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THE NUMINOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE LIGHT OF PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

By

Khader I. Alkhouri, MA, Cand. Ph.D.
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

Abstract

The numinous experience, a concept developed by Rudolf Otto, has significant importance in understanding the psychological aspects of religion. Drawing on various theories and empirical studies within the field of Psychology, this article highlights the significance of the numinous experience in the Psychology of Religion. It explores the relationship between the numinous and religious beliefs, the psychological mechanisms underlying such experiences, and the impact on individuals' well-being. The numinous experience offers a unique lens through which we can understand the profound connection between Psychology and religion, paving the way for further research and exploration in this captivating field.

Keywords: *Numinous, Psychology of Religion, Spirituality.*

Introduction

The Latin term 'numen', which refers to a deity or divine power, is the origin of the word 'numinous' (Casement, 2014). Otto used this term to describe experiences that go beyond ordinary human understanding and to conjure up a sense of the divine or sacred. Otto states that the numinous experience involves a unique blend of emotions, including fascination, fear, and the feeling of being overwhelmed by something greater than oneself (Barnes, 1994). The Professor of Psychology of the Religion at NKUA said that the «numinous» is the transcendental and divine power, which also «knocks» on the «door» of the heart, it simply transmits nods, allusions, images, and symbols (Tsitsigkos, 2017).

The numinous experience

The numinous experience is a profound encounter with a transcendent or spiritual reality that is often characterized by awe, mystery, and reverence. Rudolf Otto, a prominent religious scholar, coined the term in his book 'The Idea of the Holy' (1917). The numinous experience is not limited to any religious or cultural tradition but can be found across various Beliefs and even outside religious frameworks (Otto, 1970).

The Characteristics of a Numinous Experience:

1. *The awe-inspiring and overwhelming nature of the experience is what *Mysterium Tremendum* refers to.* A sense of mystery, incomprehensibility, and unknowability is involved (Hoelter, 2021).
2. *Mysterium Fascinans:* This aspect of the numinous experience involves a feeling of attractiveness, fascination, and enchantment. The numinous attracts the individual and motivates them to explore further (Mercur, 2006).

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3. *Transcendence is the experience that transcends ordinary, mundane reality.* A sense of connection to a higher power or a realm beyond the material world can be achieved through it (Harrison, 2013).

4. *The experience of numinousness often involves a sense of the presence of something or someone greater than oneself.* This presence can be characterized as divine, sacred, or spiritual (Bastow, 1976).

5. *Transformation:* Numinous experiences have the potential to bring about personal transformation, leading to changes in beliefs, values, and behavior. Inspiring a deep sense of meaning and purpose in life can be achieved through them (Hunt, 2000).

The numinous experiment in the light of the Orthodox Church and psychology.

It's a topic that's fascinating. The profound impact of these experiences on individuals' spiritual and psychological well-being is recognized by both fields (Emmons, 2003). Rudolf Otto coined the term 'numinous' to describe experiences that inspire awe, reverence, and a sense of profound mystery (Oman, 1924).

Encounters with the divine, manifestations of God's grace, or encounters with saints and angels are often associated with these experiences in the Orthodox Church. Orthodox theology emphasizes belief in the "uncreated energies" of God, which can be directly experienced and in which individuals can take part. Through practices like prayer, contemplation, and participation in the sacraments, these experiences are often sought (Athanasopoulos, 2013).

From a psychological point of view, countless experiences can be considered transformative and profoundly significant encounters that have a profound impact on a person's well-being (Douglas, 2021). In his work, Carl Jung (Jung, 1975), a Swiss psychologist, wrote widely about the concept of the numinous. He described it as a vital spiritual experience that transcends the ego limitations and connects individuals to something greater than themselves (Ponte & Lothar, 2013).

Psychologically, these experiences can lead to a sense of expanded consciousness, heightened feelings of connection and unity, and a deep sense of purpose and meaning in life. They may also have a therapeutic effect, providing a source of comfort, orientation, and healing.

The Orthodox Church and psychology can benefit one another by synthesizing their understanding of numinous experience. The church's spiritual teachings, rituals, and practices can provide a framework for individuals to explore and cultivate these experiences (Wang, McMinn, Wood, & Lee, 2023). Psychology, on the other hand, can contribute by offering a scientific lens for understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying these experiences and their potential benefits for the individual (Brady, Fryberg, & Shodaa, 2018).

