

## RELIGIOSITY IN THE AESTHETIC OF THE SONG OF SONGS

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### ABSTRACT

Two extremes in the interpretation of the Song of Songs are the allegorical and the literal, respectively representing the ancient and the modern way of understanding this poetry. As a result of this shift from the ancient to the modern, the religious elements of the Song have often been sacrificed. When its aesthetic nature, which has not been sufficiently appreciated, is considered from a psychological perspective, its embedded religious dimension can also be recognised and regained, even if it is different from what has traditionally been read into the Song.

### INTRODUCTION

The aesthetic dimension of the Song of Songs is often separated from its religiosity.<sup>2</sup> The aim of this study is to show how the aesthetic points towards and is psychologically linked to the religious, first by briefly giving an outline of its aesthetic, followed by some insights from the psychologies of aesthetic and religious experiences, and finally by discussing “peak- ” and “peace-experiences” in the Song. The distinction of these two kinds of experiences is, of course, an historical one.

The close link between the two categories of experience in the Song is, of course, already suggested by its canonisation and the interpretations which issued from that. The problem with its allegorical understanding which has dominated tradition is that the aesthetic has not been recognised as literal, most probably because of its roots in the erotic and, secondly, that the Song’s religiosity has been regarded as a conscious intention and limited to traditional beliefs, whereas this study suggests that it is unconscious and more mystical.

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<sup>2</sup> This is because the aesthetic appreciation usually stems from a literal understanding of the Song.

## THE AESTHETIC OF THE SONG

Apart from some scattered writings in the biblical wisdom literature, the Song is almost unique in its aesthetic celebration. Not only its form but also its contents express, and so create, aesthetic impressions and their concomitant emotions. Its playful, poetic language paints pictures of and musically celebrates the beauty and pleasure of two lovers in the unfolding splendour of spring. In the study beauty is understood as pleasurable experience, two categories which the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (*vide infra*) distinguishes as being universal, intersubjective (but not quite objective), and affective versus particular, subjective, and sensual judgements respectively (Kant 1902:215).

The descriptive vocabulary used for beauty and pleasure is rather limited, perhaps because the experiences are so intense and otherworldly that the composer is faced with the ineffable. The limited vocabulary is, however, compensated for by ample metaphors and similes (*vide infra*). The same words are repeated but sometimes beauty is described indirectly, as in in 2:1 (a rose and lily) and 6:8–10 (superior to royalties and similar to celestial bodies) by using concrete images rather than adjectives (Gerleman 1981:146, 195). It is explicitly referred to by six words:

- In 1:16 נְעִים (pleasant) is used as an adjective and in 7:7 תְּעַמְּךָ (you [the female beloved] are pleasant or delightful or lovely – as an exclamation of admiration after רַמְּה) occurs as a verb. In both cases the meaning is general without singling out any particular aspect or specifying in what way the beloved is beautiful or pleasant.
- נְאִוָּה (comely or seemly) in 1:5 (despite her dark skin) and in 6:4 (like Jerusalem), נְאִוָּה in 2:14 (her appearance) and in 4:3 (her lips), and the verb, נְאִוָּה, in 1:10 (her cheeks), all therefore referring to the female beloved.
- יָפֵה is the more common word for beautiful; it is used in 1:8 as a superlative, twice in 1:15 (both as exclamations of admiration after תְּהִי), in 1:16 to perhaps emphasise it by using the word a third time after the previous verse, twice in 4:1 (both again as exclamations of admiration after תְּהִי for her whole being), to express perfection in 4:7, as a superlative in 5:9, again as a superlative in 6:1, in

6:4 (like Tirzah) and in 6:10 (like the moon), as יִפְתִּי in 2:10 and 2:13 (both as substantive vocatives), as a verb יָפִי in 4:10 (an exclamation of admiration after מָה) and in 7:2, and as יִפִּית in 7:7 (as exclamation of admiration after מָה). From the exclamations and superlatives it is clear that it is mostly used to express intense feelings. Once again all refer to the female beloved.

- עָרֵב (sweet, pleasant) in 2:14 refers to the voice of the female beloved and is therefore an auditory appreciation.
- דָּגוּל (looked at or conspicuous) in 5:10 refers to the male beloved and reminds one of the boastful banners mentioned in 2:4, 6:4, and 6:10. This is the only time where the object of beauty is the male beloved.
- מְהֻמָּדִים (lovely) in 5:16 referring to the male beloved.
- For pleasure in its multidimensionality טוֹב (good or pleasant) is used in its various inflexions:
  - “for his love is (or her breasts are?) טוֹבִים (better) than wine” in 1:2. This may include various senses: visual, tactile, even olfactory and gustatory, and, of course, proprioceptive;
  - for his ointments, regarding their fragrance, are טוֹבִים (great) in 1:3;
  - for הַטוֹב (the best, again a superlative) wine, to which her palate, perhaps in the gustatory and tactile senses, is compared in 7:10; and
  - as a verb, טָבַח, in the plural form in 4:10, again comparing both her love or breasts to wine and the fragrance of her oils to all the spices.

