

This is the last session of our course. We have examined how religion and science have contributed to how we understand ourselves and the world we live in.

The illustration is a 1932 watercolor by Paul Klee entitled "Two Ways." There are two paths into the painting one from the left and one from the right. These are indicated by the arrows. They come close to getting tangled but they both exit to the right.

The abstract style of Klee and his colleagues did not sit well with fascism. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, they closed the Bauhaus, where Klee was a professor. In 1937, the Nazis produced an exhibition of "degenerate" art, which included fifteen of Klee's pictures. For fascism there was only one way.

This session will cover some general questions about religion and science for which we have no answer. We shall deal first with our sense of the "numinous" – our perception of something or someone that transcends the real world. Perhaps there might be some way to study this scientifically. Then we shall consider theodicy – the justification for suffering in the universe – starting with the story of Job. Then we shall look at the role of organized religion in human life, using as a point of discussion Fyodor Dostoevsky's story of *The Grand Inquisitor*. We shall end by discussing some of the implications for religious pluralism, as seen through a Sufi poem about 40 birds in search of God.

Characteristics of the Numinous

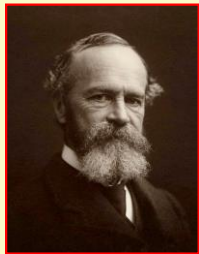
- (i) a sense of being in the presence of something beyond comprehension or control.
- (ii) an intense emotional arousal, combining fear and wonder, like being at the edge of an abyss.
- (iii) a state of uncertainty and a need to do something about it (“You must change your life” Rilke)

Sebastiano Delgado, 2009



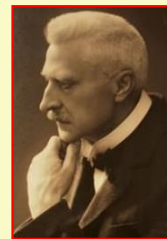
The psychology of religion centers on the experience of the numinous. Mountains make it easier to feel the numinous. The photograph shows a view in the Brooks Mountains in the Gates of the Arctic National Park in Alaska.

Descriptions of the Numinous





It is as if there were in the human consciousness a sense of reality, a feeling of objective **presence**, a perception of what we may call ‘something there,’ more deep and more general than any of the special and particular ‘senses’ by which current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed. (William James, 1902).

I propose to call it ‘**creature-consciousness**’ or creature-feeling. It is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures. (Rudolf Otto, 1917).




The word “numinous” comes from the Greek *neuein* for nodding – perhaps the barely perceptible nodding of a divine idol when it approves of being worshipped or grants a wish. William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), in the chapter *The Reality of the Unseen* described a feeling of being in the presence of something beyond the grasp of our normal five senses. In *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), Rudolf Otto used the term numinous to describe the relationship between creature and creator.

You 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*. (C. S. Lewis, 1947)

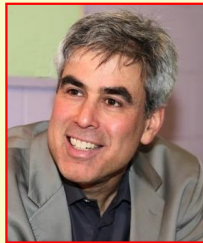



The literature of religious experience abounds in references to the pains and terrors overwhelming those who have come, too suddenly, face to face with some manifestation of the **mysterium tremendum**. In theological language, this fear is due to the in-compatibility between man's egotism and the divine purity, between man's self-aggravated separateness and the infinity of God. (Aldous Huxley, 1954)

C. S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain* (1947) used the idea of the numinous to explain how one can believe in God when the existence of suffering makes the concept of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God illogical. Aldous Huxley discussed the *mysterium tremendum* when reporting his hallucinogenic experiences with mescaline in *The Doors of Perception* (1954).

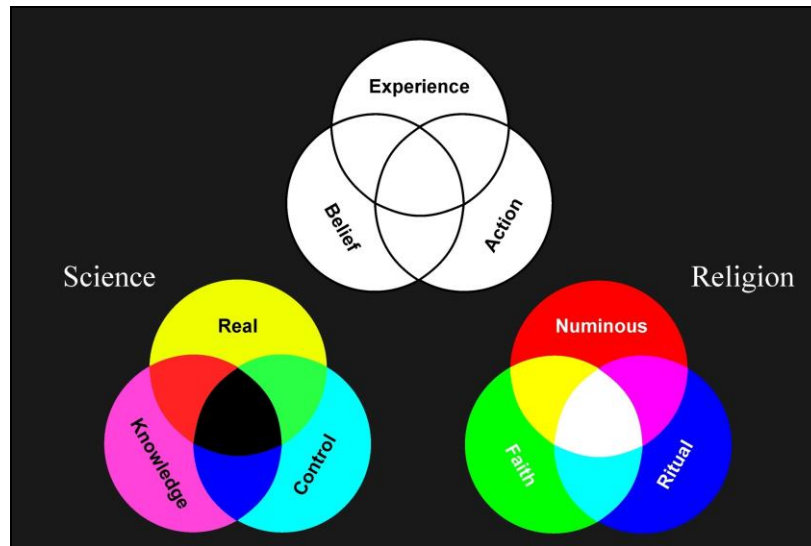


[A]we involves being in the presence of something powerful, along with associated feelings of submission. **Awe** also involves a difficulty in comprehension, along with associated feelings of confusion, surprise, and wonder. (Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, 2003)



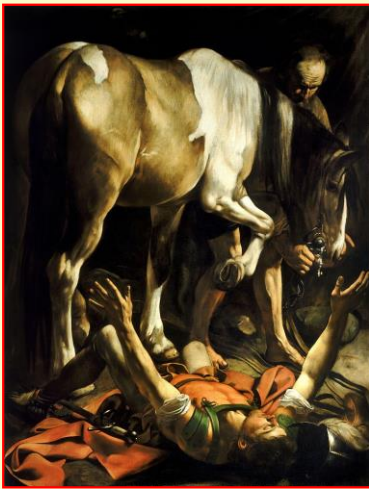

At such moments it is not only as if we were suddenly perceiving something in reality we had not perceived before, but as if we ourselves were **being perceived**. (Christopher Wiman, 2013)

Cognitive Psychology has considered the numinous under the rubric of “awe” and finds that it combines cognitive uncertainty and intense emotion. The upper description comes from a 2003 review paper appropriately published in the journal *Cognition and Emotion*. Another aspect of the numinous is the sense that one is being perceived as much as perceiving. The lower quotation is from Christian Wiman, a poet, in a book called *My Bright Abyss* (2013).



The experience of the numinous parallels the experience of the real world. In general we experience something, derive from that experience a set of beliefs, and then act according to those beliefs in order to gain more experience. When dealing with the real world we create knowledge that then allows us to act within that world. The experience of the numinous leads to faith and faith lead to practices that bring about further interaction with the numinous. For example, revelations can lead to conversion to a faith that promotes prayer and meditation to enhance the experience of the numinous.

