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Sense of the Numinous

It is doubtful that anyone ever came to believe in God by force of philosophical argument. The leap of faith is not a rational process:

For, honestly, all these arguments leave me cold. Even if they were sound – and none of them is watertight – they would only quiet my intellectual questionings. They would never motivate me to absolute dedication ... Arguments are devised subsequent to our deep conviction, not preceding our conviction. They bolster faith; they do not create it. ... But there is a wholly different way of being sure that God is real. It is not an intellectual proof, a reasoned sequence of thoughts. It is the fact that men *experience* the presence of God.¹

Those who believe in God's existence often say that they directly experience God through a sense of the "numinous". The word comes from the magical "nodding" (Greek *neuein*) of a divine idol when it approves of being worshipped or grants a wish. Confronted by God, we

would feel wonder and a certain shrinking – a sense of inadequacy to cope with such a visitant and of prostration before it – an emotion which might be expressed in Shakespeare's words "Under it my genius is rebuked." This feeling may be described as awe, and the object which excites it as the *Numinous*.²

This concept goes back to Rudolf Otto's 1917 book *Das Heilige*.³ The perception of the numinous or the *mysterium tremendum* can be considered "creature-feeling," the sense of being in the presence of one's creator. The numinous is difficult to describe but intense to experience. Otto describes five basic components of the perception: awefulness, majesty (overpoweringness), energy, mystery (wholly other), and fascination.

¹ Kelly, T. (1942). *Reality of the spiritual world*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications (pp 7, 7-8 and 9)

² Lewis, C. S. (1940, reprinted, 1977). *The problem of pain*. London: Harper Collins (Fount) (p. 14). Though the quoted words are appropriate to the numinous, they come from a completely different context: Macbeth's fear that he will be found wanting in comparison to Banquo: Shakespeare, W. (1606). *Macbeth* III:1, lines 54-55.

³ Otto, R. (1917, translated by J. W. Harvey, 1950) *The idea of the holy: An inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*. London: Oxford University Press

Francis Spufford provides a recent description of the numinous:

Someone, not something, is here. Though it's on a scale that defeats imagining and exists without location (or exists in all locations at once) I feel what I feel when there's someone beside me. I am being looked at. I am being known; known in some wholly accurate and complete way that is only possible when the point of view is not another local self in the world but glows in the whole medium in which I live and move. I am being seen from inside, but without any of my own illusions. I am being seen from behind, beneath, beyond. I am being read by what I am made of.⁴

A similar description is given by Christopher Wiman for the experience of communing with God in prayer:

At such moments it is not only as if we were suddenly perceiving something in reality we had not perceived before, but as if we ourselves were being perceived. It is as if the interstellar spaces, and all the random atoms into which we will one day vanish, turned a kind of incomprehensible but utterly comprehending attention toward us.⁵

Otto described his personal perception of the numinous, and asked his readers to recognize it in their own mind.

The reader is invited to direct his mind to a moment of deeply-felt religious experience, as little as possible qualified by other forms of consciousness. Whoever cannot do this, whoever knows no such moments in his experience, is requested to read no further; for it is not easy to discuss questions of religious psychology with one who can recollect the emotions of his adolescence, the discomforts of indigestion, or, say, social feelings, but cannot recall any intrinsically religious feelings. We do not blame such an one, when he tries for himself to advance as far as he can with the help of such principles of explanation as he knows, interpreting Aesthetics in terms of sensuous pleasure, and Religion as a function of the gregarious instinct and social standards, or as something more primitive still. But the artist, who for his part has an intimate personal knowledge of the distinctive element in the aesthetic

⁴ Spufford, F. (2012). *Unapologetic: Why, despite everything, Christianity can still make surprising emotional sense*. London: Faber & Faber (p. 63).