The range of application of this adjective is therefore fairly wide; it describes various senses but also hints at its close link to the “good”: pleasure is good.

For the sake of brevity words referring to specific sensations are not dealt with here.

Beauty in the Song goes beyond the lovers to nature and so carries transpersonal nuances pointing towards and implying the religious. Regarding the beauty of their naked bodies – and one can include here that of the male as well, because no clothing (except a veil in 1:7, a coat in 5:3 and sandals in 7:2, all for the female lover) is ever mentioned – they are clearly unaware of any shame, unless one detects something

thereof in 1:5, where the woman is self-conscious about her dark skin – but then it is not shame due to her sexuality.

The Song can be regarded as drama (Pope 1977:34–36, referring to Ibn Ezra, Jacobi, Löwisohn, Ewald, Ginsburg, Renan, and Delitzsch amongst others) and in 7:2 there is dance and even *ṭāṭṭ* (an artist) who has sculpted the female body, thus balancing the description of the male statue in 5:10–16. This is only an outline of a rich, aesthetic feast inviting us to participate in it with our own fantasies: there are no clear faces or forms (fat or lean), only their effects: the male lover swoons in 4:9 when looking at her eyes, as she is love-sick through her desire for beauty and pleasure in 2:5 and 5:4 and 8, where she is paralysed by his wonderful presence, the colours, the charm and grace of courtship. The enigmatic 6:12 might mean that the beloved feels transported to another reality thanks to her sensual and aesthetic, that is, her bodily, experiences.

By appealing to the aural sensation through rhyme, rhythm, and repetition, the Song also describes and thus points indirectly towards the visual, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile experiences. In addition, the many and various artistic ways of metabolising this anthology of love songs celebrating the wonder of life and love, in its reception history, extend these visions of an ideal and perhaps even alternative reality, where an even deeper meaning can be sensed.

## **PSYCHOLOGY OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES**

Although the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein denied that psychology can explain aesthetic experience, Christopher Bollas, a leading figure in contemporary psychoanalytic theory, links the aesthetic moment back to the first preverbal internalisation of the mother's style of handling the infant. Not the mother as such but her sensual and sensitive care leaves an imprint which forms and transforms it. It gives form to its experiences and completes them. "The density of the subject's feeling and the fundamentally non-representational knowledge of being embraced by the aesthetic object" remains a wordless memory awakened and re-embodied in bodily experiences

later in life. Bollas consciously uses words with a religious resonance to describe these experiences, such as “reverential”, “transported”, “uncanny”, “beseeching”, “supplication” but above all and repeatedly, “sacred”, which he believes precedes the maternal, that is, before recognising the mother as mother (Bollas 1987:39).

One wants to assume that being in love opened the aesthetic eyes and ears of the lovers, but the inverse could also have been true: that the aesthetic awakening of nature stimulated their love for the other’s body. Eros as the desire to indulge in beauty is also the spark for religious experience if this is the merging of the ideals of the good, the beautiful, and truth as Plato (1951:211) has it in his *Symposium*. Thomas Moore (2002:241) also confirmed how closely the good and the beautiful are related and that the good wants to be expressed by the beautiful. Aesthetic experience and being in love therefore seem to be steps towards religious experience.

For Pruyser (1974:201) music and poetry as fantasies, amongst other cultural expressions, are not only playful transitional objects in the Winnicottian (1953) sense, but also serve, just like dreams, as wish fulfilment and idealism. As transcendent objects beyond both external sensory perception (e.g., of beauty) and internal needs they have a sacred and mysterious character for the young child (Pruyser 1974:111, 113). One can say that in the “illusionistic world” (Pruyser 1983:110) the impressions of the external world are processed and sublimated into elevated symbols to “hold” the elusive and absent external world (cf. also the use of fetishes to hold the [often absent] lover; *vide infra*).

## **PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES**

William James (1982:439f.) already recognised an aesthetic motive in religion. One can also turn this around and anticipate something religious in the aesthetic.

D’Aquili and Newberg (2000) developed an aesthetic-religious continuum based on a common underlying neurophysiology. An increasing sense of wholeness which is greater than the diversity of parts thanks to the progressive deafferentation of the posterior superior parietal lobule (PSPL) and certain parts of the inferior parietal

lobule particularly on the non-dominant side is found toward the religious pole of this continuum. Emotional responses, synthetic or holistic, visuospatial and auditory perceptions are all products of the right cerebral hemisphere (Wulff 1997:104).