The complementary diagrams at the bottom represent how colors interact. The left shows what happens if you mix colored pigments; the right shows what happens if you mix colored lights.



Conversion

And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me.

And I fell unto the ground, and heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

(Acts 22:6-7)

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio,
Conversion on the Way to Damascus
Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome, 1601

Many are the ways in which we become aware of the numinous. An intense experience of the numinous can lead to a complete re-thinking of one's life. On the road to Damascus, the

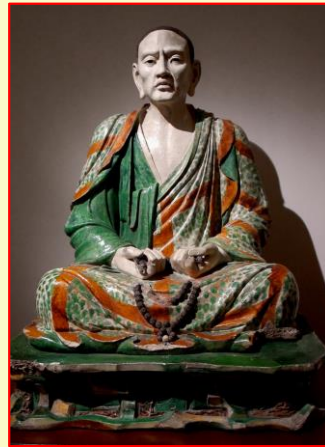
persecutor Saul had a vision that led him to become the Apostle Paul. The nature of the vision is not known. Some have suggested that it might have been epileptic in origin. Yet the effect is perhaps more important than the cause.

Meditation

The birds have vanished down the sky.
Now the last cloud drains away.

We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains.

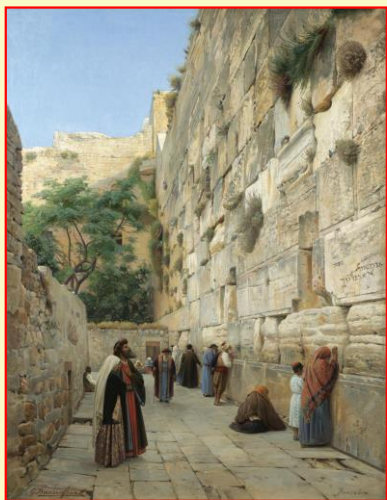
Li Bai, 8th Century CE
translated by Sam Hamill, 2002



*Luohan, 11-12th Century
Musée Guimet, Paris*

Once a religion is founded, behaviors are promoted to maintain the link to the original numinous experience. The mainstay of the Eastern religions is the process of meditation. The goal is to lose the self, to dissolve into the great sea of being. We have already seen a similar ceramic sculpture in a previous session. Eight of these statues were found in China in 1912. They are now scattered in various museums across the world. One is in the Royal Ontario Museum. None remain in China.

Prayer



And when ye see this, your heart
shall rejoice, and your bones shall
flourish like an herb: and the hand
of the LORD shall be known toward
his servants, and his indignation
toward his enemies.

*Isaiah 66:14 (Hebrew inscription
on the Isaiah Stone of the Western
Wall, 1798)*

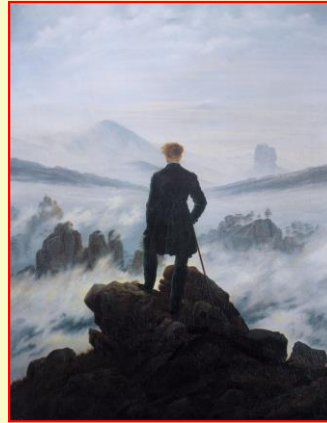
Gustav Bauernfeind, 1890
Wailing Wall, Jerusalem

Western religions tend to prayer more than meditation. Communing with a personal God rather than dissolving in a Universal Force.

Sublime

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

*Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern
Abbey, William Wordsworth, 1798*



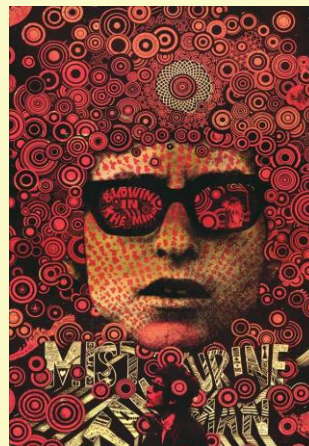
Caspar David Friedrich, 1818
Wanderer above the Sea of Fog

The numinous is not necessarily related to religion. The romantic revolution led to the search for the numinous in nature: “a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused . . .” This carries on to the present in our search for “peak experiences” through extreme sports or artistic endeavours. Other terms are “being in the zone” and “flow.” The concept of peak experience was originally proposed by the psychologist A. H. Maslow in his 1964 book *Religions, Values and Peak-Experiences*.

Psychodelic


Take me on a trip upon your magic swirlin'
ship
My senses have been stripped, my hands
can't feel to grip
My toes too numb to step, wait only for my
boot heels
To be wanderin'
I'm ready to go anywhere, I'm ready for to
fade
Into my own parade, cast your dancing spell
my way
I promise to go under it.

Bob Dylan



Martin Sharp, 1967
Mr. Tambourine Man

The numinous can come from drugs as well as devotion. Wordsworth’s friend Coleridge’s visions of *Kubla Khan* were induced by opium. In the latter half of the twentieth century psychedelic experiences became the way to the numinous. The answer from the 1964 song *Mr. Tambourine Man* is blowing in the mind. “Take me on a trip upon you magic swirlin’ ship . . .” Bob Dylan has insisted that the song has nothing to do with drugs, but simply had to do with music and imagination. Most of his listeners disagreed.



Art

denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern

here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

Rainer Maria Rilke, 1906

Torso from Miletus
480 BCE, Louvre

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote about his experience of the numinous while looking at an archaic torso of Apollo in the Louvre.

The numinous experience is the essence of scripture and the basis for religious belief. We know very little about how the brain mediates the numinous experience. This is unfortunate since it is so important. We have some understanding about the psychology that underlies the experience. Emotions of fear and wonder combine with a cognitive state of confusion and uncertainty. The outcome of the experience can be some accommodation of our understanding to a larger view of the world.

Psychology of the Numinous

Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me.

