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Experiences of “Soul Journeys” in the World’s Religions: The Journeys of Mohammed, Saints Paul and John, Jewish Chariot Mysticism, Taoism’s Highest Clarity School, and Shamanism.

Psychological and Philosophical Interpretations, Cross-Cultural Comparisons, and Effects on Culture

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“Soul journeys” are a central practice of shamanism. However, they have also been important in many other religious traditions and have exerted a major impact on religions, cultures, and history. This article surveys some important journeys in the world’s religions such as those of Mohammed, the Christian saints Paul and John, Jewish Chariot Mysticism, Taoism’s Highest Clarity tradition, and shamanism. The article explores the experiences of these journeys, techniques for inducing them, culturally specific features, and the range of metaphysical interpretations of them. It also examines some of the surprising ways in which journeys are currently impacting Western culture, ranging from political movements to our understanding of states of mind.

We must close our eyes and invoke a new manner of seeing...a
wakefulness that is the birthright of us all, though few put it to use.

Plotinus (O’Brien, 1964, p. 42)

Keywords: *shamanism, soul journey, theophany, vision, imaginal, Mi’raj, saint, chariot mysticism, Highest Clarity*

Central to shamanism is the journey. “Any ecstatic cannot be considered a shaman,” wrote the great historian of religions, Mircea Eliade (1964), because “the shaman specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld” (p. 5). Eliade’s focus on the journey as the defining feature of shamanism has been much debated, but it is certainly a distinctive feature of the tradition (Harner, 1990; Harner & Harner, 2005; Walsh, 2007). Other spiritual practitioners may enter altered states, minister, or heal, but it is shamans who primarily engage in soul flight (Winkelman, 1984). Consequently, “the shamanic journey is often a centerpiece of shamanism” (Harner, 2013, p. 67).

The shamanic journey usually requires three phases: preparation, induction of an altered state of mind, and the actual journey. Here the term “altered state of mind” is used rather than the more common “altered state of consciousness” because the latter term may reflect a confusion between consciousness and mental

content which Rock and Krippner (2007) have called “the consciousness/content fallacy.” This distinction is similar to the one made in Tibetan Buddhism between *sem* (the psyche) and *Rigpa* (pure awareness).

In their altered state, shamans experience themselves (usually as a disembodied soul or spirit) flying through space and travelling either to distant parts of this world or to other worlds. The shamanic universe is usually three tiered and consists of an upper (celestial heaven) world, a lower world or underworld, and this world which is called the middle world. In these three worlds, shamans usually see and interact with “spirits” from whom they seek power, information, help, or healing (Harner, 2013). The actual nature (or in philosophical terms, the ontological status) of these “worlds” and “spirits” is an open question (Walsh, 2007) to which attention will return later.

Yet shamans are not the only people who journey, and it is surprising how much similar journeys have shaped many religions and much of history (Collins

& Fishbane, 1995). Journeys can be found across the world's religions. They certainly occur in each of the world's "major religions," which are usually said to include the three Western monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the Indian traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism, and the Chinese traditions of Taoism and Confucianism (Smith, 1991). However, the role and impact of journeys varies widely across these traditions.

This impact was highly significant for each of the Western monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—as well as Chinese Taoism. In contrast, soul flights had less effect on Confucianism, with its greater social and political emphasis, or on the Indian traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism, where yogic practices dominated. This article examines some important journeys in major religions, the nature of these journeys, the methods used to induce them, and their many implications. The article also examines novel ways in which journeys are currently impacting Western culture.

The Western Monotheisms

In the West, three of the most influential religious leaders, Mohammed and the Christian Saints Paul and John, were spontaneously born upwards through the heavens.

Mohammed's Night Journey

Mohammed's *Mi'raj* (Night Journey or ascent) was originally described very briefly. However, it has been elaborated over the centuries, and is supposedly alluded to in the Koran in the verse "glory be to Him, who carried his servant by night...that we might show him some of our signs" (17:1; Glassé, 1989).

Tradition says that the prophet was asleep in Mecca, when he was awakened by Gabriel, the archangel who had previously revealed the Koran to him, and six centuries earlier had announced Jesus' birth to Mary. Gabriel escorted Mohammed first to Jerusalem, where he prayed with the great prophets of history. Then he ascended up through the seven heavens to the throne of Allah. Even the great archangel could not ascend this far and sighed "if I would go one step further, my wings would get burned" (Schimmel, 1975).

The Koran reports that Mohammed's "eyes swayed not, nor swept astray. Indeed, he saw one of the greatest signs of his Lord" (53:17-18; Armstrong, 1993). Of course almost nothing is told about the nature of this theophany (vision of God) which is assumed to be far beyond anything words could convey.