In addition, it has been recognised that the language of the mystics often lacks concepts and sound more like music (James 1985:333). This also makes sense physiologically as both music and religious experiences issue out of the right hemisphere of the brain.

Rhythm is the basis from which music develops (Reynolds 1967:181). As preverbal attunement to the rhythms, intensities, and cycles of the environment music precedes language. At the same time one can interpret music as being, at least potentially, “postverbal”, “translinguistic”, and even “suprarational” (Otto 2014:63), liberating itself from the constraints of propositional, discursive language, and therefore moves into the realm of the transpersonal. Going beyond echoing the beauty of the environment by merely reciprocating it, it brings its own musical score to complement but also build on it in a dance into the infinity of creative possibilities. The words of the Song are therefore only the “natural” component of something which would become more than that and closer to the numinous when music is added. Even more is possible when it is dramatised by adding gestures, facial expressions, and other actions.

The repetition in music changes the psychophysiology of the listener by transforming his or her sensibility, thinking and even moral sensitivity (Daniélou 1966:26). One can apply this effect to the Song even when it is only recited in Hebrew, yet the aim is, of course, that it be sung and so accompanied by music. This religious effect can be reinforced when it is performed, perhaps even with dance and its concomitant bodily effects, within a religious context where there are already expectations of such experiences (Wulff 1997:85–86). According to Heiler (1961:239–240) dance is more central in the earliest religions than sacrifice where it has a protective magical function, for instance, at weddings. Underlying the dances the performer mimetically reveals the mysteries into which the devotee is being

introduced and so honours him as divine whose movements are imitated by being at the same time ecstatically transformed into a godlike being herself.

Priming and conditioning would then play an important role. This potential religious effect therefore depends in the first place on the metric form of the Song, and not on its content. The form and context can therefore induce religiosity in the content through association.

These two main levels of aesthetic and religious experiences tie in with the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel who saw them as a hierarchy as well. Just as aesthetic experiences mediate universal truths through affections for Kant, so religion fulfils this function for Hegel. It is when the aesthetic becomes a “sign” that it acquires a religious feel, even if it remains institutionally disembodied (Eagleton 1990:144).

The transition between the two poles of aesthetic and religious experiences was found by physiological research to be romantic love. As far back as 1882 Hall researched the bodily link between puberty – the approximate age of the lovers in the Song – and conversion, and more generally between sexual love thanks to the beauty of the beloved’s body and religiosity. He lists numerous characteristics of both states, especially when the transcendent object is conceived as being of a particular sex, such as a vacillation between self-assertion (so prevalent in the Song; *vide infra*) and self-denial, to prepare a special home and meeting place of beauty for the beloved (as in 1:16b–17; 2:9.12–14), to ecstatically express their love rhythmically in music and dance and to reduce the object of love to a fetish, such as a body-part (the male lover’s mouth and the female lover’s breasts and eyes; van der Zwan forthcoming) or the jewellery in 1:10–11 and 4:9 (Hall 1904:2). In that sense religiosity is some kind of being in love – thanks to being aesthetically overwhelmed. That sense of the aesthetic is deeply rooted in the body and in experiences of feeling intensely alive. These similar underlying bodily experiences are then translated into the similar language of mystics and lovers.

## PEAK-EXPERIENCES

### The “contradictory” nature of religion

Is religion about peak or peace experiences, or both? This question relates to the transpersonal-psychological framework where peak-experiences are about achieving the heights of life (Eros) or rather the Spirit, and peace experiences are about surrendering into, or (religiously) “re-linking” with, the depths of death (Thanatos). Watts and Williams (1988:75) likewise regard religion as connected with either emotional excitement or tranquillity but believe that emotional excitement was the original experience and linked, for instance, in the Hebrew Bible to a battle mentality, so frequent in the book of Judges but also used metaphorically in the Song (3:7; 6:4,10; 6:12–7:1), or on the other hand to “deliberately stimulated frenzy or ecstasy” as in 1 Samuel 10:5,6 where prophesying changes one into another person. These two images of battle and being transported beyond oneself are found combined in the somewhat enigmatic 6:10: לֹא יָדַעְתִּי נִפְשֵׁי נְכִישֵׁי שְׂמַתְנִי, מִרְכָּבוֹת עַמִּי נָדִיב (before I was aware, my soul set me upon the chariots of my princely people).

