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Abstract

This project seeks to understand experiences of religious wonder and awe. While such experiences are subjective, as discussed here they are those which elicit sensations of mystery and transcendence, and are directly attributed to one's God and/or religion. This project will attempt to answer the question: What does wonder do? That is, what are the concrete, real-world effects for oneself and others among individuals who have encountered transcendence? My methodology involves extensive anthropological research into literature on the numinous, ritual, and wonder, as well as ten semi-structured interviews with Penn students. My target population is members of four religious groups on Penn's campus: the Hindu/Jain Association, the Muslim Student Association, Penn Hillel, and the Christian Union. Ultimately, I will theorize four related effects of religious wonder and awe, with each expanding into and shaping the next. These effects are a sense of purpose through reformed self-conceptualization, a feeling of interconnection with one's community, the better treatment of others, and the choice to do good on a broad scale. In this way, I will prove that wonder is a driving force in shaping the way that religious persons understand themselves, their community, and their place in it.

Keywords

religion, numinous, wonder, awe, ritual, collective effervescence

Disciplines

Anthropology | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

**CROSS-RELIGIOUS TRANSCENDENCE: EXPERIENCES OF RELIGIOUS WONDER
AND AWE AMONG PENN STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS**

By

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In

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Submitted to the

Department of Anthropology

University of Pennsylvania

Thesis Advisor: Associate Professor Jim Sykes

2021

Abstract:

This project seeks to understand experiences of religious wonder and awe. While such experiences are subjective, as discussed here they are those which elicit sensations of mystery and transcendence, and are directly attributed to one's God¹ and/or religion.

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These effects are a sense of purpose through reformed self-conceptualization, a feeling of interconnection with one's community, the better treatment of others, and the choice to do good on a broad scale. In this way, I will prove that wonder is a driving force in shaping the way that religious persons understand themselves, their community, and their place in it.

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¹ Throughout this project I will be using the monotheistic term 'God' to refer cross-religiously to any/all higher powers and deities referred to in this work. I do not want to posit 'God' as normative, as I recognize that this is an Abrahamic term and Hinduism is not monotheistic. However, I was very careful to *only* use the terminology employed by my subjects. All of my subjects, including my Hindu subjects, referred to their believed deity as 'God', specifically God in the singular. I was not comfortable supplying other names or pluralities of god(s) if not directly used by an individual. For this reason, I will use the term 'God' here on out, as it is what was used by all of my subjects of their own accord.

PART I: INTRODUCTION

Research Question

The goal of this senior thesis project is to understand the experience of religious wonder and awe among Penn students of varying religious backgrounds. I will first briefly outline the ways in which these feelings are elicited, and how subjects experience them. Following this discussion, my predominant interest is in exploring how these experiences give shape to everyday life. I investigate the ways in which wonder and awe shift how a subject understands his/herself and others, and how this, in turn, affects one's behavior, attitude, and perception of his/her positionality in the world.

Background

During the summer before my Junior year, I had the opportunity to travel to Nepal and work there for just over two months. While there, I interned for an organization called SASANE, which provided rescue and rehabilitation for female survivors of human trafficking. My work involved writing grants, providing technological support, and teaching English to survivors so that they would be able to pass exams to become certified paralegals. While I personally do not identify as religious, I was incredibly moved by the way religion bolstered the women I worked with, providing them comfort and reconciliation. The Nepalese population is predominately Hindu and Buddhist, but some of my students were also Christian. I spent a lot of time traveling with these women, exploring religious sites and sacred spaces. They shared emotional, personal accounts of times where religious experiences called up feelings of wonder for the world

and their place in it, despite the human rights violations they had all been subject to. I was captivated by the power of this mysterious force.

Spirituality seems to permeate all corners of Nepal. Traffic flows around shrines like a river around rocks. Everywhere one can hear someone praying, see someone touching a prayer wheel, or smell the burning of incense. When I returned home to the United States, I found the discrepancy between the religious and the mundane jarring. I found myself thinking more and more about my friends' descriptions of wonder; the different kinds of ways they found it, and more importantly, the powerful effects it had.

I became curious about what these feelings would look like for my peers in the context of the United States, where the religious and secular are pitted against each other. Thus the idea for this project was born, and I have now spent the past two years researching these themes. During my Junior Capstone, I focused predominately on *how* these feelings make themselves known. From this project, I discovered a process which I termed the Transcendent Cycle, through which my subjects experienced awe via nature and community, leading them to feel closer to God, and ultimately enabling them to experience these feelings more often. Now, for what I view as the conclusion of a long exploration, I shift to the second part of my question: *what* does religious wonder and awe do?

Religious Wonder and Awe

Religion plays a critical role in the human experience across the world. It has been cited as the driving factor behind both acts of love and charity as well as those of unspeakable evil. But what kinds of emotions or states of mind associated with religion

make it so captivating? There is an ineffable component to religion, one which both entices practitioners and reinforces their conviction. This is the numinous, “its non-discursive, non-logical, affective component ... that of its aspects which cannot be expressed in words but is, rather, experienced inarticulately.”² This is the component of religious awe and wonder.

The concept of religious wonder is one that is difficult to pin down in its subjectivity and abstract nature. Peter Remien usefully outlines how, “Signaling the perpetuation of a child-like connection to the natural world, wonder draws its potency from the sense that it represents a link to something lost in the past – a primal connection to the universe, somehow eroded by the ravages of experience and time.”³ This definition gets to the core of the importance of these experiences, and the reason why I believe they are worthy of study. As supported by the findings of my interviews, religious wonder is a powerful force in that it connects and integrates a subject even closer to the fabric of their environment and natural world. It provides the individual with an idea that they are a part of something bigger than themselves, which, as we shall see, creates an integral shift in one’s personal behavior and beliefs. This reinforces Remien’s ultimate argument which is that “The experience of wonder ... leads from total immersion in present sensory experience to a consideration of futurity.”⁴ Wonder seems to manifest itself as that which does not always fully integrate into the consciousness.

² Rappaport, Roy A. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 371.

³ Remien, Peter C. “Satan's Pause: Wonder and Environmental Preservation in ‘Paradise Lost.’” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 20, no. 4, (2013), 817, www.jstor.org/stable/44087294.

⁴ *ibid.*, 823.

That is, it may be felt in the moment and understood/analyzed later, rather than wonder acting immediately as a conscious thought.

Religious wonder as an experience is common cross-culturally, but it is felt and lived differently from religion to religion and person to person. Broadly, I use the term 'religious wonder/awe' to describe an attitude of mystery/reverence/transcendence as directed towards any given identified deity/higher power. These attitudes are the result of experiences that are in some ways unexplainable and go beyond the finite self. Awe may be encountered through that which is remarkable and out of the ordinary, but it may also be encountered through a newfound appreciation and fresh understanding of that which is familiar.