⁵ Wiman, C. (2013). *My bright abyss. Meditation of a modern believer*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

experience, will decline his theories with thanks, and the religious man will reject them even more uncompromisingly.⁶

Have I experienced this sense of the numinous? I have certainly sensed the sublime in nature, yet the sublime is not supernatural. I have often been intensely moved by works of literature, music and painting, but these emotions were evoked by human artists rather than by God. I have been deeply in love but, despite my metaphors, this was human and not divine. Do I lack a sense of the numinous? Or are my intense experiences actually versions of the numinous? Can the numinous be perceived outside of any religious context? Christopher Hitchens wanted to “distinguish the numinous from the supernatural” so that that the numinous is not “conscripted or annexed by any priesthood.”⁷ My intuition is that the numinous is not necessarily religious. Or, to put it another way, perceptions of the sublime, the beautiful and the beloved are religious experiences.

Science considers sensation using psychophysics. This relates our perceptual experience to some independent measurement of what is occurring. What we hear can be compared to the pressures measured with a sound level meter. We have no instrument to measure the numinous. Psychophysics compares different subjects. Normal hearing threshold is the sound pressure level at which most people can just hear. Hearing impairment is the elevation of this threshold above normal. The psychophysics of hearing would become problematic if most people were unable to hear. These difficulties notwithstanding, perhaps we should attempt a psychophysics of the numinous.

Divine Manifestations

The numinous is difficult to describe. In Hindu thought the ultimate divinity (Brahman) is often described as *nirguna*, without (or beyond) attributes. Hindu thought, however, quickly fills this descriptive void with a myriad manifestations. We understand the incomprehensible through metaphors. We see the infinite in many finite representations.

The Rgveda, one of the earliest of the Vedas (from about 1500 BCE) states that “the wise speak of what is One in many ways; they call it Agni, Yama, Matisvaran.” Agni is energy, Yama death, and Matisvaran the breath of life.

⁶ Otto, R. (1917, translated by J. W. Harvey, 1950). *The idea of the holy*. (p 27)

⁷ Hitchens, C. (2011). from *The Four Horsemen* (Video Discussion with Dawkins, Harris, & Dennett) <http://richarddawkinsfoundation.org/fourhorsementranscript>

The names of the gods change over the years but God remains the same.⁸ This is further discussed in the *Upanishads* (from about 600 BCE). These books are commentaries on the Vedas, the term Upanishad meaning “sitting near,” a phrase describing the interactions between teacher and student. In what is perhaps the oldest of the Upanishads, the *Brhadaranyaka* (forest of knowledge), the student asks the teacher about the real number of gods and gets an initial answer of “3003.” As the question is repeated, the answer becomes “303,” then “33,” then “3” and finally “1.” The One is Brahman, “the vital force,” also called *Tat* (“that”) meaning “remote” or “ultimate.”⁹

All other gods are manifestations of this divine force. The term Brahman perhaps comes from the Indo-European root *brh* meaning “grow,” and denotes the principle of existence underlying the universe. Brahman is distinguished from Brahmán (often spelt Brahmin) which denotes a priest of Brahman, and from Brahma which is the manifestation of Brahman at the creation.

Most Hindus approach Brahman through manifestations that allow the devotee to interact with the incomprehensible. The main sects of Hinduism are centered around Vishnu, Shiva and Shakti. Vishnu reveals himself in many avatars or manifestations, the most famous of which is Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Shiva likewise has many forms, most commonly the ascetic and the dancer. Shakti represents the divine feminine.

The idea of the Hindu divine can be approached by considering Shiva in his manifestation as *Shiva Nataraja* (Lord of Dance). Bronze statues of Shiva dancing originated in the 10th century CE under the Chola dynasty in Southern India, particularly at the Chidambaram (“Hall of Consciousness”) temple.¹⁰

Shiva is one of the three main Gods (*trimurti*) of the Hindu pantheon: Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer. Shiva (“pure”) may derive from *Rudra*, the Vedic god of the wind or storm. Shiva is most

⁸ Doniger, W. (1981). *The Rig Veda: An anthology : one hundred and eight hymns, selected, translated and annotated*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin (I,164:46, p. 80).