For the French philosopher Georges Bataille, who also comments on the Song, the desire is to dissolve into nothingness and death, so that “the ultimate aim of eros is thanatos” (Kearney 2006:336), making these two extremes coincide by falling as “peak” experience into the “deepest” of depths. It is for good psychological reasons that orgasm is therefore called “la petite mort” (the small death) in French, suggesting that it is a rehearsal-experience for death.

Gooch (2000:72) refers to DeWette who influenced Rudolf Otto (*vide infra*) in a significant way and who likewise regarded “the religious feelings of enthusiasm (*Begeisterung*), resignation (*Ergebung*) and religious devotion (*Andacht*) as ‘aesthetic ideas’, which are exhibited with unusual forcefulness and depth in those personalities who become founders of new religious movements”.

### Maslow’s views of peak-experiences applied to the Song

Maslow (1970:26–27), who first described the concept of peak-experiences, regarded it as the opposite of nadir-experiences, and therefore on the highest level on the needs



hierarchy. For him it is the core of spiritual experience, often experienced by lonely but acutely sensitive prophets. Yet they do not need to be of anything supernatural, according to Maslow. They are neither hallucinations nor fantasies but illuminations “which previous blindness has hidden from them” (Maslow 1976:102). On these unique and individual experiences great world religions are then built.<sup>3</sup> Yet in his list of the most frequent situations where peak-experiences (spontaneously) occur, religion is not one amongst love, erotic, aesthetic, nature, and several other experiences (Maslow 1968:73, 102). They tend to be spontaneous, unexpected and momentary with a strong emotional intensity, symptomatic of which is the high quantitative and qualitative level of metaphors which facilitate the creative integration of the significance of experiences (Ortony and Fainsilber 1987:*passim*).

Originally understood by Maslow as moments of highest happiness, they generally range from highly intellectual at the lower levels to highly emotional at the top. They have a strong sense of wholeness, aliveness, beauty, playfulness, wonder, awe, humility, and surrender, amongst others. The world is experienced as a whole and seen irrespective of its usefulness for the person having this experience, and in the cases of love and aesthetic experiences a small part of the world is generalised as if it were the whole of reality in that specific moment (Maslow 1968:83, 88). This could be due to the fusion with the universe in those moments. In addition, one also sometimes finds an imitation or identification with the divine (Maslow 1968:87–88). That is why death also loses its sting for those who have had profound enough peak-experiences (Maslow 1964:76). He furthermore distinguishes between cosmic consciousness (perhaps insinuated by the  $\text{אֱלֹהִים}$ -theme in the Song [*vide infra*]) and narrowing-down kinds of peak-experience as different forms of peak-experiences (1976b:242). In the latter case there is feeling of closeness to reality, a “freshness” where the subject’s identity expands and includes the “object” which now becomes part of the subject and means a transcendence of the dualism between them (Maslow 1968:114).

This is the case with aesthetic and love experiences, and hinted at in the Song by the desire to belong to the other and vice versa in 2:16, 6:3, and 7:11. There is also a

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<sup>3</sup> This agrees with what Otto (1909:179) also claims.

unitive consciousness (or plateau-experiences) in which the universal is seen in and through the particular (Thorsén 1983:77). This is clear from the insight about love in 8:6 from an eternal perspective. The sensory particular is then a symbol for an eternal archetype and so points further than and beyond itself. The symbolic aspect is then experienced as sacred and eternal (Maslow 1976a:48, 112; 1976b:103, 116).

The Song seems to be about both peak- and peace-experiences, indeed quite erotic. Peak-experiences are hinted at throughout the Song and sometimes expressed by superlatives playing with the ultimate, reaching out into infinity and pointing beyond the ordinary. These peak-experiences stem from bodily experiences which are reinforced by emotions of attraction to and fascination with the aesthetic object.

The characteristics of the peak-experiences which Maslow described are precisely what the Song is celebrating. Yet they can also be questioned as not being strictly what Maslow had in mind when he limited them to motivating towards maturity and morality which one will not be able to prove from the Song although it concludes with a kind of breakthrough-insight in 8:6 where the transcendence of love beyond this life is intuited. This might be the first and only sign that the lover could see beyond herself and her desires. If the Song does not testify to what has been technically designated as peak-experiences, they are at least what Maslow calls high-plateau experiences which also recognise the miraculous in the ordinary though they are more perpetual, serene, and with a sense of sadness (Krippner 1972:110) which could also be inferred from the Song (van der Zwan 2014:852–853).