It is said that Muslims were instructed to pray fifty times a day. Moses, however, had other ideas. When the prophet descended to the sixth heaven where Moses presided he was ordered to go back and request a smaller number better suited to the limited capacities of humans. This was repeated several times until, at five prayers a day, Mohammed felt ashamed to beg yet again for another reduction.

During his descent to Mecca he saw camel caravans trekking across the desert. The next morning, his report of the journey was met with mocking hostility by skeptics. Then the caravans arrived (Glassé, 1989).

The nature of Mohammed's journey—whether a dream, a spiritual vision, or a literal transport of the body—has been debated for centuries. But whatever its nature, its impact has been extraordinary. For fourteen hundred years, devout Muslims have prayed five times a day, whilst the great mystics of Islam, the Sufis, use the language of ascension to describe their own spiritual experiences.

Actual ascensions were described by some notable Sufis, including the extraordinary intellectual and mystical genius Ibn Arabi (1164-1238) who is widely known as "the Greatest Master" (Shah, 1971). Such claims were daring because of the risk of seeming to claim parity with Mohammed, but were clearly an important element of spiritual life for some Sufis.

In the West, the medieval poet Dante apparently fashioned part of his famous allegorical journey in the *Divine Comedy* on Mohammed's experience. However, as a conventional Christian he duly consigned Mohammed to one of the lowest hells.

Mohammed's journey, like those of the saints Paul and John, was spontaneous. By contrast, the journeys of shamanic, Jewish, and Taoist practitioners required elaborate training, preparation, and practices. In shamanism, the psychospiritual technology for journeying is usually a highly developed skill passed across generations from teacher to student. The training might require months or even years of apprenticeship and spiritual discipline. Preparations might range from physical (e.g., fasting, solitude, and sleep deprivation) to pharmacological (tobacco or psychedelics), rhythm (music and dance), ritual (group gatherings and involvement), and spiritual (purification and prayer; Walsh, 2007).

Early Christian Ascents

Saint Paul was also "caught up into Paradise." Paul was no stranger to visions, having been transformed

from a merciless persecutor of Christians to one of their foremost leaders by a vision of Jesus so overwhelming that “He fell to the ground.” Afterwards “he could see nothing” and “For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank” (Acts 9:9, NRSV). Later Paul underwent a spontaneous journey that he reluctantly revealed to maintain his authority in the face of competition from other Christian visionaries:

I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows, [and] was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. (2 Cor. 12:2-10, NRSV).

Paul’s visions braced him with an unwavering faith that endured persecution and torture, fortified the precarious early church, and shaped Christian doctrine for 2,000 years.

But the impact of even St. Paul’s journeys is dwarfed by those of John, author of the *Book of Revelation*. John reported a voice: “Which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must Take place after this.’ At once I was in the spirit...” (4:1, ESV).

John’s detailed, highly symbolic visions portray perennial Christian themes such as future trials and tribulations, the millennium, and Armageddon: the final cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. The nature and meaning of John’s visions—symbolic or literal—have been hotly debated, and even today this debate is having an enormous religious and political impact. Literalists have long expected their fulfillment at any time (an internet research reveals dozens of related websites), and some believers are now agitating politically to bring about the conditions for their fruition.

The Chariot Mysticism of Judaism

Judaism and Taoism provide examples of religions in which spiritual journeys mushroomed into major traditions. In fact, Judaism’s earliest mystical tradition, the *Merkabah* or “Chariot Mysticism,” centered on journeying. It was sparked by the spontaneous journey of the prophet Ezekiel, who in 592 BCE had an overwhelming vision of a chariot and of the throne of God. Presumably some initial journeys in any tradition may be spontaneous and then provide inspiration for followers to discover techniques with which to create them deliberately.

For over a thousand years, Jewish seekers strove to emulate Ezekiel’s vision. To do this they elaborated a complex and demanding discipline that required “moral purity, rabbinic learnedness, ritual purity, and thorough mastery of the special knowledge necessary to negotiate the supernal realm” (Blumenthal, 1978, p. 90). Thus prepared, seekers readied themselves by fasting, solitude, and prayer for the journey through the heavens, and through the halls of the divine palace. An 11th century account reports:

when a man is worthy and blessed with certain qualities and he wishes to gaze at the heavenly chariot and the halls of the angels on high he must follow certain exercises. He must *fast* for a specified number of days, he must place his head between his knees *whispering softly* to himself the while certain praises of God with his face towards the ground. As a result he will gaze in the innermost recesses of his heart and it will seem as if he saw the seven halls with his own eyes, moving from hall to hall to observe that which is therein to be found. (Ariel, 1988, p. 22)

It was not an easy journey. Standing watch at every level were guardians who were “harsh, fearful terrifying....Bolts of lightening flow and issue forth from the balls of their eyes....and torches of fiery coals from their mouths” (Blumenthal, 1978, p. 63). Fires scorched the seekers, complex prayers were demanded at every level, and the unworthy suffered insanity or death. For the successful, the reward was an ecstatic vision of the throne of God.