The experience of wonder and awe is inflected by religious culture and modern life. While it may be both personal and distinctive for each subject in its specifics, as discussed here it is that which is felt transcendentally and is explicitly tied to one's religious beliefs. This ethnography will explore the experience of religious awe across four religious groups on the University of Pennsylvania's campus: The Hindu/Jain Association, The Muslim Student Association, Penn Hillel, and the Christian Union.

The resulting research will attempt to shine a light on the numinous, as it is vital to understanding the emotional relationship one may have to religion, as well as broader implications for religious experience as a whole. This project builds off of research I conducted as a junior in the Anthropology Capstone course, where I focused more on the catalysts for religious wonder. Here, I go further and explore the ways in which such religious experiences affect an individual's attitudes/life outlooks, and therefore one's understanding of their role in the world. As we will see, this, in turn, affects how subjects

view and treat others following their engagement with the numinous. I am therefore especially interested in the broader implications of religious wonder, seeking to understand how those experiences seep into the fabric of self-conceptualization and day-to-day life.

The Numinous

The term 'numinous' was first coined by Rudolph Otto in 1950 to specify a specific kind of religious experience⁵. Otto was interested in giving this category a special kind of value. In discussing Otto's conception of the numinous, Dan Merkur writes, "Considered as a phenomenological category, Otto's concept might be more fittingly expressed in English by inventing the word 'numinosity' to parallel 'beauty' and 'morality'. It is a quality, not an entity."⁶ This equation of the numinous with beauty is important in that it demonstrates early on the *kind* of feelings elicited by these experiences, as opposed to potentially feeling overwhelmed and full of terror.

Otto goes on to define two types of numinous experience: "*mysterium tremendum*" and "*fascinans*". He describes *mysterium tremendum* as intrinsically numinous due to its elements of "...awe, majesty, urgency, and mystery."⁷ He goes on to say that these such experiences are "self-confirming", that is, they reinforce one's

⁵ Merkur, Dan. "Interpreting Numinous Experiences." *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*, Vol.50, no. 2 (2006), 205.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23182016>.

⁶ *ibid.*, 206.

⁷ Otto, Rudolph. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*. Trans. J. Harvey. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 13-15.

constructions of a worldview.⁸ Otto called the second type of numinosity “*fascinans*”. This type is more closely related to metaphor. Merkur outlines this form when he writes, “When the implication of something more develops into a discrete concept of theism, the interior logic of the *fascinans* treats it as a metaphor that often conveys the cosmological argument, as it were, for the existence of a god or God.”⁹ That is, experiencing *fascinans* bolsters one’s beliefs in a deity. The experience goes further, with *fascinans* implying an “argument for design”, or an individual’s prescribed path/plan, and an “argument for meaning”, or a reason for being.¹⁰ Here, an object or experience may act as a signifier that there is ‘something more’; a captivating unknown.

The data I collected from my interviews indicates the reality of both of these numinous experiences. However, I argue that rather than two separate, distinct kinds of experiences, both *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans* may be found in a single encounter with the numinous. In attempting to describe the feeling of wonder itself, my subjects often employed vocabulary such as “mystery”, “awestruck”, and “beauty”. But it was generally later, while reflecting on these experiences, that the *fascinans* came in. Once the immediate wonder had diminished, my subjects then attributed such experiences to a confirmation of their deity, the presence of a plan for them, and their place in the world as interconnected with other beings.

Pointing to such attributions, Paul Pruyser suggests that numinous experiences involve a “limit situation”, or a question beyond which it is impossible to think. Limit situations lead to the numinous when one’s attempt to exceed this limit elicits feelings of

⁸ *ibid.*, 28.

⁹ Merkur, Dan. "Interpreting Numinous Experiences." 209.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 209-210.

“... transcendence and mystery ... charged with cognitive, ontological, epistemological, and emotional implications.”¹¹ In turn, they “...provoke the experience of man’s contingency on powers beyond his grasp or control.”¹² When an individual comes to the precipice of wonder, he/she may subsequently be led to reflect on some of life’s biggest questions: who am I?, why am I here?, who put me here?, where am I going?. Of course, these questions are all unanswerable, but it is at their point of conception that the religious individual encounters the numinous. For such a person in such a context, this is an indicator of a “power”, or in other words, a deity.

Ultimately, as Keith Yandell explains in “Sensory Experience and Numinous Experience”, “... the numinous experience provides evidence that God exists.”¹³ Yandell goes on to argue that such religious experiences provide sufficient evidence for belief in a Deity, in a similar way to sensory experiences signifying the existence of a physical object.¹⁴ Thus we see how religious wonder and awe are fundamental to the development of an individual’s spirituality and faith. This ‘proof’ of a deity often has to do with the question of where one is going, that is, one’s purpose and/or life path. As we shall see from the data, the numinous brings about a deeper understanding of one’s purpose and existence in a web of “something bigger”. Thus, wonder seems to be future-oriented, while based in current circumstances and experiences.

¹¹ Pruyser, Paul W. *The Play of the Imagination: toward a Psychoanalysis of Culture*. (International Universities Press, 1983), 155-156.

¹² *ibid.*, 157.

¹³ Yandell, Keith E. "Sensory Experience and Numinous Experience." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 31, no. 2/3 (1992), 115.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40019195>.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 89.

An understanding of this numinous component, this religious wonder, will elucidate the influence of religion on individual behavior. Religious experience, as it stands, results in a significant alteration in the state of human consciousness.¹⁵ The numinous experience brings the subject closer to God, closer to their divine being. This closeness (God is not 'there', rather She/He/They is/are 'here' as well), brings about the perception that God does not reside in a place beyond reach.¹⁶ Rather, what God is, or what God represents, is attainable. In his essay "Religious Experience", Paul Weiss writes that, "In a religious experience the subject may be aware of God in a number of places – within himself, in the adumbrated content which lies outside all demarcated and categorized objects, and in relation connecting God and himself."¹⁷ This is extremely important because it demonstrates how religious experiences of wonder are felt by the individual and related back to God. This creates an intrinsic shift in the value of self and others. At its core, this is the seed of awe which catalyzes an alteration in a subject's behavior and attitude.

Formative Literature

Most theoretical works on religious awe have not been done in a 21st century context situated in the United States. However, my ethnography explores this cross-cultural experience here on Penn's campus. The feelings of religious awe that students at Penn report to have experienced serve a function which is very different from how

¹⁵ Rappaport, Roy A. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, 377.