Even if there are traces of narcissism in the Song where the first person is used more than in any other book in the Bible, this can be explained by the personal testimony of the characteristics which research in San Francisco (Krippner 1972:112) has shown to be a correlate of those who report to have had peak-experiences. They tend to be more self-aware and self-assured because they have a profound sense of meaning and ultimate values in life. Maslow (1968) calls them “acute identity experiences” by integrated, uninhibited agents. Blanchard found in 1969, however, that *during* the peak-experience people often questioned themselves and the world, and can feel that they have nothing to hold onto. This self-doubt is expressed several

times in the Song, such as in 1:5 already when the female lover feels ambivalent about her appearance, in 2:5 where she cries out in love-sickness and in chapters 3 and 5 where she roams the streets searching for her lover but unconsciously also for herself. This trend actually continues in every chapter right through the whole Song until she eventually finds peace at the end, in 8:10.

People who have had several peak-experiences have also been found to give a lower ranking to materialistic and status concerns, and to be more deeply touched by the beauty of nature than other people, both of which we find in the Song. In addition, research has also shown (Breed and Fagan 1972:866) that more people who do not adhere to traditional religious beliefs have peak-experiences. Although this finding is context-relative it ties in with the fact that no explicit mention of religiosity or of a deity is made in the Song where there are several traces of peak-experiences.

That the world is somehow seen as one with the lovers in the Song can be inferred from the multiple personifications, metaphors, and comparisons where so many experiences mirror each other. The intensity of the lovers' experiences leads them to make extreme statements by what others, who have not been in those states of consciousness, would call exaggerations.

This intensity of perception of their sensual external and internal realities may have been derived from some of the plants mentioned in the Song. They could have either been aphrodisiacs or have contained substances which induce altered states of consciousness as a form of religious experience. Krinetzki (1981:151) claims that the plants mentioned in 4:14 all had either medicinal or magical uses and so would have opened up a transcendent world for the lovers.

The crescendo in 4:6 seems to reach towards heaven: אֶלֶּה לִי אֶל-הַר הַמּוֹר וְאֶל-גְּבֻעַת (I will go (up) to the mountain of myrrh and to the hills of frankincense). The frequent mention of incense and other fragrances, as in 3:6 and 4:14, conjures up religious associations. It is as if the lovers experience religious impressions but do not have the religious expressions for them. In the Hebrew Bible it is only in the Song where frankincense is not explicitly connected with cultic life relating to the temple offerings and as an ingredient in holy ointment (United Bible Societies 1972:121–

122). Likewise קַלָּמ (calamus) was used for cultic purposes according to Exodus 30:23, Jeremiah 6:20 and Isaiah 43:24 (Keel 1986:168).

That the lovers are subtly equated with the divine is clear from the *wasf* celebrating the male lover in 5:10–16, in which his body is portrayed as a statue of a deity. In addition, the lovers are repeatedly associated with symbols of the divine such as doves and gazelles (the two animals mostly associated as images for the beauty of the lovers) and awe-inspiring celestial bodies (van der Zwan 2012). The bodily beauty of the lovers is also unconsciously identified with various aspects of nature, that is, beyond them, as mentioned before, but also beyond their grasp.

### **Rudolf Otto's hierarchical link between the aesthetic and the numinous**

Otto (2014:31–37) is well-known for his view of the holy as “*das ganz Andere*” (the wholly other or different) and therefore struggles to describe what is unique and irreducible. Yet, he finds several analogies (Otto 2014:57f.) such as the beautiful (Otto 2014:177) and the sublime (Otto 2014:62)<sup>4</sup> which do not necessarily and naturally evolve into an experience of the numinous or awareness of divine power, but which have strong associations with religious experience which they can awaken and even pass over into. On the other hand, there is a relationship between the sublime and the numinous which is more than just a coincidental similarity. This also ties in well with the view of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe that the sublime can be experienced in the awesome which is in turn the root of all religion experience (Loader 2011:665) which Otto (2014:15) also sensed as the sense of the unnatural and the mysterious. It is only when the impression of the sublime as the aspect of the aesthetic which knows the unnatural through the senses (Loader 2004:254 n. 7) is expressed as deep feelings by humans that it is religion (Loader 2004:255). Religion is therefore the means to express something subjectively experienced.

<sup>4</sup> In his *Third critique* Kant distinguishes between two subcategories of the aesthetic: the beautiful as being “connected with the form of the object” and the sublime as “boundlessness” (§ 23).

In sketching the analogy between the aesthetic and the religious Otto (2014:177) refers to Kant who meant by the aesthetic in the broad sense of the word that “es im Unterschiede des Logischen sich nicht vollziehe nach verständig klaren sondern nach ‘dunklen’ Prinzipien die nicht in begrifflichen Sätzen auswickelbar sondern nur ‚geföhlt‘ sind” (is not worked out in accordance with a clear intellectual scheme but in conformity to obscure, dim principles which must be felt and cannot be stated explicitly as premises).<sup>5</sup>

Otto (2014:179) also refers to Goethe who pointed out the daemonic at work in poetry but even more so in music, appealing to the unconscious beyond the grasp of the rational. Therefore it is so effective in creating a sense of the marvellous in religious worship. Similar to it is the sense of the uncanny which is experienced in things which happen in human life and in nature, especially in certain animals. One is reminded of the seemingly irrelevant animals, such as the אַרְיֹת (lions) and the נְמִרִים (leopards) in 4:8 which are mentioned in the Song and which analytical psychology has interpreted as archetypal signatures of the enigmatic and devouring mother (Krinetzki 1981:140).

