a religious meaning came readily to mind. I have often heard others say how they found the Lord intervening in their lives. It is the kind of thing “one says.” I incline to skeptical interpretations of such statements. This time, however, I sensed that there was more.

The two accounts of the experience, the one that explained it naturalistically, and other that felt something “more,” are compatible. Indeed, Karl Rahner argued that I can “explain this sudden idea, . . . trace it back to associations that I am not conscious of or to a physiological and psychological constitution

¹ James, “Varieties,” 512.

² Taves, “Religious Experience,” 8.

which perhaps cannot be analyzed exactly at the moment, . . . regard it as a function of myself.”³ As long as one remains within such an explanatory way of thinking, “I cannot see in this ‘good idea’ any special presence of God in the world.”⁴ However, when I understand the act as a personal one, as a response to a call from an Other, then I am no longer explaining what occurred. In Rahner’s words, “being a person . . . means the self-possession of a subject as such in a conscious and free relationship to the totality of itself.”⁵ When in such an act, I answer a call to be response-able, I can affirm that the call came from outside me.

The concept of a religious experience is a borderland one, of psychological concern necessarily but also, because of its character, of theological interest. As William Meissner observed: “the psychological attempt to understand religious experience will remain naïve and misguided unless it is informed to a significant degree by theology.”⁶ In what follows, I examine it from both these points of view. Because of my own biography, I will refer only to Catholic theologians.

2.1 Absence of the numinous

There was no sense in the experience of an overwhelming presence of the Holy or any sense of awe. In other words, this was not a numinous experience. For Jung, who took this term from Rudolf Otto (1928), in a numinous experience the ego is overwhelmed by a powerful psychic presence. Mystical and psychotic experiences can both be numinous. Victor White, the English Dominican who sought to collaborate with Jung, described the characteristics of numinous experiences: the person is “purely passive to them: they seize him in spite of his conscious attitudes and intentions with feelings of awe and fascination . . . and are therefore of a wholly irrational character.”⁷ Such experiences were “the primary ‘religious experience’,”⁸ according to Otto and to James before him. White noted however that numinous experiences do not always have religious significance and that religious experiences are not always numinous. He disputed the idea that the numinous lay at the heart of religion, as such experiences can issue also in “magic, superstition, art, poetry”⁹ as well as psychopathology. For White, “whatever purely passive and indeed overwhelming experience may underlie [religious experiences] . . . they always consist in some active response.”¹⁰ Such responses are various and include assent and worship.

Bringing these observations to bear on the experience I described, what stands out is the play between activity and passivity. There was no sense of a higher power overwhelming me. What there was, however, was a sense of playing a role in a larger drama that I did not write. Moreover, there was what I would claim to be empirical support: I saw the sky as a dome. This fleeting perception gave objectivity to the experience. However, the appearance of the dome does not guarantee that the experience was anything more than a comforting self-deception. As the psychologist of religion, André Godin, observed: “nostalgia for a variety of all-inclusive, integral, and pacifying experiences persists; a direct divine presence would transform doubts into certainty, anxieties into peace of mind.”¹¹ Nevertheless, the felt consolation of the experience, even if it resonates with such a nostalgia, does not invalidate it. It does indicate that the event had deep effects.

³ Rahner, *Foundations*, 88. (I thank one of the reviewers of this article for this reference.)

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶ Meissner, “Psychoanalysis,” 13.

⁷ White, “Soul,” 55.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Godin, “Psychological dynamics,” 69.

2.2 The Social character of the experience

In discussing what he calls “the Christian experience,” the theologian, Angelo Scola, wrote: “talk of Christian experience in the comprehensive sense of a life containing its own *logos* necessarily implies a constitutive link with the Christian community, which is the commensurate subject of this experience.”¹² In the experience described above, my role was secondary; the center of the action was elsewhere, with the student and her daughter. The center of the action was off stage, so to speak; I learned of it only when the daughter contacted me to say that her mother had died. Without my participation, if I had delayed reading the thesis, the reconciliation of mother and daughter may have occurred anyway. Who knows? My felt sense when I realized that I had responded to a small whispering noise was one of relief. I had not failed by omission. Never in my life had I experienced so directly what I can call the action of God in the world.