¹⁶ Weiss, Paul. "Religious Experience." *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 17, no. 1, (1963), 11. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20123981.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 5.

these ideas have been conceptualized in broader literature. In general, anthropologists have hypothesized these sensations as resulting from religious practices, especially ritual. Yet it seems that now, perhaps due to modernity, the sensations themselves are instead the driving factors of religious experience. Perhaps another more significant factor may have to do with class. The Penn students I worked with all came from middle to upper class backgrounds. This may generate a particular kind of understanding of and relationship to religion for them, as opposed to folks who are born into more provincial contexts. It seems that religious wonder resides outside of religious service, ritual, and practice, and in fact the experiences themselves inspire new relationships with religion.

With ritual not appearing as a catalyst for awe in the data, we are led to the age-old debate of religious action as belief versus activity. Does the performance of a ritual, or lack thereof, necessarily indicate an individual's system of beliefs? In the context of this project, it seems that there is less emphasis placed on religious action in the form of ritual, with some rituals even rendered "mundane" and "tedious" in their repetitiveness. However, this is not an indicator of the strength of religious belief for any given individual. It seems that perhaps in a more "Westernized", middle/upper class context, religions at Penn are treated more as a notion of ethics, rather than with a greater focus on the elements of ritual action. Again, I make the distinction here that of all of the interviewees, my Hindu subjects prioritized ritual to a much greater extent, and even lauded its repetitive nature as a potential seed of wonder/awe. Even still, ritual was posited less as an embodiment of belief, and more as an action in and of itself.

Victor Turner, who famously coined the term “communitas”, was one of the most prominent figures in the study of the anthropology of religion. He describes communitas as a social relationship that is sacred in its modality, in which this sacred aspect is, importantly, acquired during rites of passage, or ritual.¹⁸ Turner conceptualizes communitas as an intense augmentation of community, one which is characterized by an acute feeling of social oneness. While my research certainly points to the common value of such a social fabric, the emphasis is placed less on the rituals themselves and more on the significance of being surrounded by people who have a shared set of experiences and religious understandings.

Outside of his hypotheses regarding ritual, Turner also writes about the quality of the mystical, which he believes to be the root of personal religious experiences.¹⁹ He describes four “marks” that categorize mysticism, a term which he employs in the same way I talk about wonder here. These four marks are *ineffability*, *noetic quality*, *transiency*, and *passivity*.²⁰ It is important to briefly outline these definitions in order to enhance our understanding of the quality of the numinous experience, which will be highlighted in the next section via subject interviews.

Turner describes the mark of ineffability by saying that, “The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it

¹⁸ Turner, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. (Aldine Pub. Co., 1969), 360.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 537.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 538-540.

cannot be imparted or transferred to others ... No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists.”²¹ This is an important aspect of mysticism that we must keep in mind, especially when conducting an ethnography on the subject. Much of my research depends heavily on interviews with subjects who have experienced this feeling. Taking Turner’s stipulation of ineffability into account, this seems a bit paradoxical. However, while it may be impossible for a subject to truly convey the experience in all its intricacies, I hold that we must still ask these questions, and are not barred from a glimpse at its qualities. Additionally, I seek predominantly to understand the broad-reaching *implications* of the experience in an individual’s life, rather than to capture in words the feeling itself.

In describing the mark termed ‘noetic quality’, Turner writes that, “Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.”²² We shall take these “mystical states” to be the state of *being in wonder*, or the state in which an individual finds oneself while experiencing a sense of wonder. As we will see in the interview analysis later, the mark of ‘noetic quality’ turns out to be one of the most important. This project is especially preoccupied with the *significance* of encounters with religious wonder, that is, how they elucidate and shape a subject’s understanding of his/her place in the world. The noetic

²¹ *ibid.*, 538.

²² *ibid.*, 539.

quality of the mystic experience thus imbues the subject with a sense of knowledge about the workings of God. The curtain is peeled back to reveal individual revelations about God's plan, in turn affecting a subject's outlook on his/her life and behavior towards others.

Turner outlines the third mark, transiency, by saying, "Mystical states cannot be sustained for long ... often, when faded, their quality can but imperfectly be reproduced in memory; but when they recur it is recognized; and from one recurrence to another it is susceptible of continuous development in what is felt as inner richness and importance."²³ This mark is of slightly lesser note for our purposes. However, it is useful to understand that moments of wonder and awe are not typically frequent or lengthy. Rather, they punctuate an individual's religiosity at intermittent intervals, but fundamentally shape one's spirituality and attitude when taken as an aggregate.

Finally, in the case of the mark of passivity, Turner writes that "...when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power ... Mystical states, strictly so called, are never merely interruptive. Some memory of their content always remains, and a profound sense of their importance. They modify the inner life of the subject between the times of their recurrence."²⁴ Here, it is important to recognize the fact that wondrous experiences may continually feed the spiritual soul, even after the moment has passed. That is, all of my subjects were able to delve into their encounters with the mystic and tease out meaning that they still hold onto. Many

²³ *ibid.*, 539.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 540.

even commented on how reflecting on such feelings/moments in the present further deepens their religiosity and relationship to God. This demonstrates that numinous experiences do indeed affect one's attitudes and self-conceptualization going forward.

Another influential scholar on numinous experiences and how they are catalyzed is Emile Durkheim. His ideas on collective effervescence describe how communal meetings, ceremonies, and practices elevate and intensify religious experiences. In discussion of such gatherings, he writes that, "The very fact of the concentration acts as an exceptionally powerful stimulant. When they are once come together, a sort of electricity is formed by their collecting which quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation. Every sentiment expressed finds a place without resistance in all the minds, which are very open to outside impressions; each re-echoes the others, and is re-echoed by the others. The initial impulse thus proceeds, growing as it does, as an avalanche grows in its advance."²⁵ Here we see a demonstration on how collectivity enhances a given experience and propels it forward. This "exaltation" is, I believe, an equivalent to wonder and awe, and thus apropos to our discussion.

My research supports these findings to some extent; a sense of community seems to enhance feelings of religious wonder, and the presence of others with the same beliefs perhaps reaffirms one's convictions. However, this is only the case *for some*. As I will outline in the next section, a good portion of my subjects pointedly specified that they must be alone in order to experience wonder and awe; that quiet reflection was their own catalyst rather than the "echoing" of others. Additionally,

²⁵ Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 162.

Durkheim's ideas imply that such feelings of collective effervescence are perceived as an aggregate. His focus is on a shared community experience, whereas my research points to an individual transcendence impelled by the presence of others (for those who cited community as a catalyst).