There is therefore a kind of hierarchy at work in the thinking of Otto about the relationship between the aesthetic and the numinous which resemble each other to a certain extent.<sup>6</sup> Just as the integration of two opposites is what amounts in transpersonal psychology to a higher level of existence, Otto (2014:61–63) saw the interpenetration of the lower, animalistic instincts into the next, higher level of human feelings on the one hand, and the interpenetration of the higher numinous into the ordinary feelings on the other, as an improvement of humanity. This means that the higher level of the numinous is not a leaving behind of the lower aesthetic level, but an inclusion into something which is more, quantitatively and qualitatively. That also explains why metaphors can be used between two such levels, an experience which points towards a parallel even if different level of consciousness. That is why the erotic is yet another analogy for the numinous (Otto 2014:62). These metaphors can

<sup>5</sup> Translated by Harvey (1975:148).

<sup>6</sup> It would seem that for Loader (2004:252) there is no hierarchy as the religious is rooted in the aesthetic and the aesthetic is also rooted in the religious.

then be seen as projections from one level to another. Only someone on the higher level can, however, recognise its reference to that higher level. That means that the corporeal involved in the aesthetic is also present in the numinous.

Otto (2014) recognises in these experiences the elements of numinous consciousness: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. The sequence is important, as the initial religious impulses are those of awe-struck wonder, majesty and energy (*tremendum*, the terrible) which can unfold, develop and be sublimated, depending on stimuli, to become awareness of the fascinating, attractive and possessive (*fascinans*, the fascinating) as well. The numinous object therefore has an ambiguous impact on humans. It would seem that the aspect of *tremendum* is actually the sublime (as unconscious religiosity) and that it is the addition of the aspect of the *fascinans* that makes it consciously religious.

The אַיִמָּה (terrible) beauty, הִרְהִיבֵנִי ([such as that of your eyes which] has overwhelmed me), in 6:4–5 and 10, already foreshadowed by the female lover's dark appearance right in the first chapter, reflects something of the *mysterium tremendum* in religious experiences. In this way the aesthetic is associated with the religious (Viviers 1990:244). It refers to something outside the norm and the expected, transgressing the boundary of the conscious into the unconscious. Eluding intellectual understanding love becomes a dangerous experience about which the principal refrains of adjuration in 2:7, 3:5 and 8:4 warn. They are like overwhelmed cries for protection to the cosmos in this hesitant and vertiginous state: the lovers have entered an uncharted labyrinthine territory. Even if one imagines the Song to play out mostly in sunshine fields of nature, the aesthetic impressions leave them with obscure feelings which transcend their control as in 2:5, 5:8, 6:5, 6:12 and 7:6b. From the principal refrains it sounds as if being in love with the beauty of a body is like a sleep from which the lovers rather not be awakened.

Loader (2012b:344, 348) intuitively senses the proximity of aesthetic beauty and the religious specifically pertaining to the element of danger lurking in both experiences, even when he does not sufficiently explicate the connection.

Furthermore, love is surrounded by enemies: just as the שְׁעָלִים (foxes) in 2:15 destroy the vineyard which is in bloom, so in 3:8 the armed body-guards protect the king in-love מִפְּחַד בְּלֵילוֹת (because of the dread in the night). In Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Syro-Palestine sleep needed divine protection against either natural or supernatural dangers for which a variety of measures could be taken (McAlpine 1987:179). This could make it more sensible to remain somehow alert as in 3:1, 5:2–5 and 3:8. This could refer to the demonic threat against the wedding procession or that of death in the bridal chamber, a widespread belief in the ancient Near East. Demons were thought to be attracted particularly by good-looking brides and pestered humans with sickness and death specifically at night, which was therefore an ominous time. In Exodus 11:4f. and Isaiah 37:36 nocturnal intervention is even identified with Yahweh or his angel (Krinetzki 1981:122). Demons, symbolising sexual anxiety, first needed to be killed by the sword, clearly referring to phallic potency (Keel 1986:122). This is, for instance, evidenced in the book of Tobit, where the jealous demon, Asmodeus, kills seven husbands to prevent them from having sex with the bride. According to rabbinic literature, this fate could befall either party of the marriage, however. The marriage canopy and its variations elaborated upon above were perhaps the precaution taken against these dangers (Horine 2001:150). The subtlety and fragility of the aesthetic, especially as erotic, are sensitive and vulnerable to the gross gravitation which constantly attempts to draw it back into the primitive levels of the unconscious and of death. Viviers (2006:94n8) mentions a belief that the demons craved to be incarnated and would therefore try to enter the woman via the virginal blood and eventually also the man. These precautions might also explain the military images with which the female lover is associated in 1:9, 4:4, 6:12 and 7:1.