The experience involved other people at every turn. There was Delma, who wrote the thesis, and her daughter who typed and emailed it to me. There was my Dean, who supported the unusual plan for Delma. There was the Chair of another department, who authorized an unconventional arrangement for the student to complete a course she had not yet taken. Colleagues in my department affirmed the plan as well. Everyone wanted to do right by this student—so there were no obstacles to my acting as I did. This sense of good will suffused the moment of insight that I had.

2.3 The communal character of the experience

The experience was social in another way as well. The theologian, David S. Koonce, discussed Joseph Ratzinger’s conception of such events for someone with my background: “Christian experience begins in the ordinary course of communal experience, but it relies, for its future course, on the extent and richness of the experiences already accumulated throughout history by the world of faith.”¹³ That is, we can understand the experience in relation to the history of Christian experience of God, who acts in history. For me, this interpretation in light of collective experience was a horizon of conceptualizing the event.

The community of interpretation is important in another respect as well. Koonce pointed out that “although experiences are immediate and self-imposing, they are not self-authenticating.”¹⁴ One must ask if an experience “genuinely derives from the reality we take to be its origin.”¹⁵ Such discerning would be part of the interpretative questioning posed to the experience, such interpretation being part of the experience, which does not happen merely at its occurrence, but also in its subsequent history.

2.4 The negative character of the experience

The moment when the lights came on for me in the experience was something of a shock. Not a trauma, to be sure, but a realization that my actions were not what I had thought them to be. To grasp this aspect of the event, I turn to Gadamer’s account of experience (*Erfahrung*) in *Truth and Method*. Gadamer wrote:

Language shows that we use the word “experience” in two different senses: the experiences that conform to our expectation and confirm it and the new experiences that occur to us. This latter—“experience” in the genuine sense—is always negative. If a new experience of an object occurs to us, this means that hitherto we have not seen the thing correctly and now know it better.¹⁶

¹² Scola, “Christian experience,” 204.

¹³ Ratzinger, “Principles,” 350-51, in Koonce, “The turn,” lecture 9, 4.

¹⁴ Koonce, “The turn,” lecture 10, 3.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gadamer, “Truth,” 353.

Not only something new experienced; in experience of this sort one comes to new self-knowledge. For Gadamer, “experience has the structure of a reversal of consciousness.”¹⁷ This reversal is the experience that “something is not what we supposed it to be.”¹⁸ This negation in my own experience did not happen immediately: an experience is not a momentary event. It continues to take place: in thinking about it, in remembering it, in acting on it. The negation was in a question: Was my impulse to act not mine alone? What had changed, such that now I call it the sound of a small whisper? The reversal reverberated: How frequently I have not responded to that small whisper? An uneasy thought, given what I had experienced. Had I been graced with a reprieve?

3 The dome as illusion, symbol, and reality

In discussing religious experiences, the psychoanalyst W. W. Meissner stressed a developmental perspective, not to reduce them to infantile wish fulfillment, but to indicate there are “levels of religious experience, which reflect the developmental attainments of various phases of the developmental progression.”¹⁹ While I do not pretend to psychoanalyze my experience, it is important to note the presence of a transitional phenomenon, which Meissner²⁰ saw as significant in such experiences. I refer to the perception of the sky as a dome. This perception was neither a hallucination nor a delusion, since I knew perfectly well that I was seeing the sky *as if* a dome, the way that ancient cultures in the Near East portrayed it in their conception of the cosmos. This sky-as-dome was something objective or worldly, namely the blue sky, and something subjective, namely, the fulfillment of a desire to be connected to a loving transcendent Other. It was an illusion because, to use Meissner’s terms, it kept “its ties with reality” and simultaneously kept “the capacity to transform reality into something that is permeated with ... inner significance.”²¹ Those ties to reality included not only the sky as perceived at that moment, but also what I knew of ancient cosmology. The element of desire I would depict as paternal, since I relate the image of the dome to the story of Noah; the only other time I had seen the sky as a dome was when a rainbow graced a radiant blue sky from horizon to horizon. The rainbow, in the Noah story, was a sign of a promise following a world-shattering traumatic event. In my own experience, that second perception of the dome referred back to that earlier one.

