

The Numinous Experiences of Children

By Donald Ratcliff

In this paper the nature of children's spiritual experiences will be explored by examining the perspectives of German theologian Rudolf Otto of what he termed the encounter with the "numinous." Otto's theology provides useful insights into the spiritual experiences of children.

What are Spiritual Experiences?

The term "spirituality" is used in many ways in modern society, and writings on the spirituality of children also vary widely in their descriptions and assumptions about spiritual experience. A key reference point for this chapter is the work of Rebecca Nye (2003, Hay & Nye, 1998), who described children's perceptual experiences of state of heightened attentiveness and awareness related to profound wonder. Hay and Nye emphasize that spiritual sensitivity can be categorized as *awareness sensing* which emphasizes the "here-and-now" aesthetic experience or meditation, often marked by focusing and "flow" in which there is undivided, intense concentration on the present moment. Spiritual experiences of children could also be considered *mystery-sensing*, mysterious because they are associated with life's ultimate mystery, characterized by wonder, awe, and/or a highly imaginative state far beyond what is typically experienced in daily life. A third category found in children's descriptions of their spiritual experiences is *value-sensing* characterized by a quest for meaning, trust in life, and affirming ideas of value or worth expressed in feelings of delight or despair. These three

categories may reflect distinct spiritual experiences, or conversely may be combined to some extent. Regardless, the three categories point to a core category of *relational consciousness*, with “relational” denoting the importance of God, other people, things, or self as the focus of attention, while “consciousness” emphasizes the heightened perception, awareness, and reflective aspects of spiritual experience.

Spiritual experiences, in Nye’s view, occur in children regardless of religious faith or lack of faith. In this respect she follows Robert Coles’ (1990) research of children’s spiritual experience, as well as a great deal of other research. Nye emphasizes that spirituality is, in this sense, quite distinct from religion. Perhaps one might suggest that spiritual experience is the experiential structure while the child’s thoughts about God or another relational object is the focal point of the experience. Regardless, Nye makes clear that spiritual experiences are relatively common early in life, although they tend to be less frequent—or at least reported less frequently—as children move into late childhood and adolescence.

Spiritual experience is not decontextualized from the immediate environment. Certain contexts are more conducive to quiet reflection and experiences of awe and wonder than others, as noted in the introduction to this chapter. Sophia Cavelletti, an Italian Hebrew scholar, developed a specific curriculum to help children to be more receptive to such experiences, building upon Maria Montessori’s prior work. Cavelletti’s approach forms the core of what is now termed “Catechesis of the Good Shepherd,” as well as the increasingly popular adaptation known as “Godly Play.” Context and preparation are important, but not determinative—spiritual experience is never

guaranteed by any specific method, but certain contexts and methods can help the child be more open to such experiences.

Spiritual Experience as an Encounter with the Numinous

Drawing from his study of theology, the Bible, and personal investigation of many cultures and religions, Ruldolf Otto (1950) considered the general nature of spiritual experience. Otto is usually credited with creating the term “numinous,” but in a later writing (Otto, 1996), he credits Count Zinzendorf—leader of the Moravian Church in the early 1700s—with the creation of the phrase “sensus numinus” from which he took the term “numinous.”

Like Rebecca Nye, Robert Coles, and many other researchers, Otto considers spiritual experience to be a universal across religious faiths, although he did not address the specific issue of such experiences among non-religious persons. However, Otto—a German Lutheran—emphasized repeatedly that Christianity was the highest of all religions, and that the Bible was perhaps the most important resource for understanding the numinous experience.

The numinous experience is an encounter with the Holy, says Otto. It is not just a subjective feeling, nor is it merely a psychological process, but rather he considered such experiences to involve unusual perceptions of objective reality. He was careful to emphasize that the numinous experience is *not* antithetical to rational and ethical understandings of religion and God, as reflected in formal theology, but rather was a complement to theology. Unlike Nye, he encouraged people to study the rational aspects of God prior to encountering the numinous (Nye and others, in contrast, suggest that even

small children have spiritual encounters and that the religious language of theology is added as a descriptor of that experience).

For Otto, the numinous is supra-rational—but not irrational—in that the experience is inexpressible; he emphasized repeatedly that the numinous can be discussed, but not defined because it is “absolutely primary and elementary datum” (Otto, 1950, p. 7). One may be guided so that the numinous has the opportunity to stir, and one must cooperate with the initiative of the numinous for a spiritual experience to occur, but a numinous experience cannot be taught nor can it be initiated by human will; the numinous can only be awakened and evoked.

While Otto often relates the numinous experience to God, he also allows for such experiences to be more general in nature. It seems likely that he sees the numinous experience as being much like a sixth sense, a connecting with another dimension, the realm of spirits and the paranormal as well as God.

Otto makes the curious comment that if one has never encountered such a deeply religious experience, it will make little sense and his recommendation is that such an individual not even read his book! This suggests some common ground between the experience of the numinous and mysticism, and while Otto often makes use of the literature of Christian mystics, he is also careful to distinguish his views from that of mysticism, particularly in relation to the articulation of the experience. While cautious of mystics, he is also quick to affirm common ground with non-Christian religious experiences of the numinous. That common ground is the sense of mystery that is ultimately inexpressible.

While the numinous experience is associated with solemn worship and a sense of personal insufficiency and dependence in Otto's own experience, he also states that "it may burst . . . with spasms and convulsions, or lead to . . . intoxicated frenzy" (p. 12). Here he is undoubtedly speaking of some of the religious experiences found in non-Christian religions, yet it is not difficult to think of some forms of Pentecostal and charismatic experience that could be described similarly. Yet Otto is clearly not speaking of the carnival atmosphere that characterizes some of today's children's ministries.