The fascinating, on the other hand, forms the foreground of the whole Song being the encounters between the lovers. The sublime as indirect means to the numinous is suggested by the superlatives, already in the title but also elsewhere (*vide supra*), by the royal imagery in 1:4, 12; 3:9–11, by the unique nature of both lovers in 5:16 (בְּחֹרֵר, chosen or excellent) and 6:9 respectively, by the female lover being compared to celestial bodies in 6:10 and by the claims of perfection (*vide infra*).

One wonders whether Otto's regard for architecture as particularly suitable to convey the sublime as an expression of the numinous cannot be applied to the architectural images for the bodies of the lovers in the Song, especially the female lover's breasts which are in 8:10, like her neck in 4:4 and 7:5 and her nose in 7:5, like a tower (cf. van der Zwan forthcoming). It is significant that Otto (2014:85–86, 88) uses precisely the examples of simple tower-like structures which leave an impression of magic – independent from their historical connection to magic – from as far back as the megalithic age.

If the divine inspiration, insight, and skill for the artistic creation of cultic objects in Exodus 31:3 can be generalised to the creation of all aesthetic artefacts being shadows of God's creation (for instance in Psalm 139:13–16) and yet also to please God, as Loader (2012a:104–105, 112) seems to suggest, then the litter described so meticulously in 3:7, 9–10 would have conjured up associations of the religious as well.

Juxtaposing and linking the dark and the bright sides of both the aesthetic and the numinous add to the general *coincidentia oppositorum*, a feature of peak-experiences when conflict is “seen through” as an illusion. Perhaps the evolution of the numinous from its *tremendum* to its *fascinans* aspect can be related to the movement from peak to peace experiences.

## PEACE EXPERIENCES

Dreams of peace subtly run through the Song as well: we find it, just as with the first expression of peak-experiences, in the title already in the name Solomon, which occurs seven times in the Song (1:1, 1:5, 3:7, 3:9, 3:11, 8:11 and 8:12). In fact, this name, derived from שָׁלוֹם, meaning amongst other things “peace”, leads to 8:10: זָךְ הָיִיתִי בְּעֵינָיו כְּמוֹצֵאת שָׁלוֹם (then was I in his eyes as one that found peace, that is, *her* “Solomon”). If this peace is unconsciously “connected to death, then it has already been adumbrated by 8:6: כִּי-עֹזָה כְּמָוֶת אֶהְיֶה (for love is strong as death), the ultimate religious experience according Bataille (1962:23).



It is possible that at least unconsciously the words of this verse are a defence against the dark side of beauty due to its transience and therefore deceptive nature, as explained by Loader (2012b:340–341; 346–347; *passim*).

A fuller meaning of *שְׁלוֹם* would be “wholeness”, “integration”, and “tranquillity” of which peace is then a result. Integration is what psychological development is all about.

One can even go a step further and assume perfection to be implied by *שְׁלוֹם*. This nuance is reinforced by suggestions of divinity as explained earlier, as well as by references to the beauty of the female lover’s exceptional quality when she is called *תְּמִתִּי* (my perfect one) in 5:2 and 6:9, and *אֵל-יְהוָה הַמְּזִיג* (there is no lack of mingled wine) in her “navel” in 7:3, a litotes where a negative is used to emphasise a positive. The same stylistic feature occurs when her teeth are compared to the symmetrical perfection of the descending ewes expressed by *וְשִׁבְלָה אֵין בָּהֶם* (and none fails among them) in 4:2 echoed in 6:6. In 4:7 *כֻּלְּךָ יָפָה* (all of you is lovely) and *וּמִזֶּה אֵין בְּךָ* (and there is no blemish in you) are reminiscent of how perfection is regarded mostly in cultic contexts (cf. Leviticus 21:17ff. and 22:20, referring to priests and sacrifices otherwise not being acceptable to God). Perfection is also ascribed to the male lover: *וְכָלֹו מִמֶּמְדִּים* (and all of him is lovely) in 5:16. Asher-Greve (1998b:10) claims that perfection was something guaranteed by the mother and birth goddesses in the ancient Near East. This would imply that the modern interpretation of it being an exaggeration for stylistic purposes is culture-relative and not loyal to the original sense of the Song. Perfection as idealism points to another world and is therefore one of the commonalities between the aesthetic and the religious. It would seem that idealism opens one up to a greater possibility of exceptional, and therefore religious, experiences (Stratton 1911:115; cf. also Loader 2004:253).