In her book *An Archaeology of Doings: Secularism and the Study of Pueblo Religion*, Severin Fowles teases out the relationship between congregation and transcendence. She argues that in moments of collective effervescence, the source of potency is found *not* in the likeness of group-thought, but rather in the *differences* among unique individual experience²⁶; a definition which is more germane to my interview findings. Fowles goes on to reformulate Durkheim's conception of effervescence: "We are left, then, holding onto a more complicated notion of effervescence in which (1) an experience of aggregation or assembly (2) prompts a heightened encounter with social difference that (3) specifies, redefines, and transforms the worldly position of individual actors by placing each actor in a new or newly visible skein of relations, but that also (4) undermines the individuality of actors by drawing attention to the relations of interdependency that give form to both self and other, and that (5) suffuses the assembly with a pool of potential energy insofar as interdependency is the basis of all social power."²⁷ This expanded understanding of Durkheim's work is beneficial to my study in that it demonstrates how the aggregate may influence religious experience. However, it also highlights the very point I made in the above paragraph by acknowledging that the term 'collective effervescence' ignores

²⁶ Fowles, Severin M. *An Archaeology of Doings: Secularism and the Study of Pueblo Religion*. (School for Advanced Research Press, 2013), 147.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 147-148.

the potentiality of individual actors/experiences. Thus, we must keep this reworked conception of group-influence in mind as we explore the individualistic and personal experiences of my subjects.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study involving four main focus groups. The target population is students of the University of Pennsylvania who are members of the Hindu/Jain Association, the Muslim Student Association, Penn Hillel, and the Christian Union at Penn respectively. These groups were not selected by any value judgment, but rather from a pool of diverse groups large enough to connect with multiple subjects. The research process involved multiple semi-structured interviews. The intent in planning for this project was to also include aspects of participant observation, but the pandemic and COVID-19 restrictions made this impossible. All of the interviews were conducted on a volunteer basis, and the subjects have been de-identified with pseudonyms.

I have conducted a total of ten interviews. The distribution was such that I talked to two members of Penn Hillel, two members the Muslim Student Association, three members of the Christian Union, and three members of the Hindu/Jain association. I also made sure to vary my subjects in gender and background. I will refer to these individuals with coded names, using the first letter of the religion with which they identify, followed by the number of the subject. Therefore, we have J1, J2, M1, M2, C1, C2, C3, H1, H2, and H3. Out of my subjects from the Hindu/Jain Association, H3 was the only one to identify both as Hindu and Jain, while H1 and H2 only identified as Hindu. I asked the subjects questions about their religions, and about their own

personal experiences with wonder and awe: what it feels like, what elicits the feeling, how it affects their understanding of themselves, and how it affects their day-to-day lives and relationships. I am attempting to understand religious wonder in its intricacies and case-by-case subjectivity, as well as its broader implications.

Here I think that first it is important to acknowledge that three out of my four target populations are a part of the Abrahamic religious tradition. This was not done intentionally through any kind of value judgement, rather, I chose student organizations that varied in population size on Penn's campus. In an attempt to avoid such a majority, I had initially reached out multiple times to the Penn Buddhism Club, but I never received a response regarding their potential involvement. Once again, I take a moment to note my broad use of the term 'God' throughout this project. This term was deliberately chosen as it is that which every one of my subjects used to label their deity, regardless of which religious tradition he/she came from.

In light of this, I will briefly highlight the fact that the different traditions I worked with have different philosophies and textures of belief, which is evidenced in the data I collected from the interviews. One important manifestation of this difference was that my Hindu subjects spoke of community as coming before the individual, rather than as an individual finding one's way into a community. Additionally, counter to more Abrahamic philosophies, those of the Hindu tradition were less "belief/doctrine" focused.²⁸ These three subjects placed greater emphasis on the bodily effects of wonder and induced

²⁸ Valentine, Daniel. *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*. (University of California Press, 1987).

trance, such as a “vibrating” and “buzzing”, with all three mentioning music and/or dance. None of my subjects from the Abrahamic tradition discussed music or dance as awe-inducing.

Another important difference to foreshadow here is a commonality among my Jewish subjects which did not appear anywhere else. All of my subjects from the Jewish tradition cited the history of their people as one of the leading catalysts for religious wonder and awe. None of my other subjects mentioned ‘history’ as a factor. I believe that this is a significant point to make up front, as it highlights the role that communal ancestry plays in shaping individual, present-day experiences and emotions. I hypothesize that this is due to a tight-knit Jewish community which has come together in the face of global practices of anti-Semitism. This difference, along with the aforementioned differences between the Abrahamic and polytheistic religions, will be further explored in Part II of this project.

I mention these differences up front, especially in relation to the Abrahamic versus non-Abrahamic traditions, because I want to be careful to avoid a presumptive normativity. I am *not* trying to assume a categorical Abrahamic norm. On the contrary, I am acknowledging and appreciating historical and cultural differences up front, and following these backgrounds through the data to a frank exploration of commonalities and variations in the manifestation of a *feeling*, in this case, awe. In this way, I am attempting to hold onto the ways that different backgrounds shape the individual experience, while obtaining some understanding of a sliver of the broader human religious experience.

In his essay “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category”, Talal Asad cogently outlines the historical religious normativity bestowed to Protestant Christianity. He works against traditional Eurocentric ideas and the academy’s common conceptions about religion which are applied universally, saying that these originated from Protestantism. Such scholarship takes Protestant biases and maps them onto other traditions.²⁹ However, not all religions are about belief and/or focus on symbols.³⁰ In fact, this emphasis on belief again stems from Protestant Christianity. Rather, sometimes ritual *action* is more important than just the symbolic meaning of it.³¹ This gets back to our earlier discussion of religious belief versus action, and I make the point to demonstrate that I am cautious of assuming the predominant presence of one versus another in any given religious experience.

Thus, Asad is directly arguing against such scholars as Clifford Geertz, who was interested in how individuals interact with symbols, and the moods and motivations of a given believer.³² Asad says that this idea of religion affecting individuals and internal belief systems through moods/motivations as produced by symbols is historically specific, again emerging from Protestant Christianity. Ultimately, Asad is arguing against universalism, and the idea that we can apply these notions of religion to all

²⁹ Asad, Talal. “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category.” in *Theories of Religion: A Reader*, by Seth D. Kunin and Jonathan Miles-Watson, (Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

³⁰ Valentine, Daniel. *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*.

³¹ Asad, Talal. “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category.”

³² Geertz, Clifford, and Michael Banton. *Religion as a Cultural System*. (1966).

cultures across all temporalities. I make a note of this debate here because I wish to uphold Asad's argument throughout this project.