Overall, the numinous experience is a profound and transformative aspect of human spirituality and psychology, with both the Orthodox Church and psychology recognizing its value and significance in facilitating personal growth, healing, and spiritual connection (Chaudhari, 2019).

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Numinous Experience in the Greek Orthodox Church: Exploration of Divine Meeting and Spiritual Transcendence.

In the Greek Orthodox Church, the numinous experience is a fundamental aspect of spirituality (Meyendorff, 1974). The Greek Orthodox Church, which is rooted in ancient traditions and deeply intertwined with Greek culture, provides a rich spiritual framework for individuals to cultivate and encounter the numinous (Shenton, 2018).

The term "numinous" was originally coined by theologian Rudolf Otto to describe experiences that evoke a feeling of awe, reverence, and profound mystery (Nörenberg, 2017). In the Greek Orthodox Church, the numinous experience is associated with encounters with the Divine, experiences of God's Grace, and connections with Saints and Angels. It is often sought through prayer, contemplation, and participating in the sacraments (Shenton, 2018).

The Role of Rituals and Sacraments

The numinous experience in the Greek Orthodox Church is facilitated by rituals and sacraments (Kessareas, 2023). The Divine Liturgy, for instance, is a highly symbolic and transformative experience that allows believers to participate in the mystical reality of Christ's sacrifice. Using incense, icons, chants, and sacraments like the Eucharist, individuals are immersed in an atmosphere that fosters a deep connection with the divine, heightening the potential for numinous encounters (Gatta, 1974).

Iconography and Symbolism

The numinous experience is greatly influenced by the iconic tradition of the Greek Orthodox Church. Through icons, believers can access the divine realm and engage in direct communion with saints, angels, and Christ (Constantine, 1985). Icons are believed to link with uncreated energies, fostering a mystical atmosphere, and facilitating encounters with the unseen. Their power lies in their ability to reveal divine truths and create a visual language for communicating with the Divine (Schaab, 2008).

The Mysticism of the Hesychasm

Hesychasm is a mystical tradition that is deeply rooted in the Greek Orthodox Church. It underlines the practice of "hesychia" which implies inner stillness and silence as a means of attaining a state of union with God, known as *theoria*. Practitioners seek to quiet the mind and open themselves up to the direct experience of God's presence by using the Jesus Prayer, repetitive chanting, and focusing on the heart. Hesychasm offers a path to the numinous, allowing believers to transcend the limitations of the ego and enter communion with the divine energies of God (Stoeckl, 2012).

Psychological Significance of the Numinous Experience

The psychological impact of the numinous experience in the Greek Orthodox Church can be profound for personal growth and well-being (Litsas, 1985). In his exploration of the numinous, Psychologist Carl Gustav Jung emphasized that encounters with the divine provide profound meaning, purpose, and transcendence to an individual's life (Schlamm, 2008). The numinous experience can lead to psychological transformation, expanded consciousness, increased feelings of connectedness, and a sense of awe and wonder, all of which contribute to overall psychological and spiritual well-being (Butler, 1933).

The mysterious experience of the work of Greek Holy Fathers and its interconnection with Psychology.

In the teachings of the Greek Holy Fathers, the numinous experience has been a subject of reflection and exploration for a long time. Rooted in deep spiritual insight and profound theological understanding, the writings of these revered figures offer valuable wisdom and guidance on the numinous encounter with the divine (Chistyakova & Chistyakov, 2012).

Facing the Numinous in Greek Patristic Thinking

The Greek Holy Fathers, like St. Gregory of Nyssa (1978), St. Athanasius the Great (2007), and St. John of Damascus (2012), emphasized the transformative power of experiencing the divine presence. The numinous experience was described by them as a profound encounter with the Uncreated Light, leading to a mystical union with God (Lossky, 1957). Spiritual practices such as prayer, asceticism, and the cultivation of virtues were often required to purify the soul during this encounter (Areopagite, 1949).

The Process of Spiritual Transformation

Greek Holy Fathers presented a holistic understanding of the numinous experience as a transformative journey toward perfection and holiness or divinization (*theosis*). They described the gradual process of purification of mind, heart and soul that leads to a profound union with God. Through the numinous experience, believers were encouraged to participate in divine energies and cultivate spiritual virtues, ultimately becoming transformed into the image of Christ (Koss-Chioino, 2006).

