

# Religious Experiences & Pathology

Lecture 8  
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## Learning Objectives – Lecture 8

By the end of the lesson the learner should be able to:

- discuss the interaction between religious experience, particularly of the mystical kind, and pathological states;
- identify characteristics of “spiritual emergence” in mystical consciousness.

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## Introduction

- Some saints/mystics are known to have suffered from chronic neurobiological or psychotic states (e.g. Teresa of Avila had epileptic attacks), so where their reported mystical experiences merely psychotic?

## Greek's attitude towards madness

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato quotes Socrates as saying:

- Madness, provided it comes as the gift of heaven, is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings ... the men of old who gave things their names saw no disgrace or reproach in madness; otherwise they would not have connected it with it the name of the noblest of arts, the art of discerning the future, and called it the manic art ... So, according to the evidence provided by our ancestors, madness is a nobler thing than sober sense ... madness comes from God, whereas sober sense is merely human.

In Greek mythology, Lyssa was the spirit of mad rage, frenzy and rabies in animals. She was closely related to the *manie*, the spirits of madness and insanity.

Read the following quotes and discuss if there are signs of depression!

## John of the Cross, 1584-85

1. On a dark night, Kindled in love with yearnings— oh, happy chance!— I went forth without being observed, My house being now at rest.
2. In darkness and secure, By the secret ladder, disguised—oh, happy chance!— In darkness and in concealment, My house being now at rest.
3. In the happy night, In secret, when none saw me, Nor I beheld aught, Without light or guide, save that which burned in my heart.

### Thérèse of Lisieux, 1896-97

“You are dreaming about the light, about a fatherland embalmed in the sweetest perfumes; you are dreaming about the eternal possession of the Creator of all these marvels; you believe that one day you will walk out of this fog which surrounds you! Advance, advance; rejoice in death which will give you not what you hope for but a night still more profound, the night of nothingness.”

### Mother Teresa of Calcutta

I call, I cling, I want ... and there is no One to answer ... no One on Whom I can cling ... no, No One. Alone ... Where is my Faith ... even deep down right in there is nothing, but emptiness & darkness ... My God ... how painful is this unknown pain ... I have no Faith ... I dare not utter the words & thoughts that crowd in my heart ... & make me suffer untold agony. So many unanswered questions live within me afraid to uncover them ... because of the blasphemy ... If there be God ... please forgive me ... When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives & hurt my very soul. I am told God loves me ... and yet the reality of darkness & coldness & emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.

Kolodiejchuk, B. (2007). *Come Be My Light*. Toronto: Random House

### Dark night of the soul

- A state that many spiritual people are said to go through.
- It might be accompanied by depression – but they seem to have clear purpose in their suffering;
- They do no harm to themselves and others;
- They function normally.
- There is a deep serenity and a longing for God.

### Neurobiological Disorders and mysticism: the case of Teresa of Avila

Teresa of Avila (1515-) experienced some of the symptoms of temporal-lobe seizures during her lifetime and experienced them on a regular basis. An experience as a young nun, in her own words:

“The change in my life, and in my diet, affected my health; and, though my happiness was great, it was not sufficient to cure me. My fainting fits began to increase in number and I suffered so much from heart trouble that everyone who saw me was alarmed... My condition became so serious for I hardly ever seemed to be fully conscious and sometimes I lost consciousness altogether that my father made great efforts to find me a cure.”

Peers, *Complete Works*, Vol. I: Life, p. 22,

**Symptoms of Temporal-lobe seizures** vary from person to person, but the seizures usually comprise several of the following symptoms:

- The beginning of an attack may be a fixed stare, salivation, or disorientation.
- Some feel remote or alienated from their surroundings.
- Others feel they can predict the future because they may experience *deja-vu* - the illusion of having already experienced a situation.
- It may often seem as if people around them are talking too quickly or too slowly. These people may even seem to be far away. At times, the real world mixes with the unreal world.
- Genuine auditory and visual hallucinations may occur.

### She later writes about her ‘raptures’

- My raptures have become more numerous and often they come upon me violently and in such a way that they are recognizably external signs, and, even when I am with others, I cannot resist them. For they come in a way which cannot be hidden unless I attribute them to my heart weakness and give it to be understood that they are swoons.

## Spiritual Emergence (y)

- A term coined by “Transpersonal Psychologists” (Stanislov and Christina Grof, 1989) Spiritual Emergence is similar to spiritual transformation (Assagioli, 1989).

Assagioli lists four stages of spiritual transformation:

1. Crises preceding the spiritual awakening.
2. Crises caused by the spiritual awakening.
3. Reactions to the spiritual awakening.
4. Phases of the process of transmutation.

## Strategies for treating spiritual emergency

- Reduction of environmental and interpersonal stimulation;
- Temporary discontinuation of spiritual practices;
- Encouragement of creative therapies (art, music, writing...);
- Consideration for medication.

Read, T., & Crowley, N. (2009). The transpersonal perspective. In Cook et al., *Spirituality and psychiatry*, pp. 212-232.

## Implication for counselling: simplified

- Check if the client needs clinical assessment for any ailment that might need psychiatric intervention. Indication: self-harm, harm to others, prolonged problem, etc.
- If they are doing extraordinary penances (fasting, physical torture, loss of sleep) ask to stop – to verify if the symptoms are truly spiritual!

## Conclusion

- Do religions encourage such experiences and beliefs, and thereby foster psychotic episodes? The short answers are, yes to the first part of the question – many religions do indeed encourage or support voices, visions and beliefs in malign spiritual forces, but no to the second question – religion is unlikely to foster psychotic illness. However, voices, visions and other exotic religious practices, beliefs and experiences may lead to the mistaken belief that a person is suffering from psychosis (i.e. misdiagnosis).

Loewenthal, K. M., & Lewis, C. A. (2011). Mental health, religion and culture. *Psychologist*, 24(4), 256-259.