The perception of the sky-as-dome did resonate with deeply felt desire and with a cultural and religious tradition. As a phenomenologist, I take the approach of J. H. van den Berg in understanding the event: To call the sky-as-dome the *experienced* sky as opposed to the real sky is a needless concession to subjectivism. Of course, the sky-as-dome was an experienced sky. So too, however, is the “real sky;” that sky is the one we experience as people who have learned something of astronomy and know about astronauts circling the earth in the space station. This other sky, call it the Limitless Void, is also an experienced sky. There is, in fact, no sky apart from how it is experienced. So to call one sky subjective and the other objective is to misunderstand the nature of perception. What is perceived is always, to use Husserlian terms, a *noema* that corresponds to a way of perceiving, a *noesis*. The sky, as a phenomenon, is not only how it is given to me now, with my present *noesis*, but the sky is its possibilities for manifesting itself in other *noeses*.²² The sky-as-dome is one possibility for the sky, and it has been a significant perception of the sky historically and culturally. Thus, perceiving the sky as a dome reveals something real about the sky.

The sky as dome also refers to the earth, the ground I was walking upon when the experience happened. Earth and sky, the everyday world and a transcendent realm, time and eternity: the contrast pervaded the experience and the experience brought them together for a moment.

In noticing the sky, we encounter it as “elemental,” a notion developed by Gaston Bachelard, Emmanuel Levinas, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Phenomena such as fire, the ocean, the night, the flesh, and light.

¹⁷ Ibid., 354.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Meissner, “Psychology,” 49.

²⁰ Meissner, “Psychoanalysis,” 177-78.

²¹ Ibid., 52.

²² Ihde, “Experimental.”

According to Edith Wyschogrod, the elemental “has no fixed limits, is prolonged indefinitely, is unifaceted ... it cannot be circumnavigated to obtain a view of its reverse side, since there is only obverse without underside.”²³ Something elemental is not a thing. It surrounds. To build a house is to separate oneself from the elements, as we say. The arch of the sky points to its elemental character; opposite the earth, “sky is recessive and open ... arching over the earth.”²⁴ Moreover, “everything about the sky has to do with light”.²⁵ Surrounded by the elemental sky, one is exposed to the weather. One’s finitude is sensed, as is the enjoyment that the elemental affords.

3.1 The opaque character of the image

The theologian Gerald O’Collins informs this reflection. In religious experiences, there are often symbols such as this dome. Their significance, however, exceeds any given experience, and for O’Collins, “the multi-levelled nature of the central religious symbols we experience individually and collectively can mean that we misread what we see and misinterpret what we hear.”²⁶ I take this to imply that the meaning of the dome is not self-evident, despite the surprise of seeing it and the consolation that followed. In Jung’s terms, that image asks for “amplification” to draw out its significance. That interpretation would proceed in two directions: to the personal, in light of my mood at the time, and to the objective, that is, to exploration of the sky-as-dome image in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Far from being self-evident, the experience was opaque and in that sense, transcendent.

3.2 The image and the symbolic order

The dome’s appearance was in one sense fortuitous, suggested by the bright clear day. In another sense, it or something like it was perhaps inevitable, according to Antoine Vergote, the psychologist and philosopher: “Experience occurs only within an interpretative framework.”²⁷ A symbolic form mediates the experience and inserts it within a religious tradition. For Vergote, in a religious experience of the type I presented, three elements come together: “perception of forms, affective and selective investment by emotion and desire, and religious language.”²⁸ In my experience, these three elements were the beauty of the sky, the melancholy and the wish that Delma would have completed the degree, and the Christian language of my heritage. Vergote described such a “religious perceptive experience” as a “metaphorization,” in that the experience brings “about a real and new understanding”²⁹ for the person having it. To state the metaphor simply: The completed thesis is a rainbow. That was not an understanding I had at the time; it came with time and reflection, as the experience was prolonged in memory and thought. In the Noah story, the rainbow appeared after the entire earth had been devastated, its peoples and other creatures almost entirely destroyed. My religious experience, nowhere nearly as traumatic, did follow news of a death.