Powerful as this vision may have been, contemporary Jewish scholars point out that it was also curiously limited (Blumenthal, 1978; Scholem, 1946). There is little devotional love, no penetrating insight into the fundamental nature of humankind or the world, no new moral ideal, no practices for ordinary people, and certainly no sense of union with God. The great scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem concluded that “The mystic who in his ecstasy has passed through all the gates, braved all the dangers, now stands before the throne; he sees and hears—but that is all” (Scholem, 1946, p. 56). Perhaps these lacks help explain why the chariot tradition eventually died out.

Of course, spontaneous journeys continued. For the Baal Shem Tov, the remarkable 18th century founder of Hasidism, journeys were a vital source of inspiration, and he wrote:

For on the day of the New Year of the year 5507 (= September, 1746) I engaged in an ascent of the soul, as you know I do, and I saw wondrous things....That which I saw in my ascent is impossible to describe or to relate... (Ullman & Reichenberg-Ullman, 2001, p. 79).

So impactful was the Baal Shem Tov that he inspired Hasidism: a new movement of ecstatic Judaism, in which joyous prayer, singing and dancing—though not journeying—assumed central places.

Taoism

Chinese shamans traveled the cosmos for centuries before the birth of organized religions. The most famous of all Chinese soul flights is described in the classic poem “The Far-off Journey,” dating to the 3rd century BCE. The author described how he toured the universe:

Up to the Cracks of Heaven,
Down to the Great Abyss....
Going beyond-nonaction, I reach the Clarity,
Become a neighbor of the Great Beginning.”

Kohn, 1993, pp. 256-257

Like Judaism, ecstatic journeys became a central practice of Taoism. Beginning in the 4th century CE, the Highest Clarity (*Shang Qing*) Tradition transformed “the ancient shamanistic practice...into a formal meditation procedure” (Kohn, 1993, p. 267). To do so, it developed the art of visualization to a degree never found before or since in Chinese religion. The body now became a microcosmos, and the practitioner journeyed within it and through the heavens.

The Highest Clarity school also created an enormous pantheon of gods and goddesses residing in the body and the stars. These deities the practitioner visited, drew power from, and even took as lovers (Robinet, 1989).

Journeys aimed for knowledge, power, ecstasy, union with a divine lover, and ultimately immortality. The Taoist obtained knowledge and power

by sinking deep in rapture within the confines of the sacred space of his meditation chamber and traveling through the world searching for virtue and instruction....The practitioner absorbs the essences of the stars and guides them to remain in certain parts of the body (Robinet, 1989, p. 164).

It is not all hard work. While the practitioner draws nourishment from the stars, he also “frolics in the paradise protected by them, where the divinities originate and reside” (Robinet, 1989, p. 168). Ecstatic union with a divine lover is also possible:

Adepts visualize the pure energy of the sun or the moon, then imagine a goddess in its midst. The goddess grows stronger and more vivid with prolonged practice until she is felt present in the flesh. Pressing her mouth to his, she dispenses celestial vapors to increase the adept’s vitality. After a long courtship and regularly visualizations, she will even lie with him. (Kohn, 1993, p. 267)

But ecstasy demands preparation, and Taoist training could be long and arduous. Years of discipline, purification, and meditation were necessary, and a classic text urged: “In all cases, first undertake purifications and fasts, make an effort to control your thoughts, and focus your mind firmly on the mystery” (Kohn, 1993, p. 259).

As in mystical traditions the world over, purification was regarded as essential (Walsh, 1999), and “To attain the Tao through ecstatic excursions, the soul and spirit of the Taoist must be freed completely from the concerns of this world” (Kohn, 1993, p. 250). A classic text, *Three Ways to Go Beyond the Heavenly Paths* gives the following instructions for a journey to a favored celestial destination, the Big Dipper and its attendant deities:

To practice the Tao excursion to the seven stars [of the Dipper] first summon the Jade Emperor and his nine lords and let their mysterious essence radiate within your body. Block off the root of death, calm your mind, and darken the room....Concentrate your mind and make a strong effort to control your thoughts. Visualize the gods in creative imagination, but do not fall asleep. Practice this for seven years; then a jasper carriage with a flying canopy and cinnabar shafts will come to receive you and take you to ascend through the Heavenly Pass. (Kohn, 1993, pp. 257-258)

Having arrived at the Big Dipper, the adept either rested on it, imbibed nourishment from its stars and divinities, or traveled the cosmos in it. “Once the tour of the whole universe is completed, the kings of the Thirty-six heavens will enter his or her name into the registers of immortality” (Robinet, 1989, p. 167).