To represent the numinous in a direct way the aesthetic should withdraw into some kind of darkness on the visual and silence on the auditory levels, according to Otto (2014:88–89). The first reference to darkness comes both quite early and literally as the female lover refers for the first time to her physical appearance and more specifically her dark skin. The suggestion of nocturnal experiences in 2:17 (after the

hushed and lingering “musicality” of 2:11–16) and 7:12, as well as the twilight of dawn hinted at by the shadows of 2:17 and 4:6 (and perhaps even by 6:12) could reflect something of this toned-down light. There might also be a struggle against the darkness of death in 8:6 when the flames of love survive it.

The absence of explicit communication about anything religious despite its constant presence in the background (van der Zwan 2012:*passim*) could be regarded as the expression of the ineffable through some kind of silence. Otto’s insight that the recognition of the numinous (which cannot be communicated by language) despite this silence agrees with the view of transpersonal psychology that “reality” is dependent on the state of consciousness.

The references to the (wide-stretching) desert in 3:6 and 8:5, especially linked as both of them are open interrogatives, as well as the poetic simplicity of sometimes ordinary and repetitive vocabulary, such as the word, יָפֵה (beautiful), in an elevated atmosphere adds the Eastern recognition of (here, relative) emptiness as numinous element in the aesthetic (Otto 2014:89–90), even when this is again at times disturbed by the unexpected *hapax legomena*. By creating an alternation between the calmer and more arousing parts of the poetry, and by repeating certain central feelings or ideas, for instance, in the various refrains, space for a more meditative processing is allowed in the Song. This feature of the Song can also be intuited from the “openness” which it has experienced in its interpretation (van der Zwan 2017).

The polarity of peak and peace experiences are extremities which are so typical of the Song where the lover is seen as vacillating between ascending and descending. The two extremities of peak and peace experiences are perhaps not that different: one feature of peak-experiences that Maslow identified is that it makes a “deep” impression and is the sense of a reconciliation of opposites which in the case of the Song would mean an identification of peace as peak-experiences, alongside the integration of sexuality and religiosity. This integration or שְׁלוֹמִים which is the subtle theme of the Song despite several military images eventually brings the peace for which lovers long. At the same time another characteristic of peak-experiences is that they heighten sensual experiences. They are not an ascetic escape from the body but

precisely the opposite and therefore embodied experiences with a greater sensitivity for the aesthetic. With these heightened senses people reach peak-experiences and transcend to a level of peace unknown under usual circumstances and with their ordinary state of consciousness.

It was, in fact, a few days after Pearl Harbour that Maslow had a daydream of people seated at a peace table while watching a military parade, and so felt inspired to work out a theory of human nature beyond war and violence. According to him, the best of people had intense, dreamy or mystical experiences, that is, peak-experiences which changed them profoundly (Schott 1992:115). These intense experiences of meaning Krüger (2006:149–150) defined as the essence of religiosity being the search for comprehensive integration and radical transcendence.

This urge for merging in the Song is not only mutual between the lovers but also in their close identification with nature. Hall (1900, referred to in Wulff 1997:59) regarded the love of nature as the first religion, not only of humanity but also of every individual human being. He believed that education should facilitate the natural feelings of the child, such as awe and dependence, through studies which highlight the poetic dimension of nature.

One can perhaps speak of an oceanic feeling which is common to all three: aesthetic experience, being in love, and religious experience, and has been interpreted by Freud (1962:11-12) as a regression to the pre- and neonatal states where he believed the roots of religious experience are.

## **CONCLUSION**

This investigation from a psychological perspective into the aesthetic of the Song sets out to show how the expressions of the experiences of beauty are, or at least can be, an inducement to religious experiences. Its aesthetic is pregnant with religious potential and depends on the midwifery skills of the interpreting recipient. It is, however, the aesthetic's sublime aspect in awe-inspiring nature which is shared with the religious.

Peak and peace experiences, the melody and harmony of the Song, are essential elements of both aesthetic and religious experiences. Yet the religious elements in the Song go in the postmodern world mostly unrecognised because no explicit religiosity is ever mentioned and because religious experiences have therefore remained “uninstitutionalised”. Being in love is the bridge from the aesthetic to the religious and therefore in the foreground of the Song. The aesthetic in the Song is spirituality en route, a finger that points towards a wider, higher and deeper reality beyond itself.

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