⁹ Madhavababda, S. (translator, 1950) *The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad with the commentary of Sankaracarya*. Calcutta: P. C. Chatterjee. (III: 1-9, pp 530-537); Mahony, W. K. (1998). *The artful universe: An introduction to the Vedic religious imagination*. Albany: State University of New York Press (pp. 162-164). The numbers vary in the different translations. *Tat* is the same word as in *tat tvam asi* discussed in Chapter II (p. 174)

¹⁰ Kramrisch, S. (1981). *Manifestations of Shiva*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art; Dehejia, V. (2006). *Chola: Sacred bronzes of southern India*. London: Royal Academy of Arts.

commonly depicted in abstract form as a phallic pillar or *lingam*, often resting within a vaginal base or *yonī*. Sexual energy infuses the universe. Shiva's consort *Parvati* (daughter of the mountains) is a version of Shakti, the primordial feminine. *Parvati* has many manifestations from the voluptuous *Uma* to the demonic *Kali*. Sometimes Shiva and *Parvati* are joined together in one body as *Ardhanarishvara* (the lord who is half woman), usually male on his right and female on her left.

The Nataraja statues derive from the legendary confrontation in the pine forest of Taragam between Shiva and the heretical sages.¹¹ The exact nature of their heresy is not clear. They may have refused to believe in the gods or considered themselves as gods.¹² This is intriguing since the *Upanishads* identify the self with God. However, perhaps they did not dissolve themselves in God's purpose, but rather usurped the powers of God improperly.

The sages conjured various forces to attack the god. Shiva first subdued a fierce tiger and wrapped its skin around his loins. He then tied a monstrous serpent as a sash around his waist. Finally the sages sent the malignant dwarf of ignorance (*Muyalaka* or *Apasmara*) to attack the God. Shiva overcame him and performed upon his broken back the dance of bliss (*ananda tandavam*) depicted in the Nataraja statues (Figure III.9).

Shiva dances within a flaming aureole that represents both the universe and the mind of man. The universe moves into and out of existence, into and out of consciousness. Shiva's posterior right hand holds a small drum (*damaru*) that beats the rhythm of creation and his posterior left hand cradles the fire (*agni*) of destruction. The anterior right hand is raised in the *abhaya* (Be not afraid) gesture, and a cobra is coiled around his right forearm. The anterior left hand points down to his raised left foot in the *gaja* (elephant) gesture: the drooping hand mimics the elephant's trunk and raised fingers suggest his tusks. This alludes to Shiva's son Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, who provides the means to overcome all obstacles. The raised left foot represents the release from suffering, and the stable right foot represents the defeat of evil.

¹¹ Coomaraswamy, A. K. (1918). *The dance of Śiva: Fourteen Indian essays*. New York: Sunwise Turn.. (pp 56-66); Gaston, A.-M. (1982). *Śiva in dance, myth, and iconography*. Delhi: Oxford University Press; Smith, D. (1996). *The dance of Śiva: Religion, art and poetry in South India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Chapter 2 The Cidambaram myth).

¹² Doniger, W. (1976). *The origins of evil in Hindu mythology*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (p 313)



Figure III.9 Shiva Nataraja. Bronze, Chola Dynasty, Tamil Nadu, India, c 1100 CE. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

The lower locks of Shiva's hair fly out in the frenzy of the dance. Through these braids flow the sacred waters. On Shiva's right, the Goddess Ganga, whose incarnation is the River Ganges, rests in the flowers that float upon the waters. Shiva's right earring is serpentine (male) and his left earring circular (female).

The dance embodies Shiva's five activities. *srishti* (creation, evolution) in the drum, *sthiti* (preservation, support) in the gestures, *samhara* (destruction) in the flame, *tirobhava* (mystery, veiling) in the right foot, and *anugraha* (revelation, salvation) in the raised left foot. The dance was described by Ananda Coomaraswamy in a book of essays introducing Hindu art and thought to the West:

In the night of Brahma, Nature is inert, and cannot dance till Siva wills it: He rises from His rapture, and dancing sends through inert matter pulsing waves of awakening sound, and lo! matter also dances appearing as a glory round about Him. Dancing, He sustains its manifold phenomena. In the fulness of time, still dancing, he destroys all forms and names by fire and gives new rest. This is poetry; but none the less, science!¹³

¹³ Coomaraswamy, A. K. (1918). *The dance of Śiva: Fourteen Indian essays*. New York: Sunwise Turn. (p. 66).