At this point the long discipline was complete, and the practitioner fulfilled one of Taoism's highest goals: to become an immortal.

Further Kinds of Journeys

The focus here has been on journeys occurring in the major world religions, especially those spontaneous journeys and journey practices that had a major impact on the traditions. However, no discussion would be complete without pointing to other important kinds of journeys that occur in both religious and secular settings.

Two are especially important and are now impacting Western culture in new ways. These are the journey-like experiences that can occur in near-death experiences and in dreams, especially in lucid dreams. Lucid dreams are those in which people know they are dreaming, have partial control of their experiences, and can use them to undertake conscious journeys.

Both near-death experiences and dreams can result in journeys that are powerful, informative, transformative, and healing. Of course the specific experiences may be very different from typical shamanic ones. However, the general pattern of entering an altered state of mind, and traveling as a disembodied entity to other realms may occur.

Near-death and dream journeys have occurred throughout history, and had major impacts on individuals, myths, religions, and cultures. Because of new technologies they are now having impact in novel and far reaching ways, as resuscitation technology, dream-induction machines, and sleep electroencephalograms (sleep EEGs) make near-death and lucid dream experiences far more common (Ring, 1992; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993).

Many cultural effects of these experiences and technologies remain to be identified. However one crucial but as yet little recognized cultural shift is clearly underway. People in the Western world are now experiencing an increased frequency of altered states of mind such as near-death and lucid dream states, together with the states induced by spiritual practices such as shamanism, yoga, and meditation. The result is that the West is gradually transforming from a *monophasic* culture (which recognizes a very limited number of healthy states of mind) to a *polyphasic* culture (which recognizes and utilizes multiple states, such as those of dreams, meditation, yoga, and shamanism). For a fuller discussion of this transformation see *The World of Shamanism* (Walsh, 2007) or *Higher Wisdom* (Walsh &

Grob, 2005), and for an excellent analysis of monophasic and polyphasic cultures see *Brain, Symbol and Experience* (Laughlin, McManus, & d'Aquili, 1992).

General Principles

This brief cross-cultural survey of journey experiences reveals several important principles. These include the frequency of journey experiences, their remarkable impact, their cultural specificity, the extensive array of techniques designed to introduce them, and the diverse metaphysical interpretations given to them.

Frequency and Impact

One can only marvel at the far flung distribution and world changing impact of journey experiences. They occur across religions, cultures, and centuries, both spontaneously and after arduous preparation. In their wake, they have transformed individuals, religions, societies and history, and their impact continues to this day.

Cultural Specificity

The general problem or "deep structure" of many of these journeys is often similar, and is analogous to the shamanic upper world journey. However, the specific experiences are obviously strikingly culture specific. Mohammed traversed seven heavens, St. Paul only three; the Jewish seeker arrived at the throne of God, while the Taoist retraced a time honored route through the stars.

Where journeys are deliberately sought, their goals are also culturally specific. The most common goal is *kratophany* (a revelation of power), in whatever form power is conceived. The Taoist also journeyed for pure pleasure, for ecstatic union with a divine lover, or ultimately for immortality and union with the Tao. On the other hand, Tibetan Buddhists—whose journey practices are not described here since they form a relatively minor part of the vast array of Tibetan practices—seek enlightenment and liberation from the suffering and delusion of samsara (Powers, 1995).

Techniques

Though physical disciplines such as fasting and adopting specific postures remained, the methods used for inducing journeys in Judaism and Taoism differed from the usual techniques of shamanism. In these later traditions, intensely energetic methods such as dancing and drumming gave way to greater reliance on meditation, calm, and mind control.

This demonstrates a general principle of the evolution of both the techniques used for transcendence

and the religious states of mind they induce (Walsh, 2007). Over the centuries, techniques may become increasingly subtle, internal, and focused on mental training and control. The original reliance on entrainment by powerful external stimulation may be supplemented or replaced by a more subtle inner control of mental processes. According to Ramakrishna, one of the greatest of Hindu sages, the defining characteristic of such a practitioner is that “the mind is under his control; he is not under the control of his mind” (Ram Dass, 1978). So widely is this kind of self-control praised by sages and philosophers that the great historian, William Durant (1968) concluded that “The greatest of all wonders is not the conqueror of the world but the subduer of himself” (p. 360). In short, shamanic techniques still thrive in shamanic settings, but elsewhere have been supplemented or replaced by more subtle psychospiritual disciplines.