4 The flaw, melancholy, and death

Aidan Nichols, the theologian, observed that experiences have two components: the interpretive framework that mediates the event, and “the refractory element, that which comes to us in its novelty, resistant of

²³ Wyschogrod, “Sport,” 167.

²⁴ Sallis, “Force,” 181.

²⁵ Ibid., 182.

²⁶ O’Collins, “Retrieving,” 112.

²⁷ Vergote, “Psychoanalysis,” 136.

²⁸ Ibid., 140.

²⁹ Ibid., 141.

inappropriate ways in which we might wish to describe it.”³⁰ Consider these two components together. On the personal side, was my response to Delma’s death. She had come close to completing her degree but had died too soon to complete the task. Her dying overshadowed, for me, any joy for her accomplishment. A melancholy mood hung over me with these thoughts of death and of my near failure to reply in a timely way to her thesis.

Then there were the refractory elements: the sense of having been prompted to act, the report of the celebration between Delma and her daughter, Delma’s death, and the perception of the dome. They all belong to the negative aspect of experience. For Nichols, “it is through this refractory element that experience can be said to have its own authority.”³¹ Theologically, we experience a “reality that is offering itself to us.”³² The context for both the realization of having been nudged and of having seen the dome was the news of a death, of a quest ended too soon. The melancholy was a ground for the experience. I had not been looking for and I did not receive assurance that Delma still lived in an afterlife. That had not been the point of the experience. There was a sense that things do not work out as we would like and that I had to acknowledge that. Despite the sadness and the wondering how things might have worked out differently, there was consolation. Out of the blue.

Some reality was offering itself to me. In the moment, I did sense something meant for me. The reality of death and failure were not erased, but the sense of having played a part in a drama not written by me, the consolation that I had played my part sufficiently well, and the sense that we were not alone in the face of failure and death was assured by the dome of the sky.

5 When does an experience end?

In recounting this experience of mine and reflecting upon it, I have noticed that the experience of that day, some years ago, is still happening. In one sense, an experience takes place at a particular moment; in another sense, it lives on in remembering, imagining, contemplating, telling: all these subsequent acts are directed to the same lived experience. Just as a song lives in its performances, so does an experience live on, renewed, changed, distorted. It is also true that in the present re-experiencing of this experience, two aspects assert themselves as they had not done previously: the good and the flaw. The good refers to the overarching sense of the event, as something good occurring in the presence of a death. The reconciliation was good, the completion of the thesis was good, the relationship of mother and daughter was good. At the same time, I have recognized those moments, subsequent to my little epiphany, when I have not listened to the whisper. It is as if I still must learn from the experience, which calls me out of my familiar and taken-for-granted routines and venture into the new world promised by the arch in the sky.

6 Are all experiences potentially religious?

To this question, it seems that theology and psychology give different answers. For a Catholic theologian, like Aidan Nichols, all experience has the potential to be or become a religious experience. Why? Because as we consider secular experiences, we can “come to discern more fully the reality that is offering itself to us in our personal depths. And this reality ... must inevitably say something about the God who is ‘Creator of all things, visible and invisible’.”³³ This is not to insist that such a realization must occur; it is to say that the reality of the Divine is a horizon or possibility of any experience whatsoever. Psychologically, because all experience occurs within a symbolic order, that horizon is not invariably present. Graham Richards asserted that “the notion that all people share some deep spiritual yearning is nonsense,”³⁴ and that such

³⁰ Nichols, “Shape,” 236.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 238.

³³ *Ibid.*, 238.

³⁴ Richards, “Psychology,” 153.

a desire is not necessary for a meaningful life—a secular structure of experience common in our time. Psychologically, it does not seem reasonable to say that such people are missing something. Richards was making a critical point, which is that psychology must know the boundaries of what it can say ought to be the experience or life course of a person. Do we really want or need psychologists telling people what their spiritual “needs” are? Christian theology makes a different claim, however; the intersection of psychology and theology is a complex knot.

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