And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest. (*Psalms* 55: 5-6)

Elicitors: Great Beauty, Power, Charisma, Insight, Mystery

Cognitive Features: Vastness and Need for Accommodation

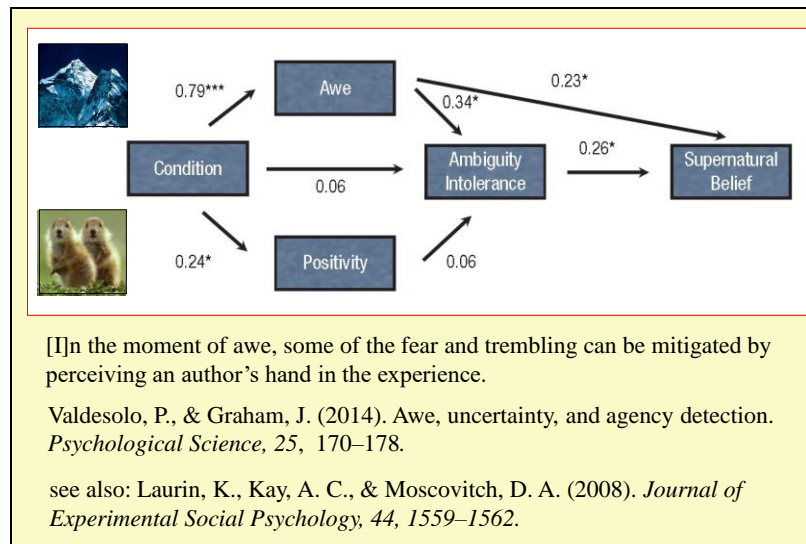
Emotional Concomitants: Fear and Wonder

[A]we involves a need for accommodation, which may or may not be satisfied. The success of one's attempts at accommodation may partially explain why awe can be both terrifying (when one fails to understand) and enlightening (when one succeeds).

Keltner, D., & Haidt, J. (2003). Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion. *Cognition & Emotion*, 17, 297–314.

Keltner and Haidt reviewed our understanding of awe. Various situations can elicit the mental state. We may be in the presence of great natural beauty – sunsets, mountains, canyons, galaxies. Artistic creations can also elicit awe – paintings especially when large, music especially when

loud. Great leaders and saints trigger awe and devotion. Science can also bring forth the feeling. Essential to the experience of awe, however, is an incomplete understanding. The main cognitive characteristics of awe are a sense of vastness that overwhelms our present ability to understand, and a pressing need to come to grips with whatever we are experiencing. Awe is highly emotional. The two main factors are fear and wonder. The experience of the numinous therefore “can be both terrifying (when one fails to understand) and enlightening (when one succeeds).”



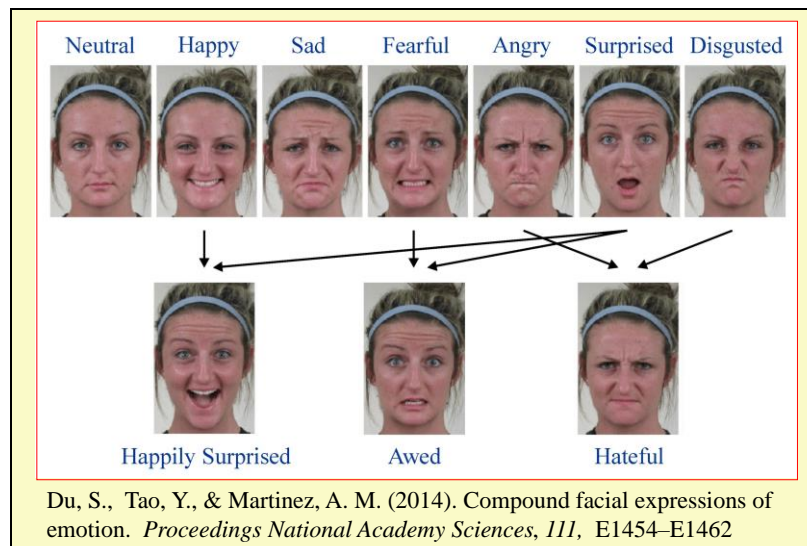
A common outcome of the experience of the numinous is a belief in supernatural powers. A recent psychological study by Valdesolo and Graham investigated how this comes about. Subjects were exposed to two conditions. In one they watched awe-inspiring videos of sunsets, mountains, canyons and galaxies. In another they watched humorous videos of animal behavior. Two questionnaires were administered:

- One determined the subject's ability to tolerate uncertainty: “I feel uncomfortable when I don't understand the reason why an event occurred in my life”
- Another determined the subject's belief in supernatural forces: “The events that occur in this world unfold according to God's or some other nonhuman entity's plan.”

The correlational analysis showed that awe induced by the experimental manipulation increased belief in supernatural forces in those that were less able to tolerate ambiguity.

“[I]n the moment of awe, some of the fear and trembling can be mitigated by perceiving an author's hand in the experience.”

In a related experiment, Kristin Laurin and her colleagues related the belief in God to the “desire to avoid the emotionally uncomfortable experience of perceiving the world as random and chaotic.”



The numinous induces emotional as well as cognitive effects. However, we understand much less about our emotions than about our thoughts. The complex array of human emotions can be considered as mixtures of some primary states. This figure comes from a recent article describing computer techniques for reading the emotions from facial expressions. Six basic emotions generally were considered: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust. Other emotions were considered as combinations of these primary states. Thus hatred may be a combination of anger and disgust. The authors suggested that awe is a combination of surprise and fear.

Curiosity

Curiosity/Interest is an emotional state, personality trait or motivational drive that becomes manifest in a situation where there is either a lack of arousal (boredom) or a disparity between what one experiences and what one understands (information-deprivation). The main facial aspects of curiosity are the fixed stare, widened eyelids and pursed lips.



Litman, J.A. (2005). Curiosity and the pleasures of learning: Wanting and liking new information. *Cognition and Emotion*, *19*, 793-814.

Reeve, J. (1993). The face of interest. *Motivation and Emotion*, *17*, 353-375.

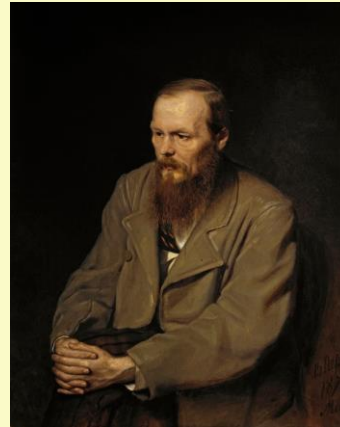
It may be more complex. The experience of the numinous involves attraction as well as withdrawal: orientation toward as well as flight from. Heart rate slowing as opposed to speeding. Some systems of emotion include curiosity: the state of mind or personality trait that leads us to explore our environment. Curiosity is prominent in children. It shows a characteristic facial expression: a fixed stare, opened eyelids and pursed lips. I suggest that the numinous induces curiosity as well as fear and uncertainty.

Epileptic Experiences

The sense of life, of self-awareness, increased nearly tenfold in these moments, which flashed by like lightning. His mind, his heart were lit up with an extraordinary light; all his agitation, all his doubts, all his worries were as if placated at once, resolved in a sort of sublime tranquility, filled with serene harmonious joy, and hope, filled with reason and ultimate cause.

(Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, 1869)

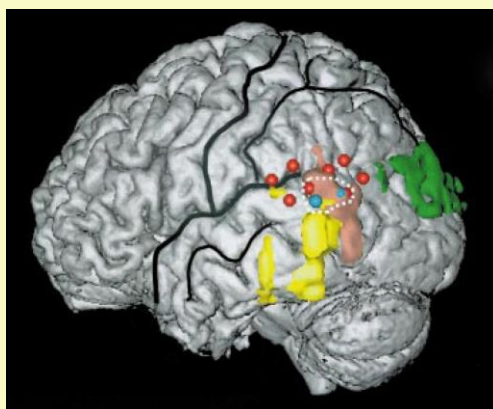
Vassily Perov,
Dostoyevsky, 1872



Devinsky, O., & Lai, G. (2008). Spirituality and religion in epilepsy. *Epilepsy & Behavior*, 12, 636–643

Many people have sought an explanation of the numinous in the brain. The numinous experience may be part of the aura of an epileptic attack. Fyodor Dostoyevsky suffered from epilepsy, and we presume that the seizures of Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* reflect his own experience: a brief period of sublime tranquility and a sense of ultimate cause. Although the origin of Dostoyevsky's seizures is unknown, most consider them as temporal lobe epilepsy. Surveys show that about 4% of patients with temporal lobe epilepsy have religious or mystical experience either in the aura or in the post-ictal state. The experience is much more likely pleasant than not. Some people have tried to induce feelings of the numinous by stimulating the temporal lobe but these experiments are poorly controlled and unconvincing.

Out-of-Body Experiences

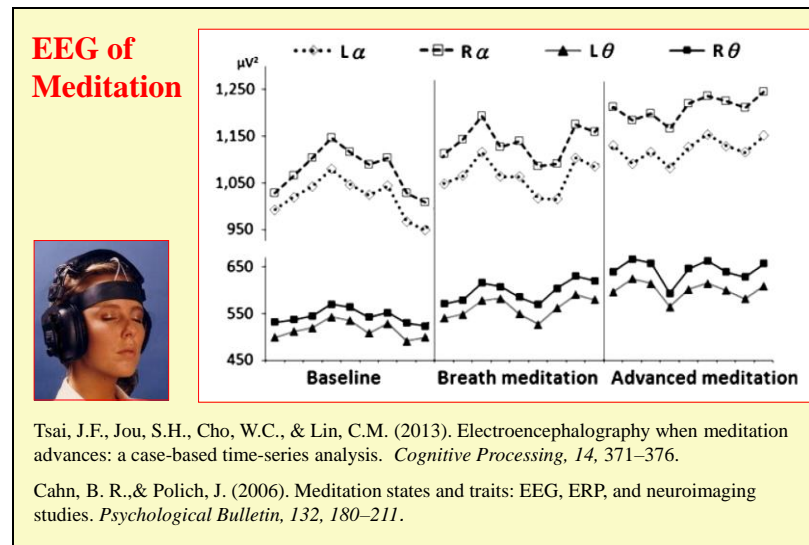


Blanke, O., Landis, T., Spinelli, L., & Seeck, M. (2004). Out-of-body experience and autoscapy of neurological origin. *Brain*, 127, 243–258.

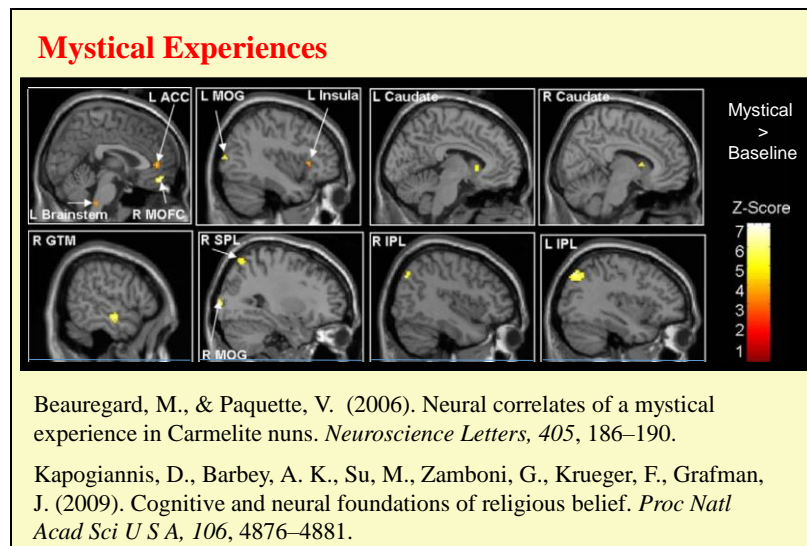
Arzy, S., Idel, M., Landis, T., & Blanke, O. (2005) Why revelations have occurred on mountains? Linking mystical experiences and cognitive neuroscience. *Medical Hypotheses*, 65, 841–845

Olaf Blanke and his colleagues studied five patients who reported out-of-body experiences and found lesions in the temporo-parietal region of the brain. This region where the different perceptual systems come together may be important in the representation of the self within a

world. Losing oneself and becoming swept away in a more universal experience may therefore result from damage to these regions. This area of the cortex is very sensitive to anoxia since it is at the furthest reaches of the cortical vascular supply. In an intriguing paper, the authors wonder if the prophets who received divine revelations when they went up into the mountains might have been susceptible to hypoxia. A similar hypothesis can be made for the near-death experience.

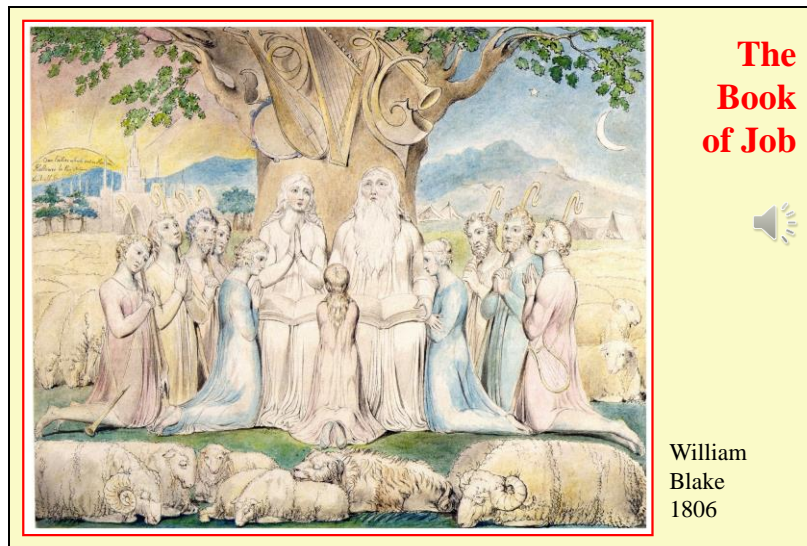


The brain's electrical activity changes markedly during the numinous experience. Both alpha activity (8-13 Hz) and theta (5-7 Hz) activity significantly increase during meditation. The problem is that we do not really know what these rhythms mean in terms of brain processing. Furthermore, we do not know whether the rhythmic changes are an essential part of the meditation process or simply a side-effect. The alpha rhythm is likely an idling activity generated when the visual cortex is not processing information. Theta activity can occur in drowsiness and in emotional arousal. In the sixties, seekers of the numinous trained their brains to increase their alpha rhythm. I am not sure that such biofeedback brought forth any revelations independently of the pharmaceuticals that were its frequent concomitants.



