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The encounter with God in myth and madness

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Abstract

Background: It is well known how often psychiatric patients report religious experiences. These are especially frequent in schizophrenic and epileptic patients as the subject of their delusions. The question we pose is: are there differences between this kind of religious experiences and those we find in religious texts or in the mythological tradition?

Results: An overview on famous mythological narratives, such as The Aeneid, allows us to establish that the divinities become recognizable to the human being at the moment of their departure. Thus, Aeneas does not recognise his mother, Venus, when she appears to him in the middle of the forest at the coast of Africa. A dialogue between the two takes place, and only at the end of the encounter, when she is going away and already with her back to Aeneas, she shows her son the signs of her divinity: the rose-flush emanating from her neck, her hair perfume and the majesty of her gait. Something analogous can be observed in the encounter of Moses with Yahweh on Mount Sinai. Moses asks God: "Show me your glory, I beg you". And God replies, among other things: "you shall see the back of me, but my face is not to be seen". In the same sense, the Emmaus disciples do not recognise Jesus till the moment of his disappearance ("but he had vanished from their sight"), and Saul of Tars falls off his horse just in the moment when he feels the divine presence. In short, the direct encounter with the divinity seems not to occur in the realm of myth or in religious tradition. The realm of madness is exactly the opposite. Our research on religious experiences in schizophrenic and epileptic patients leads us to conclude that God appears to them face to face, and the patient describes God the father, Jesus or the Virgin Mary in intimate detail, always in an everyday setting. So, the divinity is seen in the garden, or in the bedroom, or maybe above the wardrobe, without any of its majesty. The nearness to God also tends to be so extreme that even an identification of patient and God can occur. That light emanating from the world of the divine ceases to be perceived by them.

Conclusion: While in mythological narratives God appears to the human being at the moment of His departure or showing His back, psychiatric patients with religious delusions experience the divinity in a direct way, face to face. Given the deformation of the divine occurring on the edge of madness we can better understand the mysterious words from Yahweh to Moses in Exodus: "for man cannot see me and live".