The Metaphysics of Journeys

Interpretations of the metaphysical nature of journeys in the major religions span the spectrum of possibilities from realist to imaginal. In shamanism, soul journeys are usually viewed literally as a journey across or between worlds. Likewise the inhabitants of these worlds—whether spirits, power animals, or the souls of the dead—are also viewed as real, independent beings who battle or befriend, help or heal. Shamans, in other words, are ontological realists. By contrast most contemporary Westerners would view such journeys, as well as the worlds and beings in them, as imaginal, that is, as products of the shaman’s psyche created via processes such as creative imagination or active imagination (Jung, 1961).

At first glance, deciding between these interpretations seems like a simple task. However, more careful philosophical analysis reveals that there are actually major difficulties (Walsh, 2007). In short, these difficulties include incommensurability, undetermination, and indeterminacy. Literal and imaginal interpretations come from different cultures and worldviews and therefore face the challenge of *incommensurability* (the challenge of comparing and deciding between worldviews that may be incommensurate). In addition, the *undetermination of theory by data* suggests that observations can always be interpreted in multiple ways. The result is that the nature of shamanic worlds and spirits may be *ontologically indeterminate* meaning that they cannot be decided definitively (i.e., they are indeterminate). For a fuller discussion see Walsh (2007), especially pages 147-149 and 173-167.

The conclusion that the exact nature of the worlds and beings encountered during journeys cannot be decided may not be very satisfying. However, it is intellectually honest and usefully humbling. As the ancient philosopher Heraclitus (2001) observed, “Things keep their secrets” (p. 9), while the religious scholar Huston Smith (1991) concluded that “Reality is steeped in mystery” (p. 389).

However, others are not as cautious in their interpretations. For example literal interpreters of John’s *Book of Revelation* view it as visions of future events, and such interpretations have long had great appeal and impact for many people.

Just how much appeal such interpretations can have is shown by the best-selling *Left Behind* series of novels which have sold an astounding 80 million or more copies. Based on John’s visions, the books portray the head of the United Nations as the antichrist, and jubilantly celebrate a genocidal second coming in which a curiously militant and merciless Jesus massacres billions of non-Christians. “If a Muslim were to write an Islamic version...jubilantly describing a massacre of millions of non-Muslims by God, we would have a fit” (Kristof, 2004).

As history shows repeatedly, literalist interpretations of visions can sometimes be dangerous. Literalist interpretations and their dangers are best understood developmentally as expressions of specific developmental stages of faith and morality. James Fowler’s (2000) research on faith development showed that at early adult stages such as *literal-mythic* and *synthetic-conventional*, religious life centers on narratives which are interpreted literally. At the conventional level of moral development known as the *maintaining norms schema*, the moral implications of these narratives may be followed without question since “For this schema, no further rationale for defining morality is necessary beyond simply asserting that an act is prescribed by the law, is the established way of doing things, or is the established will of God” (Thoma, 2006, p. 79). When these narratives are interpreted as sanctioning war and violence, the results can be devastating. Of course, visions can also be interpreted benignly and used to help, heal, and teach, and shamans have used them in this way for millennia.

Fortunately, other people have been more cautious in their interpretations and some have been agnostic. St. Paul humbly acknowledged that he did not

know whether his journey was “in the body or out of the body” and there has been long debate about whether Mohammed’s ascent was bodily or visionary. Taoists embraced both views, and saw themselves able to travel within the body and the heavens simultaneously.

Others have viewed soul journeys as imaginal. For Tibetan Buddhists, spiritual travels are explicitly mind creations, as is the entire physical universe. Some Jewish interpreters of Chariot Mysticism concluded that “This does not mean that they actually ascended on high, but that they gazed and saw it in the chambers of their heart, viewing it just like something seen clearly with the eyes” (Kaplan, 1982, p. 26). The religious scholars Henri Corbin and Mircea Eliade (1964) reached a similar conclusion: namely that cosmic travelers in diverse religions learned to create inner worlds consistent with the maps of their tradition, via imaginal processes such as creative imagination and active imagination (Jung, 1961).

Though journeys never endured as a central focus of the world’s major religions as they have in shamanism, it is clear that those practitioners who experienced them found them invaluable aids in breaking the bonds of ordinary physical life, and attaining the goals of their traditions. The impact of “soul journeys” throughout history has been extraordinary and continues to this day.

Note

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