Functional MRI studies of the numinous experience are difficult. Mystic visions may not come easily in a multi-Tesla magnetic field. Many experiments have occurred and many manipulations have been made. Some are woefully inadequate in terms of their design and analysis. Some are intriguing but founder on the difficulty of setting up experimental manipulations that can lead to a sense of the numinous within the confines of the magnet. Beauregard and his colleagues found multiple regions active when Carmelite nuns recalled mystical experiences, most prominently in the inferior frontal, temporal and parietal regions. Kapogiannis and his colleagues used a much less effective manipulation – subjects either evaluated religious statements or discriminated fonts. Their only significant finding related to a belief in God’s lack of involvement in the world. The brain only betrayed its lack of faith. In conclusion there does not seem as yet to be any clear idea of what is happening in the brain during the experience of the numinous.

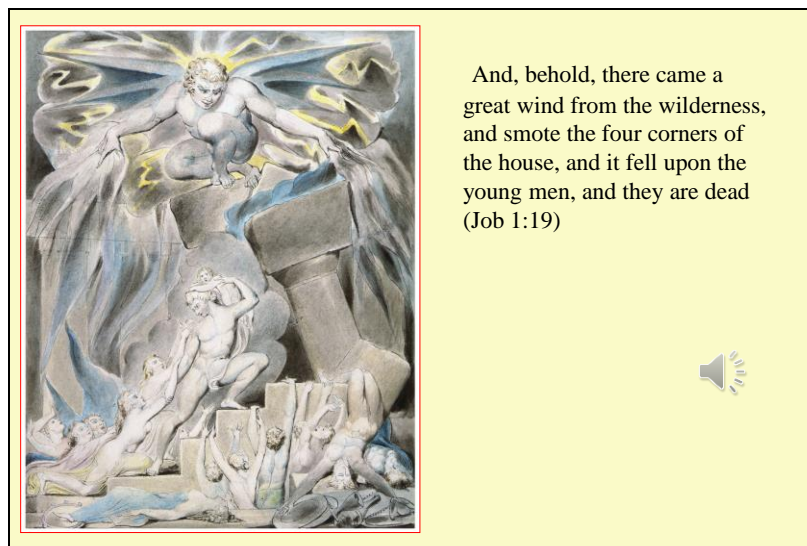
However, the experience of the numinous is real. And it is important to understand. There is a need for more research with adequate controls and accurate measurements of the subjective experience.



In this section we shall deal with theodicy ('justifying God' from the Greek *theos*, God, and *dike*, trial – putting God on trial). Why does a theoretically omnipotent and omnibenevolent God allow evil and suffering? In the beginning the idea was that evil and suffering were divine punishment for bad behavior. However, this is patently false. The story of Job is the great demonstration of the truth that bad things happen to good people.

Job 1:1 There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil.

The recitations in this section are by Alexander Scourby. He reads from the King James Version of the Bible. I shall also give some other translations that are more modern in their tone.



God allows Satan to test his follower Job, to see whether Job remains faithful even when he is afflicted by unnecessary suffering. Satan brings down calamity upon the family of Job.

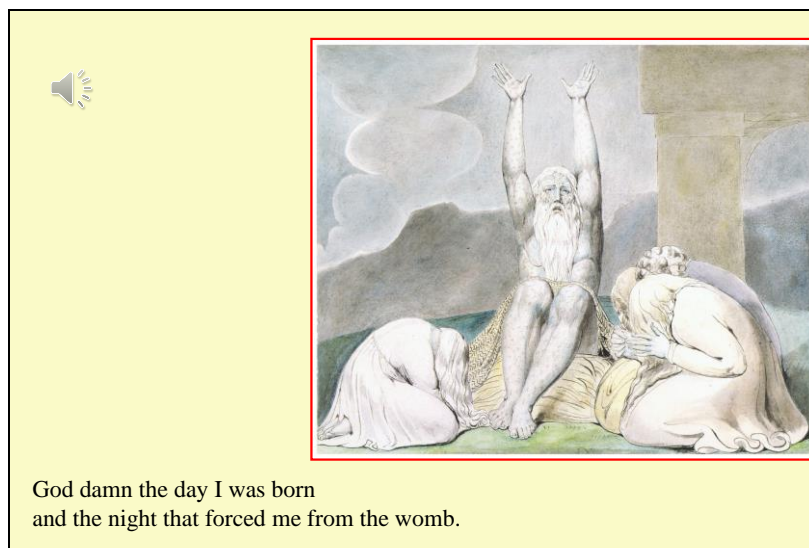
Job 1:18-22: While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house:

And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped,

And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.

In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.



Job tries to find some reason for his unmerited suffering. Job's comforters visit him and attempt to convince him that it is his fault. Job does not accept their reasons. finally gives up his defense of God and curses the day he was born

From the 1979 translation by Stephen Mitchell:

God damn the day I was born
and the night that forced me from the womb.
On that day—let there be darkness;
let it never have been created;
let it sink back into the void.
Let chaos overpower it;
let black clouds overwhelm it;
let the sun be plucked from its sky.
Let oblivion overshadow it;
let the other days disown it;
let the aeons swallow it up.
On that night—let no child be born,

no mother cry out with joy.
 Let sorcerers wake the Serpent
 to blast it with eternal blight.
 Let its last stars be extinguished;
 let it wait in terror for daylight;
 let its dawn never arrive.
 For it did not shut the womb's doors
 to shelter me from this sorrow.



God appears to Job out of the whirlwind. He chastises Job for criticizing what he does not and cannot understand.

from Stephen Mitchell's translation:

Who is this whose ignorant words
 ...smear my design with darkness?
 Stand up now like a man;
 ...I will question you: please, instruct me.