Going forward with this paper, we must keep in mind the subjective nature of these experiences. There is not a single 'catch-all' to describe religious transcendence, and it may manifest itself differently for each individual. As defined by Paul Weiss, "... a religious experience, whether it be treated as entirely private or not, is not an exercise in faith, not a way of occupying oneself with God, but is instead a type of experience which allows one to see the difference that God makes to mere experience."³³ Thus feelings of wonder and awe as associated with religion affect the quality of a subject's spirituality and ability to attribute God to one's surrounding environment. What we can say about the numinous experience, which must hold true for all religions discussed here, is that it is an experience which the individual directly links to their own religion and/or religious beliefs.

PART II: THE INTERVIEWS

The Experience of Awe

Before we are able to explore the broader and long-term implications of experiencing religious wonder, we must first have a solid understanding of what awe *feels* like. These descriptions are useful in elucidating the emotional effects of the experience, and in understanding how these emotions drive future changes in attitudes and behavior.

³³ Weiss, Paul. "Religious Experience.", 16.

Due to the subjective nature of these feelings, the vocabulary differed a bit from individual to individual. However, the core essence of the experience was generally the same, and every single subject used words with connotations of tranquility, peace, and especially interconnectedness.

For example, when asked how she would define the feeling of religious awe, J1 said, *I would say the words I would use to describe it are connected, sacred, spiritual, and divine.*

Similarly, C3 said, *It is a feeling of wholeness and comfort, warmth and security.* But also stipulated that he *can't explain exactly because the feeling of love in general is hard to pin down.* Interestingly, this subject was the only one to directly correlate the feeling of religious wonder as God's love.

H3 provided a little more information about the physical manifestations of these experiences. She said that, *Usually I feel very still, so I don't necessarily recognize my breathing. I become fixated on one specific object or image, and there is a slight buzzing that my body feels. It is a feeling of warmth; there is a communal setting so I feel the energy of others and a love for the community.* This account demonstrates some of the visceral and bodily implications of the immediate moment when one encounters awe.

M2 also pointed to some of his physical responses to the feeling, saying he gets, *Goosebumps and a bunch of chills down the spine.*

Perhaps more importantly, when asked this question, seven out of the ten subjects specifically linked the experience to a resulting realization that there is a

greater purpose/plan for them, and that as humans they are a part of something bigger than themselves.

For example, M1 said that, *I usually feel it in my heart, like a glow, or an opening, or something like that. I think it's a very grand feeling. It tends to make me look upward ... like there's something more.* Here, M1 attributes the feeling to an enhanced conviction that her life has meaning.

Similarly, H1 said, *It makes me realize that there is a world beyond my own small world. I feel a sense of purpose; I recognize a vastness of the world and how complex it is, then I think back to how what God gave me is good and I must do something with it.* This is an important idea because it gives us a taste for what is to come. Namely, that religious wonder acts as a driving factor for a positive shift in one's attitude and behavior.

We see this same seed growing in C2's account as well when she answers by saying, *The chances are so slim that I'm even here, and my life really is in God's hands. I feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude and a need to help people. I have to show gratitude for how much I've been blessed by God.*

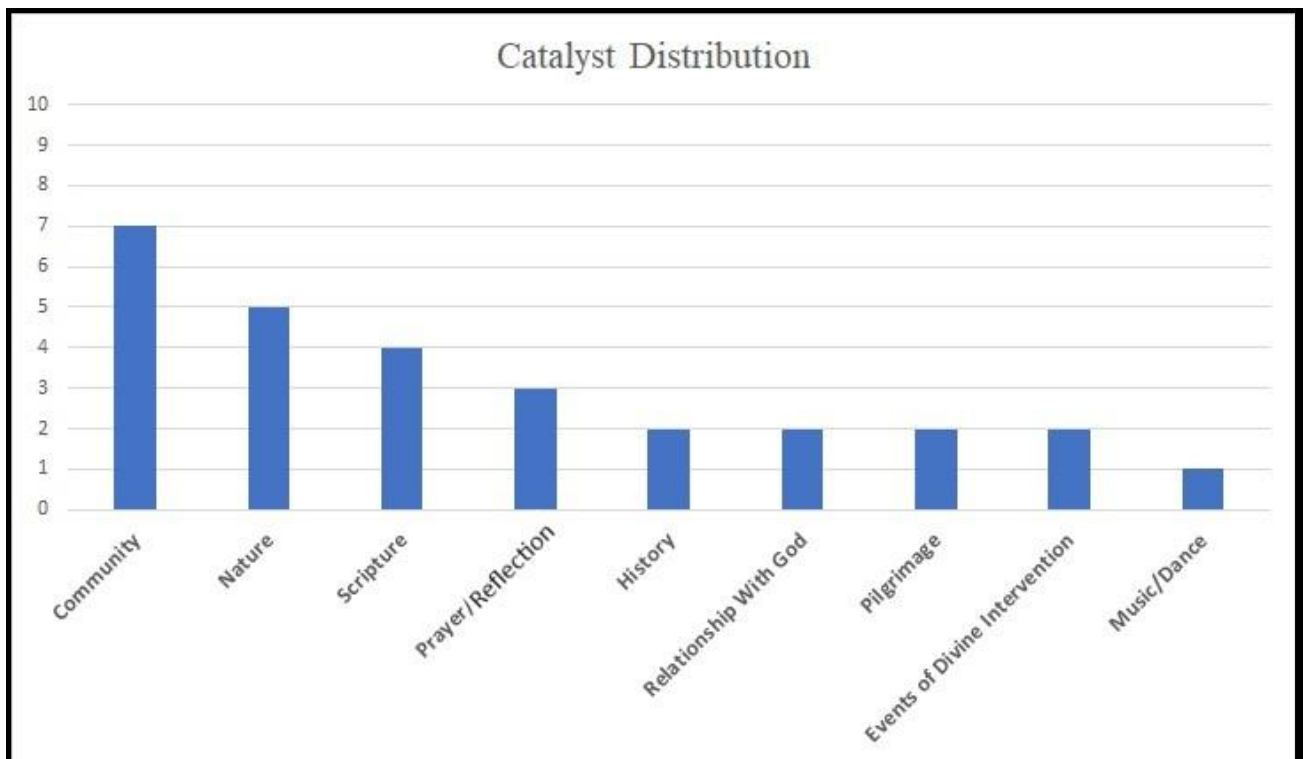
Thus, while the descriptors used to highlight religious awe vary slightly among subjects, the overarching theme is the same: wonder elicits a feeling of warmth, peace, and community. Let us hold in mind these beginnings of a shifting in an individual's actions and understanding of their place in the world. These shifts are at the heart of this project. They help us to understand the substantive effects of religious experience, and they grow from the seeds of feeling.

