

Ecstasy: The Life of the Trinitarian God

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Introduction

King David danced before the ark. “David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with songs, and lyrics, and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals” (2 Sam 6:5) His wife Michal, daughter of Saul the king, disapproved of the spectacle David was making of himself and “She despised him in her heart.” (6:16)

How do we respond to such a display of **religious enthusiasm**? Are we with Bishop Butler that it is a “horrid thing” reputedly said to John Wesley! We gather as part of his spiritual legacy at Wesley Church, but we may not identify with his religious enthusiasm. Do we prefer a far cooler dish than the hot curry of say Pentecostalism?

Peak Experiences

I will not ask you to put yourself on the spectrum between King David and Michal. I have something far more interesting for you to consider. Have you ever had what Abraham Maslow termed a “**peak experience**”? Intense, memorable, pleasurable, even transcendent in some way?

Such experiences tend to be diverse. And not usually in a religious setting. Standing on the rim or the **Grand Canyon** is as close to awe as being in any great medieval cathedral. I seek out such experiences in art galleries or concert halls. I think of walking through the Frick gallery in New York City – intense joy to be surrounded by the old Masters of the western tradition. Or it could be the intense joy of your wedding day or feeling proud about receiving a degree after years of hard study. Or the joy of designing your new house and eventually moving in. Or it may, like King David, be in the midst of a religious activity.

It is hard to think of anyone more religious than the mystic **St Teresa** of Avila. She had an ecstatic experience, as captured by Bernini’s famous sculpture of 1652. She was in prayer at the time and concluded that it had religious significance.

I saw in his hands a long golden spear [...] This, he plunged into my heart several times into my heart, that it penetrated to my entrails. [...] The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans, and yet such pain was so exceedingly sweet that one cannot possibly desire it to cease. (St Teresa of Avila, 1515-1582).

Think for a moment – what experience would you identify as a peak experience in your life. Do you have more than one? Even many? (**Share** with a person sitting near you?)

It is my intention today to locate such experiences within the realm of faith.

A Sacramental View of Reality

Here is the problem: we all have intense experiences. Unpredictable, wild, catching us (as it were) by surprise. It is easy to have the experience but miss the meaning (T. S. Eliot in *Four Quartets*). How do we **reclaim the sense of religious significance**?

The problem runs deep. For example, we look at the world through ‘modern eyes’. Think for a moment about how a **medieval person** might see: life and death, changing seasons, harvests, sources of authority in the world, who knows the truth about God. Most of us have shifted to

a rationalist ‘course and effect’ with the acid test of scientific method. Some of us are post-modern with a fragmented, multiple, equally valid viewpoints. The result of both shifts is a loss of religious significance in the mundane. Life is effectively ‘paint stripped’ of spiritual colour.

There have been attempts to ‘**re-enchant reality**’. The New Age Movement is such an example with gurus, festivals, music and crystals. Even more interesting is neo-paganism with Neil Gaiman’s novel (2001) *American Gods* and the Amazon DVD series. I am sympathetic with such attempts to re-enchant. It is like humanity has woken up and said, “I don’t want to be a lonely orphan in this vast universe or infinite reach of multiverses proposed by recent science.”

The Christian tradition answers this with new contemporary relevance. We have always had a **sacramental view of reality**, instituted by Jesus who transformed ordinary bread and wine into his body and blood in the Holy Communion. I will give a personal example of a peak experience which I consider sacramental. The Rothko Chapel is in Houston, TX. It is an interfaith place of meditation surrounded by 14 Rothko paintings creating a sublime and sacred place. We (I speak as humanity) have created many sacred places including this church. Heaven and earth meet. Intermingle. The profane becomes sacred.

The first point is that in a **sacramental view** of reality **peak experiences have profound meaning**. These are times when we can experience God in a life changing way. We can awake, open our eyes, and see God.

But if the cost in *not seeing* is not enough, there is equally a cost in *not knowing*. This is where theology comes in.

Life of the Trinity

The classic Christian vision of God is profoundly relational, one-in-three persons. This is not a picture of an isolated God, requiring creation (as it were) for ‘company’. This is the origin of the profoundly **human need for relational intimacy**. We, created in the image of God, are but a shadow of a greater fullness which is in God. Many of our peak experiences are *relational* and point to the inherent nature of God as a trinity of persons.

This touches on two theological themes:

- (a) **Incarnation** What the contemporary theologian Volf described as “Jesus demanded that we imitate the divine dance of love’s freedom and trust, [including] the divine labour of love’s suffering and risk.” God sharing our humanity in Christ. But it is a ‘two way street’; we share the divine pain as well. But also,
- (b) **Life of the Trinity** The eternal joy and ecstasy of a complete relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Kathryn Tanner (2010) in *Christ the Key*, underlined the significance of the incarnation (God the Son becoming human) in that this downward movement provides a bridge: first, from God to humanity but also from us to God. We cross the bridge and participate in the divine life – that which joins Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Now I do not want to limit the inner life of God to just two dimensions, we can reasonably assume that there is a richness of everything in God which we can hardly imagine. But our life provides **sacramental indicators pointing to the divine richness**. I am asserting that the

veil that hides God from our eyes is thinnest when we have a peak experience. Such experiences are revelatory.

Sex as a Peak Experience

There are huge risks in **mentioning sex** in the pulpit. The church is still bruised and bleeding from the royal commission. As part of our humanity our sexuality is often hijacked by deviant or shameful impulses, what we would want to hide from polite society and God. But how do we understand **powerful drives** and at times intensely pleasurable experiences?

Perhaps some of you thought of a sexual experience when I asked you to identify a peak experience? Perhaps fewer would have mentioned it to your neighbour today in church. But I don't think we can begin to understand this topic without acknowledging the full range of human experience.

Theologian **Sarah Coakley** (2013) has written on this in her *God, sexuality and the self*. This book is described as an essay on the trinity, so Trinitarian thought is certainly 'making a come-back' in the most influential of theological discussions. Sex and trinity in the same title. And by one of the 'rock stars' of the theological world! Reading theology is becoming more interesting.

Coakley is clear in her argument that **sexual desire is woven into our being and is a clue of our grounding in God**. Now we can appreciate why seeing the very being of God as relational is important. The early church fathers such as Dionysius attribute the fullness of ekstasis or ecstasy to God alone and our human desire finds its origins in desire for God. It is a love across barriers of difference – I do not mean just gender or differences of orientation. Coakley talks, rightly I think, about an ecstasy of exchange in what theologians have called the **dance of perichoresis**. This is seen in the dance of the hares in the 16th C window of Paderbon cathedral (Coakley, p. 253). Coakley noted, "this sculpture injects the idea of divine intra-Trinitarian delight, careless frolicking and even erotic excess, all the while holding the movement within its circular frame". (p. 252)

Towards a Sacramental View of Reality

Theology, spirituality and our Christian understanding risk being cut off from that we feel most intensely. I am suggesting today that we see differently. I would invite you to a pre-modern view of the world shared by the ancient Greeks, the Biblical writers and of course people in the middle ages. Then you will begin to see God everywhere you look. You will see life "charged with the presence of God".

This is properly a sacramental view of life in which nothing is ever just bread and wine. Not people, not relationships, not sex - everything is part of the mad dance of the hares. Peak experiences are a revelation of God including the divine inner life.

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