Where were you when I planned the earth?
 ...Tell me, if you are so wise.
 Do you know who took its dimensions,
 ...measuring its length with a cord?
 What were its pillars built on?
 ...Who laid down its cornerstone,
 while the morning stars burst out singing
 ...and the angels shouted for joy!

Were you there when I stopped the waters,
...as they issued gushing from the womb?
when I wrapped the ocean in clouds
...and swaddled the sea in shadows?
when I closed it in with barriers
...and set its boundaries, saying,
“Here you may come, but no farther;
...here shall your proud waves break.”

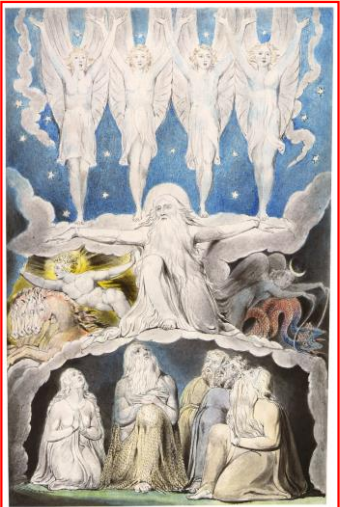
Have you ever commanded morning
...or guided dawn to its place—
to hold the corners of the sky
...and shake off the last few stars?
All things are touched with color;
...the whole world is changed.

Have you walked through the depths of the ocean
...or dived to the floor of the sea?
Have you stood at the gates of doom
...or looked through the gates of death?
Have you seen to the edge of the universe?
...Speak up, if you have such knowledge.

Where is the road to light?
...Where does darkness live?
(Perhaps you will guide them home
...or show them the way to their house.)
You know, since you have been there
...and are older than all creation.

Have you seen where the snow is stored
...or visited the storehouse of hail,
which I keep for the day of terror,
...the final hours of the world?
Where is the west wind released
...and the east wind sent down to earth?

Who cuts a path for the thunderstorm
...and carves a road for the rain—
to water the desolate wasteland,
...the land where no man lives;
to make the wilderness blossom
...and cover the desert with grass?



Where were you when I planned the earth?
 ...Tell me, if you are so wise.
 Do you know who took its dimensions,
 ...measuring its length with a cord?
 What were its pillars built on?
 ...Who laid down its cornerstone,
 while the morning stars burst out singing
 ...and the angels shouted for joy!

Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1930
 Pavane for the Sons of the Morning



And in the end Job lives happily ever after.


Job 42:12-17: So the LORD blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning: for he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she asses.

And he called the name of the first, Jemima; and the name of the second, Kezia; and the name of the third, Kerenhappuch.

And in all the land were no women found so fair as the daughters of Job: and their father gave them inheritance among their brethren.

After this lived Job an hundred and forty years, and saw his sons, and his sons' sons, even four generations.


So Job died, being old and full of days.



Nickles' Song

I heard upon his dry dung heap
That man cry out who cannot sleep:
"If God is God He is not good,
If God is good He is not God;
Take the even, take the odd,
I would not sleep here if I could
Except for the little green leaves
 in the wood
And the wind on the water."

Archibald MacLeish, 1958

Mr. Zuss and Nickles 

Archibald MacLeish wrote the play *J. B.* based upon *The Book of Job*. J.B., a rich and observant banker, is tested by God. In the original Broadway production, the character Mr. Zuss (cf Zeus) was played by Raymond Massey and Nickles (cf Satan, or Old Nick) was played by Christopher Plummer. Like its biblical source, the play brings up issues concerning


- (i) God's omnipotence – if God is omnipotent and benevolent why is there suffering?
- (ii) Justice – why is goodness not always rewarded and why do the evil prosper?
- (iii) Understanding – how can finite minds comprehend the actions of an infinite God?
- (iv) Consolation – how can we alleviate the sufferings of others? (Not by telling them that it is all their own fault)

Nickles' song deals with God omnipotence? Either God is not omnipotent or He is not benevolent. In the picture the characters take up their masks to play the roles assigned to them.

A Masque of Reason

Robert Frost, 1945

I've had you on my mind a thousand years
To thank you someday for the way you helped me
Establish once for all the principle
There's no connection man can reason out
Between his just deserts and what he gets.
Virtue may fail and wickedness succeed.



Yousuf Karsh, 1958

Robert Frost considered the issues raised by the story of Job in his Masque of Reason. God talks to Job. The above comments continue:

‘Twas a great demonstration we put on.
 I should have spoken sooner had I found
 The word I wanted. You would have supposed
 One who in the beginning was the Word
 Would be in a position to command it.
 I have to wait for words like anyone.
 Too long I’ve owed you this apology
 For the apparently unmeaning sorrow
 You were afflicted with in those old days.
 But it was of the essence of the trial
 You shouldn’t understand it at the time.
 It had to seem unmeaning to have meaning.
 And it came out all right. I have no doubt
 You realize by now the part you played
 To stultify the Deuteronomist
 And change the tenor of religious thought.
 My thanks are to you for releasing me
 From moral bondage to the human race.
 The only free will there at first was man’s,
 Who could do good or evil as he chose.
 I had no choice but I must follow him
 With forfeits and rewards he understood—
 Unless I liked to suffer loss of worship.
 I had to prosper good and punish evil.
 You changed all that. You set me free to reign.
 You are the Emancipator of your God,
 And as such I promote you to a saint.

Theodicy

The problem of undeserved suffering is the most common reason for not believing in a God or in one that pays special attention to humanity.

Counter arguments are that suffering

- i. is a proper part of a **grand plan**: “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things.” (Isaiah 45:7).
- ii. allows us to develop **virtue**: “God judged it better to bring good out of evil than to suffer no evil to exist.” (Augustine)
- iii. will be **compensated**: “The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” (Romans 8: 18)
- iv. is in exact retribution for wrongdoing either in this life or in previous lives (**karma**)
- v. is a necessary part of the universe becoming perfect (**process theology**)

Roles of Religion

Support community
Comfort the afflicted
Provide ways to cope with death
Show moral leadership
Mark the passages of life

Seven Acts of Mercy
Caravaggio, 1607



This next section examine the role that religion should play in society. The list mentions five things. The painting illustrates seven

burial of the dead
visiting those in prison
feeding the hungry
sheltering the homeless
clothing the naked
comforting the sick
refreshing the thirsty