Catalyzing Factors

The next step is to look at *how* these feelings are elicited, that is, what the catalyzing factors of wonder are. This provides an important clue for the future implications of the experience. Once we have a grasp on this idea we will be able to look at the worldly significance of awe.

Below I have included Figure 1, a graph that breaks down each catalyst as mentioned by a given subject, and the number of subjects who cited it as a driving factor for awe:

Figure 1



H3 was an outlier for this section. All of my subjects except for her specified that they were not able to experience the numinous on command. That is, they experienced awe naturally and at random rather than by attempting to induce the state. H3, on the other hand, gave a few recent examples of when she was able to bring herself into the mindset of wonder. The reason for this, I believe, is that she was the *only one* of my subjects to cite ritual (in the form of music and dance) as her catalyst. Specifically, H3 correlated religious awe with a trance-like state which she attained through music/chanting and dance.

She described how *Dance is a very centering thing and I can focus on that. The act of dancing and the same monotonous steps are part of it, especially because I don't do those dances outside of ritual settings. Something about those songs makes me feel zen and peaceful. I experience moments of awe from that music; I hear the perfect chord at the end and feel a buzzing in the air. I feel like I transcended something right there.* Here, we see how scheduled prayer sessions with ritual music and dance springboard H3 into a transcendent experience. She described how she can put herself back in that mental place whenever she wants just by listening to the ritual music and performing repetitive dance steps. Again, I would like to note that this discrepancy between H3 and the majority of my subjects is likely due to the fact that Hinduism is traditionally based less on belief and more on ritual action.³⁴ Thus, feelings of awe are commonly elicited from the *action itself*. On the other hand, in Abrahamic religions, the rituals tend to result from the *feeling*.³⁵

³⁴ Valentine, Daniel. *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*.

³⁵ *ibid*.

However, despite my hypotheses given the literature on the numinous, none of my other subjects touched on ritual as a catalyzing factor for awe. Despite the anomaly of H3, I argue against Roy Rappaport's disclaimer that "For most people in most societies ... the way to numinous experience is through participation in communitarian ritual."³⁶ Ritual may bring people together, which in turn may create a space conducive to experiences of religious awe, but the ritual itself is not a catalyst for these feelings in my research.

In fact, H3's emphasis on the importance of repetition contradicts Mary Douglas in her book *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* when she writes, "Ritual has become a bad word signifying empty conformity. We are witnessing a revolt against formalism, even against form ... The ritualist becomes one who performs external gestures which imply commitment to a particular set of values, but he is inwardly withdrawn, dried out and uncommitted."³⁷ Here, Douglas argues that the exact monotony H3 describes as being vital to the numinous is actually detrimental to one's spiritual experience.

C1 reflected this argument when he said *Definitely for me, and I would guess for most Christians, the feeling of awe and wonder isn't coming from ritual ... The two rituals Christians always do are Baptism and Communion [taking bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ] ... I personally don't tie that feeling to Communion ... part of it is that I've done Communion my whole life, so for me it's just been a 'thing'. It's been*

³⁶ Rappaport, Roy A. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, 380.

³⁷ Douglas, Mary. 1973. *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 1-2.

kind of disassociated from the strong significance of it. That's what I would guess for why it doesn't have that much of an impact in my life. For C1, it is this exact element of sameness and tedium that *prohibits* feelings of awe. The recurrent nature of taking Communion has almost desensitized him to its deeper meanings, and has resulted in a passive, apathetic interaction with the practice.

Thus it appears, at least within the confines of this time and place, that the ritual itself is not inherently awe-inducing. Rather, it seems that other factors induce the feeling. Some examples of factors include experiences in nature, a tight-knit community, and reading of scripture, which in turn results in a change in one's self conception and relation to others.

From Figure 1, we see that the most commonly cited driving factor of religious wonder is community, with seven out of ten subjects mentioning it.

For example, H1 said that, *Wonder and awe for me in religion is a big sense of community. We may grow up in different parts of the world and still have a religious identity tying us together. This is how I connect ... Community is a means to an end, which is moksha* [liberation from the cycle of rebirth or religious transcendence]. Here, H1 explicitly connects community to wonder, describing it as the most important factor in transcendence. This demonstrates the power that community has in individual faith.

C1 described how in moving to college he found himself surrounded by a community of peers and like-minded believers his age, rather than the older group he worshipped with at his church back home. He could not overstate the effect of this change to a more relatable community, saying that it turned him from a "cultural follower" into a "devout practitioner". In his Bible study group, he was able to see others'

faith, resulting in a desire to emulate them. Importantly, C1 attributed social interactions within the community directly to God, saying that, *They are created by God and are a representation of God's love to bring me closer to Him*. Not only does C1 emphasize the importance of community to the numinous, he also credits God with intentionally gifting these relationships so as to enhance his faith.

However, we must refrain from getting too Durkheimian. One important stipulation is that while these subjects noted community as a factor, no one described the kind of trancelike group-think that Durkheim would have us believe in. While community may help put these feelings into motion, the experience itself is still very singular and personal in nature. It is not felt the same across the aggregate, rather it is experienced individually from person to person *within* the group. Additionally, while community certainly plays a big role in the numinous for many, it does not do so for everyone. In fact, the three other subjects specifically indicated that they *had* to be alone in order to encounter the numinous. These were the three who cited prayer and reflection as their driving factor.

For example, H2 explicitly stated that in order to experience religious awe, *I have to be alone so that I can reflect. It doesn't work with other people around at all*.

Additionally, C3 described prayer and conversing with God as his leading catalyst, saying that in these moments it is *Being alone, with the sensation that I am not alone*.

Therefore, I argue that Durkheim's insistence on collective effervescence is too simplistic. While collectivity may enhance a numinous experience, *it is not the experience itself*, and it certainly is not a universal factor.

Five out of my ten subjects cited nature as one of the driving factors towards the numinous. All five attributed their experiences in nature to God. That is, they linked their emotional state of wonder to their belief in God's creation. They described how seeing and appreciating God's creations brought them closer to knowing Him/Her, and how this closeness catalyzed an emotional response of peace and awe. This is an important distinction to make because it separates the religious experience of transcendence from a more secular appreciation for the physical world. These ideas and attitudes mirror William James' discussion of "melting moods", or the state of mind produced by religious experiences in which "... the hardness in [one's] heart has broken down."³⁸

This idea was encapsulated perfectly by M1, who said, *Seeing the Earth and its beauty and ... just how complex and amazing it is ... I think that really brings awe to me, and I think the reasoning is because god created this world and so because of that you as one person cannot fully fathom how complex it is. And so I think that really brings awe and wonder to me.* M1 feels wonder in nature, and this is because of the direct correlation she finds between God and the natural world. She does not simply feel amazement at its scale and beauty, rather, she marvels at the complexity of God's creation.