The Role of the Divine Grace and Incarnational Theology

The numinous experience was frequently viewed in the writings of the Greek Holy Fathers because of God's unmerited grace and the Incarnation of Christ. The Incarnation was emphasized by the Holy Fathers, which enabled humanity to participate in the divine nature and experience the numinous (Cowles, 1994). They stressed the synergy between God's grace and human effort, stressing the need for personal participation and co-operation with divine grace to cultivate and sustain the numinous encounter (Brown, 2012).

Psychological Implications of the Numinous Experience

The intersection of numinous experience and psychology provides fascinating perspectives on human consciousness, well-being, and personal growth (Ian & Brian, 1998). Psychologist Carl Gustav Jung recognized the significance of numinosity, and he acknowledges that encounters with the divine provide profound meaning, archetypal symbols, and transformative experiences for the individual. The numinous experience has the potential to aid in psychological healing, ego-transcendence, and integrating the unconscious aspects of the Soul. It also fosters a sense of belonging, purpose, and wonder, contributing to overall psychological wellness (Lönneker & Maercker, 2021).

The Numinous Experience and its Effects on the Psychological and Mental Health of Believers

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The numinous experience is frequently characterized as a mysterious encounter with the transcendent that evokes profound emotions and a sense of reverence. Through prayer, meditation, religious rituals, or contemplative practices, it can be made possible. When individuals encounter the numinous, they often report a heightened sense of meaning, purpose, and connection to something greater than themselves (Lucchetti, Koenig, & Lucchetti, 2021).

Psychological Significance of the Numinous Experience

Numinous experience can have positive impacts on the mental and psychological health of believers (Paloutzian, 2005). Feelings of awe and wonder are generated first, and they have been shown to improve overall well-being and life satisfaction (Dacher & Jonathan, 2003). The association of awe with a broader perspective and a decreased focus on self-concern leads to reduced stress and increased positive emotions (Park, 2005).

In addition, the numinous experience gives believers a sense of meaning and purpose. Engaging in spiritual encounters and feeling connected to a higher power can give individuals a larger framework within which to understand their lives, bringing clarity and a sense of coherence to their experiences. Greater psychological well-being, resilience, and a sense of direction can be achieved through this.

Thirdly, the numinous experience often fosters a sense of hope and optimism. Believers encountering the divine often experience feelings of love, grace, and forgiveness, which can lead to emotional healing, increased self-esteem, and improved relationships with themselves and others. This can have a major positive impact on mental health outcomes, such as the reduction of symptoms of anxiety and depression (Pargament, Smith & Koenig, 1998).

The numinous experience can lead to the transcendence of the ego and a shift in perspective, fourthly. It allows individuals to move beyond their limited sense of self and connect to something greater, thereby expanding their consciousness and freeing themselves from self-centered thought patterns. Increased self-transcendence, compassion, and a broader sense of identity and interconnectedness with the world can be a result of this.

Conclusion

The numinous experience of the Greek Orthodox Church is deeply intertwined with its rich theological and cultural traditions. Creating an environment that fosters encounters with the divine is possible through the rituals, sacraments, iconography, and mystical practices of hesychasm. From a psychological perspective, numinous experience gives individuals a deep sense of meaning, purpose, and connection leading to spiritual and psychological transformation. A deeper understanding of the human capacity for transcendence and its potential for personal growth and well-being can be gained by exploring the numinous experience in the Greek Orthodox Church.

The Greek Holy Fathers' exploration of the numinous experience offers profound insights into the divine encounter and the transformation it brings to the human soul. By engaging in spiritual practices and cultivating virtues, people open themselves to

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the possibility of numinous and are transformed by divine grace. The psychological significance of such experiences is acknowledged by contemporary psychology, which affirms their potential for healing, integration, and personal growth. The exploration of the numinous experience in the works of the Greek Holy Fathers and its intersection with psychology provides a deeper understanding of the human capacity for deep spiritual connection and its implications for psychological well-being.

The psychological and mental health of believers can be greatly impacted by the numinous experience. Providing a sense of awe, meaning, and purpose enhances overall well-being and life satisfaction. Hope, emotional healing, and a transcendent perspective on life can be offered by this encounter with the divine, which can lead to reduced stress, improved relationships, and a profound sense of interconnectedness. Exploring the numinous experience can help individuals gain psychological benefits and cultivate a greater sense of psychological and mental wholeness in their lives.

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