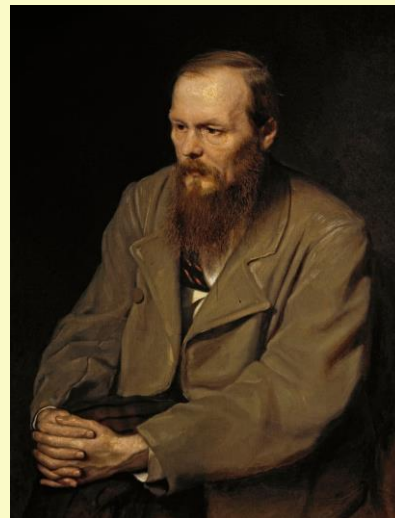
A more complete discussion of the painting is at

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23753234.2017.1287283>

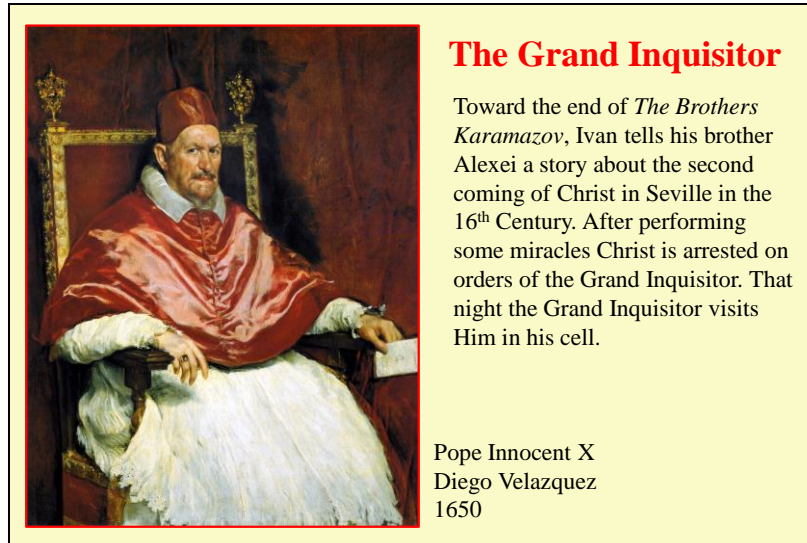
The Brothers Karamazov

Fyodor Dostoyevsky completed his final novel in 1880 just before he died. It tells of the murder of Fyodor Karamazov, the father of three legitimate sons Dmitri, Ivan and Alexei, and one illegitimate son Smerdyakov. Among the many issues considered in the book is the idea that “without God everything is permitted.”

Portrait of Dostoyevsky
Vasily Perov, 1872



A story told by Ivan Karamazov in the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* might help us to examine the role of organized religion in human society.



Ivan Karamazov, tormented by the realization that God, if he indeed exists, allows the suffering of innocent children, rejects the salvation proffered by such a God. Justice is more important than divinity.

Pope Innocent lived about 100 years after Dostoyevsky's imaginary Grand Inquisitor, serving as pope from 1644-1655. One of his acts was to condemn the heresies of the Jansenists, who did not believe in free will.



This is Francis Bacon's 1953 painting based on the Velazquez portrait of Innocent X. The horror behind absolute power.



When the Grand Inquisitor visits Christ in prison, he explains to him how the Church has done what Christ refused to do when he was tempted in the wilderness. This painting by Sandro Botticelli (1482) in the Sistine Chapel shows *The Temptations of Christ*.

The three temptations of the Devil were to make bread from stone (upper left), to cast himself from the top of the temple and to be saved by angels (upper center) and to rule all the kingdoms of the world (upper right). The relevant text is Matthew 4: 1-11

Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred. And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.

But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.

Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple,

And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.

Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.

Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them;

And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.

Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.

Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.

In Dostoyevsky's story the Cardinal says that Christ would not change stones into bread to feed the people because man does not live by bread alone. The Church, however, has provided the poor with sufficient food to live on, feeding them first before asking them to be virtuous. Christ would not show the people his supernatural powers. The Church, however, has given the people

all sorts of miracles to believe in. Christ would not rule the world because the kingdom of Heaven is spiritual rather than temporal. The Church, however, has allied itself to the Caesars of the world and given man community.



This is a clip from *The Grand Inquisitor*, produced in 1975 for BBC-TV by the Open University. John Gielgud plays the Grand Inquisitor. Full video is at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=om6HcUUa8DI>

from Garnett translation:

And everyone will be happy, all the millions of creatures, except for the hundred thousand of those who govern them. For only we, we who keep the mystery, only we shall be unhappy. There will be thousands of millions of happy babes, and a hundred thousand sufferers who have taken upon themselves the curse of the knowledge of good and evil. Peacefully they will die, peacefully they will expire in your name, and beyond the grave they will find only death. But we will keep the secret, and for their own happiness we will entice them with a heavenly and eternal reward.

Throughout the Cardinal's long diatribe Christ says nothing. Finally he "approaches the old man in silence and gently kisses him." The Cardinal shudders, opens the door to the prison and lets Christ leave, telling him never to return. "The kiss burns in his heart, but the old man holds to his former idea."

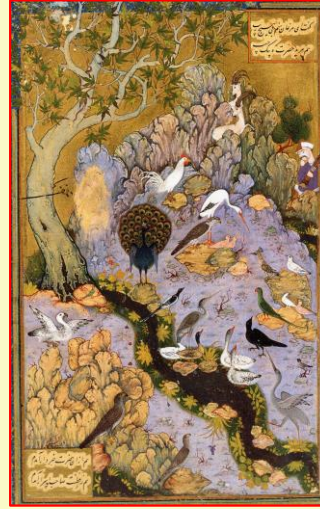
The legend ends on this ambiguous note. Does the kiss recognize the Cardinal's betrayal of the truth, like the kiss of Judas when he identified Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane? Does it represent Christ's love for the sinner no matter how great the sin? Does it suggest that Christ approves of what the Cardinal is doing and sympathizes with his sacrifice for the greater good?

Mantiq al-Tayr (Canticle of the Birds)

Led by the Hoopoe, the birds decide to seek the legendary *Simorgh*, bird of the sun, phoenix, all-knowing divinity.



Illustration 1609
Habibollah of
Mashhad



To end this presentation we might consider the ways to reach the divine by mentioning a 12th-Century Sufi poem by the Persian Farid ud-Din Attar. He tells how all the different birds got together to seek the legendary Simorgh. The hoopoe bird, characterized by his crown of feathers, was chosen as their leader. He was renowned for having carried messages between Solomon and Sheba. In the illustration, the hunter on the right represents the devil who is trying to catch unwary birds. A popular translation of the poem in rhyming couplets is by Dick Davis *The Conference of the Birds* in Penguin Classics (2011)

The birds are not sure about going on the journey. The hoopoe encourages his fearful companions, restrains the reckless, chides the self-satisfied, deflates the pompous, and comforts those possessed by too great a love of the world. He illustrates his exhortations with parables about the search for God.