One last data point of interest is that both subjects who discussed history as the most important factor in awe were the two Jewish participants. No other participant from any other religious group mentioned this catalyst. Both J1 and J2 described how reflecting on their heritage and the tradition of their people brought them recurring

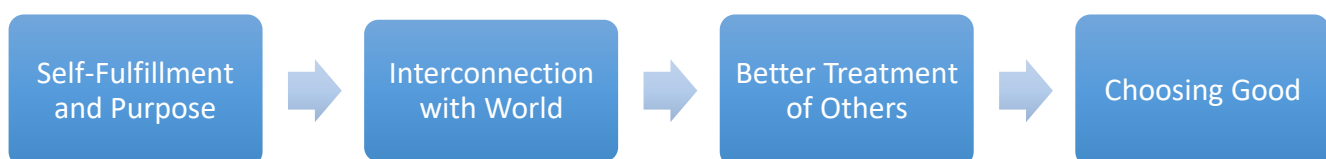
³⁸ James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. (New York: Modern Library, 1902), 267.

feelings of religious wonder. They each explicitly cited their emotional connection with the endurance and suffering of the Jewish community, giving both recent and historic examples of resilience in the face of anti-Semitism. This catalyst is closely linked to the catalyst of community, but with a twist. Rather than a community acting as a salve for pain, it is the very pain of the community, and its endurance to it, that is wondrous.

Day to Day Life

Every single one of my subjects affirmed that experiencing religious awe positively affected their everyday life. Such effects fell into four related categories: a sense of purpose and self-fulfillment, a feeling of interconnectedness, better treatment of others, and overall choosing to do good. Importantly, we should not think about these categories as hard and fast divisions. Rather, we must think of them as a continuation, with one flowing into the next. This is a snowball effect that starts with a change in one's self conception and moves towards broad-stroke shifts in attitude and behavior; a progression from the individual to the broader community, as demonstrated in Figure 2:

Figure 2



Part III of this research will analyze these effects of the numinous experience. The section will highlight specific examples as outlined by my subjects so as to demonstrate wonder's real-world, substantial implications. It will explore how the groups are related, as well as how they influence each other. Finally, Part IV will finish with concluding thoughts and a discussion about this project's significance.

PART III: ANALYSIS

Purpose and Self-Fulfillment

When asked how experiences of religious awe affected one's secular, everyday life, every single one of my subjects mentioned a shift in their person. These shifts came in the forms of both a "re-centering" and "reset" of the self, as well as a reinforced sense of purpose.

For example, H1 replied that, *These experiences make me realize that I have to take care of my body more because I only have one. I can't destroy what God gave me.* This indicates a renewed appreciation for her physical self, especially as she attributes her body and health to God's will.

Similarly, H3 responded by saying that due to these experiences, *My self-esteem goes up because I am more centered ... I feel more confident because I have a better grasp on the world. I feel more steady and capable of doing things, and then I feel more confident in myself.* H3 directly links religious experiences to her improved self-esteem. Clearly, encounters with the numinous are key components of self-conceptualization.

C2 summed these themes up well when she said, *For me, religious awe is finally feeling my own autonomy. I get to decide my faith and if I want to believe in something or not. That's a choice. When I do choose to believe that's when I feel that awe, that overwhelming fascination.* For C2, religious wonder reinforces her own autonomy. This has huge implications for attitudes and behavior. This is the ignition that will propel us through our progression of effects.

I was able to glean more details about this phenomenon when I probed further and asked if these experiences affected one's attitude and perception of self. Here is where my subjects talked about feeling a sense of purpose, and being a part of something bigger. This is where the effect of self-conceptualization and the effect of interconnectedness start to flow together, which I will explore in the next section.

In response to the question of effect on attitude and perception of self, M2 replied, *They help me see myself more. The experiences tell me that there are greater forces at work that I can't control. If something happens it's because there's a reason for it.* This is an 'everything happens for a reason' mentality that M2 directly relates to experiencing religious awe. He sees himself as part of a bigger plan driven by God's will.

Similarly, C2 responded by saying that the experience, ... *Does affect my general attitude towards life now. I believe that you have to let things happen to you, and I operate a lot on the fact that God has a plan for me. Not only that, but I have a purpose on this earth.* Here, C2 very clearly affirms how religious wonder affects her general, daily attitude, and also how it provides her with a sense of purpose. Due to numinous experiences, she sees a reason for her work and her place in the world.

Finally, M1 summed up these themes when she said, *Religious awe is purpose. I think with purpose ... you think about the vastness of the world and how complex everything is, and then you think back to how what god has given you is great. And now you have to take that and do something with it. Now you have to have a purpose in your life. Don't just waste this human life that you have.* Here we see not only a reiteration of the theme of purpose, but also that of interconnectedness creeping in with a discussion of the “vastness of the world” and broader complexity.

Thus, we see how experiences of religious awe may instill in an individual a sense of purpose. The next section will examine how it also reinforces conceptions of one's place in a complex world and feelings of interconnectedness. Note that the combination of rejuvenated purpose and sense of place in an interconnected community lead to a greater understanding and treatment of others; a snowball effect of righteousness that culminates in the sweeping desire to do good.

Interconnectedness

Parallel to my subjects' discussion of numinous experiences conveying a sense of purpose to one's life, they also mentioned an increased sense of interconnectedness with the broader world. Rather than two separate ideas, these effects are closely linked. One's newly established recognition of themselves as being “a part of something bigger” posits the existence of an extensive network to which we belong. When one recognizes this, one sees oneself as a connecting point in a wide-reaching web; an interconnected piece of global happenings and organization.

My data supports Fowles' argument on one of the major effects of transcendence. She eloquently expresses her ideas in *An Archaeology of Doings* when she describes how, "True transcendence is premised on a paradoxical realization that we are all, each of us, incommensurably distinct and yet, in spite of this, somehow connected and unified as parts of a greater whole, witnesses to a common world, offspring of a common mother or father, reliant upon the contrast between ourselves and others for our own understanding."³⁹ This demonstrates the "re-centering"/"resetting" of the self as described in the previous section, as well as the concept of deep interconnection with the world, which is the topic of this section.

J1 clearly emphasized this point when she said, *Experiencing religious awe re-grounds me in a lot of ways by reminding me of my purpose. This reinforces my idea of the interconnectedness of all people and humanity, of being a light to the nations ... There is a connection to the sacred, my ancestors, and all of humanity.* Here, J1 beautifully links all of the elements that we have discussed thus far. Religious awe results in a re-grounding/reaffirmation of the self, which conveys a sense of purpose and interconnection with the world.