The numinous experience is marked by awe and a sense of something uncanny. He also describes "shuddering" by the participant, a physical response that goes beyond normal fear. He regularly quotes biblical passages, particularly from the Old Testament, that include similar descriptions of shaking from the fear of God. The experience reflects contact with something "wholly other," very different from the natural and human, "and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb" (p. 28). He draws not only biblical support, but also cites Saint Augustine and Chrysostom's descriptions of similar experiences.

Otto suggests another side to the experience that complements the first. In contrast with the experience of fear, there is also "the element of fascination" that draws one to the holy. He suggests that attraction and fascination make up the content of the numinous experience, while fear and awe make contribute the form of the numinous experience. The numinous "captivates and transports . . . with a strange ravishment, rising often enough to the pitch of dizzy intoxication" (p. 31). The simultaneous fear and fascination is resolved by a sense of surrender to the numin, as it is "the object of search and desire and yearning" (p. 32). Otto resorts to biblical language when he comments that

“it gives peace that passes understanding” (p. 34), even though the natural person may feel the experience of others in this respect as tedious, uninteresting, or even distasteful and repugnant (p. 35).

The numinous experience is an essential complement to rational theology, says Otto, as without the numinous experience one only has ideas *about* God (or speculative knowing, as mentioned earlier), while the numinous is the experience of God (described as connatural knowing earlier in the chapter).

Otto cites dozens of scriptures in support of his argument (he could have cited hundreds more), but also repeatedly appeals to non-Christian religions where similar experiences are encountered. He also draws extensively from the writings of Martin Luther, the Quakers, Schleiermacher, Isaac Watts, and other major theologians and church fathers in support of his views. He also explores analogies and parallels to the numinous in aesthetic experiences related to music, art, architecture, poetry, and literature.

The Limitations and Value of Otto’s Perspectives

Otto’s view of spiritual experience has much to offer, even though he did not specifically address the spiritual experiences of children. While Otto’s views can serve as a healthy area to explore for potentially extending the theories of Nye, Coles, and other recent writers and researchers, there are also limitations to his views.

Otto’s theology affirms a God who is far beyond our comprehension—a truly awe-inspiring God—yet he speaks of miracles in the Bible as myths. This is a serious enigma—why couldn’t such an incredibly overwhelming God do miracles?

The universality of the numinous, regardless of one's specific religion, can present difficulty for those who believe in an exclusively Christian God. However, even more conservative Christians can affirm that God is at work drawing all people to Himself, even people who are involved in non-Christian religions. This is quite different from suggesting that God is equally present in spiritual experience, regardless of one's religious faith. His opinion that Christianity is the "highest" of all religions implies an evolutionary stance, yet his regular references to non-Christian religions as seemingly equal and comparable examples of numinous experiences may reveal some question about the superiority of the Christian faith.

Some might struggle over the general nature of the numinous experience. It is possible, although Otto does not explore this in any depth, that such experiences might not always be an encounter of the Divine but instead they may be experiences with the Enemy of the Divine. Hay and Nye similarly speak of "negative spirituality" in which violence, prejudice, and other evils are involved in the quest for meaning and pleasure. Could these also be numinous experiences?

From an Evangelical perspective, it is possible to affirm positive numinous experiences with God, marked by awe and wonder and influencing the individual towards healthy spiritual development, yet also to affirm the danger in indiscriminate experiences of the numinous. The Enemy has always distorted what God has created; he is the Great Imitator who attempts to draw people away from God. Spirits may be of God (angels) or they may be of the Enemy (fallen angels).

Three Modes of God's Expressing Himself

It is also important to understand the numinous as only one of at least three possible ways God reveals himself. The numinous is a more tactile (e.g. shaking) or inward experience of God's Otherness. In contrast, God also reveals himself through the shekinah or visible presence, exemplified by the cloud by day and fire by night during the Egyptian exodus account. The third way God is revealed is through his word, which may be written or at times in scripture auditory in nature. One can think of these three as reflecting some aspects of the trinity, with the numinous corresponding with God the Father, the shekinah reflecting God the Holy Spirit, and the word corresponding with God the Son (Christ is called "The Word" in the Gospel of John). As with the distinctions of the triune brain, one must be careful not to insist upon strict equivalence—for example, God the Father did speak in the Old Testament; the appearance of Jesus after the resurrection struck some with fear and awe. But some parallels may be suggestive of the trinity.

The significance of the three modalities—touch or inward sense of the presence of God, the visible presence of God, and the word of God—has a direct bearing upon work with children. The experiential dimension of religious faith is important, even though it is too often overlooked. This is likely to occur in quiet, reflective contexts. But as Otto suggests, it is also possible that high activity may also involve an experience of God. Unfortunately, sometimes one can mistake any high activity by children in church as being spiritual in nature, and this is certainly not always the case. God is God of the tactile.

The shekinah experience of God, in contrast, may be unearthly experiences that are reported occasionally through church history. On the other hand, God may also reveal

a bit of his shekinah glory in a beautiful sunset or in patterns of clouds in the sky. In some traditions, statuary, icons, paintings, stain glass windows, and other art may also contribute to a deeply moving experience of God. God is God of the visual.

The word of God may be spoken deep within the individual, and many great saints—and others that are not so great—throughout church history have affirmed that God has spoken to them personally, revealing direction or insight. Even more important, God has spoken corporately through the written Word of God (the Bible), and through His people in both the Old and New Testaments. God is God of the word.

All three modalities are important in encouraging the spiritual development of children. While the numinous has often been overlooked in church education (as has the shekinah in many non-liturgical churches), it is important to achieve some balance between the three modes of divine expression. And perhaps all three of these should be subsumed to the goal of a personal relationship with God, a relationship that occurs in the flux of everyday life, as well as during church and when exercising the spiritual disciplines (such as a personal devotional time).

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