One bird claims that he lives only to love Simorgh. The hoopoe reproves this presumption. What right has anyone to offer love to God? God comes to us not because of our love but by His grace, as is shown in the story of *The Shah and the Stoker*.

The Shah and the Stoker

In disguise, a Shah visited a stoker who maintained the fires that heated the water in the great baths of the city. In his dark and dirty abode, the stoker shared bread with his visitor and showed him how the furnaces were fed. The Shah so enjoyed the company of the stoker that he returned seven times. The Shah then identified himself and offered the stoker whatever he might wish, even a kingship. The stoker declined, claiming he had all that he desired. He pointed out that it was only because of his work at the baths that he had met the Shah. His only request was that the Shah occasionally be his guest.

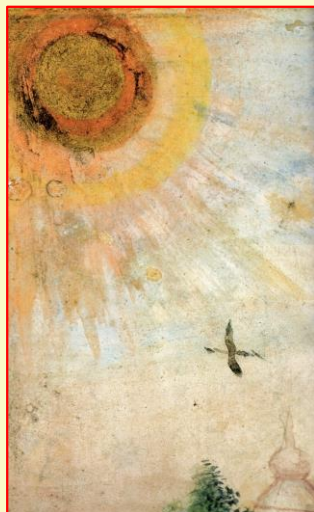


Hamam Sultan Amir Ahmad
Kashan, Iran

My hope is this, that now and then
My king will visit me in this dark den –
The dust he treads on is a crown to me.
His presence here will be my monarchy
(from the translation by Dick Davis)

I am not sure what the moral of the story is. Perhaps we should do whatever work we can. Sometimes God may visit us. Enjoy the visit – do not ask for more.

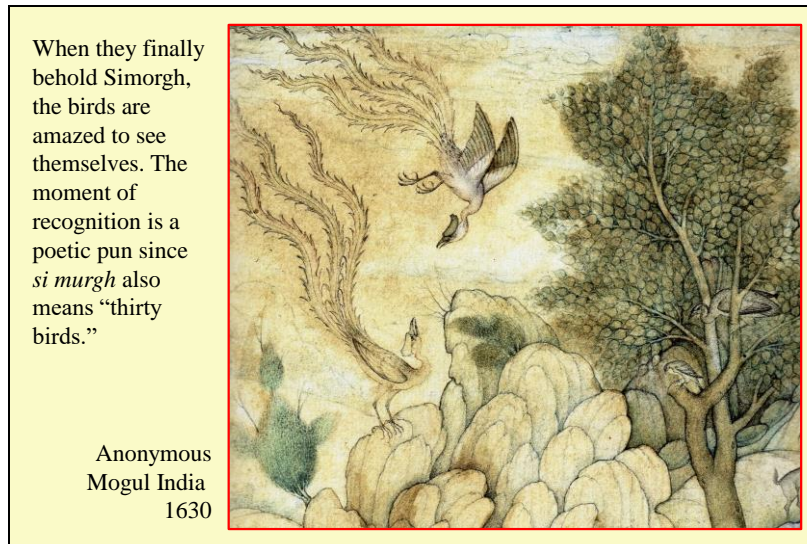
After much discussion the birds depart and fly toward Mount Kaf where Simorgh dwells. On the way they cross seven valleys. These represent the stages on the Sufi path to the divine: seeking, love, insight, detachment, unity, bewilderment and nothingness. Only thirty birds survive the journey.



As the thirty birds arrive at Mount Kaf, a herald greets them and tells them to turn back before witnessing the fearful splendor of Simorgh:

The blaze of majesty
Reduces souls to unreality
And if your souls are burned then all the pain
That you have suffered will have been in vain

Detail of a painting by Basavan
Mogul India, 1598

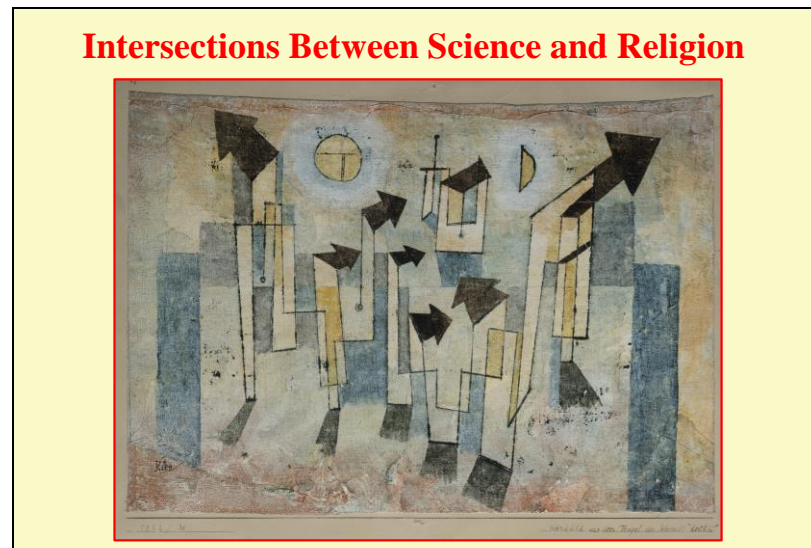


There in the Simorgh's radiant face they saw
Themselves, the Simorgh of the world – with awe
They gazed, and dared at last to comprehend
They were the Simorgh and the journey's end.

A famous Islamic hadith (sayings of the prophet) quoted by Ibn Arabi is:

He who knows himself knows his Lord.

What does it mean that when we finally see God we see ourselves? Although we can interpret this in terms of the unity of consciousness, it may also reflect the way we see the world. We create our own interpretation of the truth.



Our final slide is Paul Klee's watercolor *Mural from the Temple of Longing* (1922). The colors of the painting come from the desert. The surface is weathered as if by wind and sand. The shapes likely represent a mountain village in North Africa. Klee had been irrevocably changed by a brief sojourn in Tunis in the summer of 1914, and themes from that visit recur in many of his paintings. The blues of the picture suggest twilight, and the circular and semicircular shapes in the upper part of the picture may hint at a moon both full and waxing.

The various vertical constructions terminate in arrows which move away from us, upward and deeper into the space of the picture. Arrows occur many times in Klee's paintings and mean many things: the passage of time, the movement of things, and the force of desire. Here they may represent thoughts or questions:

The father of the arrow is the thought: how do I expand my reach? Over this river?
This lake? That mountain? (Klee, 1925)

For the purposes of this course, the arrows may represent the human search for the numinous. Many directions. All upward.

Seek the numinous in all its multitudinous and disparate forms. Try to understand it. Most importantly enjoy it.