All of my subjects except for one were also able to express this chain of reaction. For example, H3 said about the experiences that ... *they give me a feeling of centeredness and connectedness. I don't feel alone after those instances ... I am more in tune with my culture, and can connect more to my people and those around me.* Here

³⁹ Fowles, Severin M. *An Archaeology of Doings: Secularism and the Study of Pueblo Religion*, 147.

we start to see the flow of the effects of self-conceptualization and interconnectedness into the effect of better treatment of others.

As we shall see in the next section, a combined sense of purpose and feeling of interconnection with broader local/global communities has tangible implications for an individual's treatment of other people.

Treatment of Others

The effects of self-conceptualization and a feeling of interconnectedness with the broader world flow into the effect of the better treatment of others. Feeling more centered and sure of oneself, while at the same time recognizing a network of “something bigger”, results in a consideration of the effects of one's actions, and a desire to treat others with kindness.

This link was demonstrated by J1 when she said, *The way I come to understand myself through those spiritual experiences and my sense of connection affects how I interact with the world around me on a general scale. It's continuous ... I've had these experiences since I was very young, and because of them in part they have always informed the way I interact with other people.* J1 went on to specify that these interactions and her behavior towards others have shifted in a solely positive way.

H2 also discussed her development into a kinder person through these processes. After experiencing awe, she ... *can appreciate people more. Everyone has different traits and characteristics, and I can see the beauty of that more than before ... [Religious awe] helps me be kinder towards people in general because I feel more*

connected to them, and I don't want to hurt them. Again, we see a direct link between the two previous effects of religious awe, and the effect of treating others with kindness.

Finally, H1 also touched on these concepts when she said, *Because of the feeling of belonging awe brings, I can relate to other people more ... It makes me want to give back to the community, and this is instilled by my religion.* Here, we start to see the shift towards our last effect: the effect of generally choosing good. Due to H1's religious experiences, she feels a greater connection to her community, which elicits a desire to give back and do good *for* this community. The concept of actively choosing "good" decisions for the benefit of the broader community is the topic of the last section in this chapter.

Choosing Good

Every single one of my subjects wrapped up their discussion of the numinous by describing how these experiences ultimately guide them towards a more righteous path. This result was the culmination of the three effects of religious awe that were previously discussed in this chapter.

M2 outlined this effect by describing a newfound understanding of the dichotomy between good and evil. When asked how experiences of religious wonder affected his general attitude and life outlook, he responded by saying, *My worldview is that every good and bad deed of ours is written down, and at some point we will be held accountable. Sometimes I have a desire to do things that I know I shouldn't, but these experiences are a reminder to do right ... There is an internal battle with the good and*

bad sides of myself. Now more than before the good side wins because of religious awe.

C3 answered similarly by replying, *I see the experiences as a call to love others the way that God loves us. It's taking the love that God gives us and paying it forward, even if we do it imperfectly. When I feel close to God I see the world in a better light, it's easier to see the good in people and the world, and it makes it easier to be a good part of the world to make others' lives better ... At the crux of it, I feel more whole after those experiences, so I'm able to give myself more fully to the world around me.* Here, C3 succinctly connects the first effect of a reframed self-conceptualization with choosing to do good, both for others and the world around him.

Finally, C1 also linked doing good to religious experience by saying, *These feelings make me want to pursue Christianity. God is so good and wants us to live out what he has asked us to do ... When I feel awe and wonder it makes me recognize who God is and what he's done, and that affects my interactions with other people and my motivation to do good deeds. But the middle step is God.* Here, C1 directly attributes God to his desire to do good on a broad scale, but also to treat others with kindness as explored in the above section.

Through these examples, we ultimately see how experiences of religious wonder and awe lead individuals to “choose good”. This might mean turning away from actions they know to be wrong more often, or it might mean giving back to the broader community. But however this “good” manifests itself, it is important to understand that the subjects describe it as a manifestation of their God’s love. That is, my subjects described a newfound desire to carry their God’s love forward, to choose the path their

God would want from them, to be a manifestation *of* their God's goodness. In this way, religious experience and belief is directly and tangibly tied to attitude and action.

PART IV: CONCLUSION

Concluding Thoughts

Ultimately wonder and awe are significant aspects of the religious experience. These sensations influence and shape an individual's relationship to and understanding of their own religion and belief systems. Wonder is a driving force in an individual's self-conceptualization and perception of one's purpose and place in the broader global community.

Through four related and overlapping effects, religious awe catalyzes a shift in the ways that those who experience it see themselves. Subjects described feeling more "grounded", "reset", and "centered" in their being. This, in turn, instills the subjects with a sense of purpose. This sense of purpose and the idea of belonging to "something bigger" results in a rejuvenated perception of community, and a feeling of interconnectedness with one's environment and others in it. When my subjects noticed their place in a global community, and felt closer to those around them, this elicited an improved treatment of others because they felt more akin to them. Finally, in realizing this greater understanding of other people, my subjects described an overwhelming desire to "do good"; a conscious, behavioral change to be a better global citizen.

Thus, we see how religious wonder and awe affect the general attitudes and life outlooks of those who experience it. Such individuals describe a newfound

understanding of a “bigger picture”, or a feeling that there is a meaning to one’s life, that everything happens for a reason according to the plan of a higher power, that one is fundamentally not alone in this world. These are weighty realizations that have an impact on the ways one understands his/herself and interacts with the external world.

Significance

This project is significant in that it demonstrates the role that wonder and awe plays in the forefront of the religious experience. Going further, it shows how this kind of religious experience catalyzes personal and communal growth. Individuals who have felt these sensations describe how they ultimately have become better global citizens. By feeling more sure of oneself, as well as connecting more with one’s community, individuals are able to give more of themselves to their environment, and to treat others with kindness. Thus we see how religion may act as a force of social progress within any given community by eliciting a greater understanding of self and others.

To this point, my subjects believe in the power that religious awe may have in shaping a better, more understanding world.

H2 specifically noted that *If more people had these experiences, I think there would be more tolerance to anything different from you. I think we would live in a happier world because people would have greater faith in themselves but also in others.*

I would like to end this paper with a particularly powerful quote that I believe sums up the significance of religious awe, and speaks to the themes that I have outlined throughout this project. In describing wonder as a force for good, C3 closed his interview by saying, *When awe is experienced, contextualized, and internalized in a way*

that people choose to live their lives differently, that would positively impact the world for sure ... At the end of the day, I think the goal of religions in general is to either better oneself or to make the world better through teachings you believe in. So if people have religious experiences of awe and wonder that lead them to reevaluate who they are and their place in the world truly, it will make the world a better place person to person. Awe and wonder, and the impact they have on the psyche and the life of an individual, can have a ripple effect worldwide.

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