Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences

Abraham Maslow

Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) is unique among psychologists in that his primary focus of research was not the psychological disturbances of man, but his highest potentials. In the book *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences*, Maslow explores one of the most interesting elements of our highest potential, namely the peak experience.

What are Peak Experiences?

Peak experiences are profound, deeply fulfilling moments of awe, joy, and psychological clarity. During a peak experience, our normal sense of self seems to drop away, and we feel connected to something that transcends ordinary consciousness. Peak experiences make life feel inherently meaningful and create a deep sense of unity with other people and the natural world.

> **"The peak experience is felt as a self-validating, self-justifying moment which carries its own intrinsic value with it. It is felt to be a highly valuable – even uniquely valuable – experience, so great an experience that even to attempt to justify it takes away from its dignity and worth. As a matter of fact, so many people find this so great and high an experience that it justifies not only itself but even living itself. Peak-experiences can make life worthwhile by their occasional occurrence. They give meaning to life itself. They prove it to be worthwhile. To say this in a negative way, I would guess that peak-experiences help prevent suicide." (Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences)**

Peak experiences can be so powerful that they shake us to the very core, and for this reason they are sometimes referred to as "little deaths." By dissolving aspects of our existing self-system, they open the way for the emergence of a greater personality.

> **"Peak experiences can be so wonderful that they can parallel the experience of dying, that is of an eager and happy dying." (Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences)**
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> **"In peak experiences, the dichotomies, polarities, and conflicts of life tend to be transcended or resolved. That is to say, there tends to be a moving toward the perception of unity and integration in the world. The person himself tends to move toward fusion, integration, and unity and away from splitting, conflicts, and oppositions." (Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences)**

Peak experiences are also referred to as religious, spiritual, or mystical experiences, but Maslow uses the term "peak experience" to strip away any supernatural connotations. According to Maslow, the peak experience is an intrinsic element of human nature, and we don't need to subscribe to any religion or take part in any spiritual practices to have one. Peak experiences, in other words, are a normal capacity of a healthy human psyche.

> **"Man has a higher and transcendent nature, and this is a part of his essence, i.e., his biological nature as a member of a species which has evolved." (Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences)**

Peak Experiences as the Essence of Religion

While it may not be necessary to take part in religious practices to have peak experiences, Maslow maintained that the peak experience constitutes the absolute core, or universal essence, of all religions. We often lose sight of this fact as many of us tend to associate religion with its major organized forms – be it Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, or Judaism. For this reason, Maslow believed it was important to distinguish between organized, institutional religions – with their dogmas, hierarchies, and ethical codes – and what he calls "small-r" religion, which is centered around practices and rituals that promote peak experiences.

Small-r religion is more fundamental than organized religion as it was the peak experiences of the founders of the organized religions (be it Christ, Muhammad, or the Buddha) which laid the foundations for these traditions.

> **"Most people lose or forget the subjectively religious experience, and redefine Religion as a set of habits, behaviors, documents, forms, which at the extreme becomes entirely legalistic and bureaucratic, conventional, empty, and in the truest meaning of the word, anti-religious. The mystic experience, the illumination, the great awakening, along with the charismatic seer who started the whole thing, are forgotten, lost, or transformed into their opposites. Organized Religion, the churches, finally may become the major enemies of the religious experience and the religious experiencer." (Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences)**

Small-r religion is Compatible with the Scientific Worldview

As the essence of religion is the peak experience, it follows that small-r religion is completely compatible with a rational and scientific worldview. Small-r religion does not require belief in any specific dogma; rather, its goal is to foster the optimal psychological and environmental conditions to facilitate the peak experiences.

> **"The very beginning, the intrinsic core, the essence, the universal nucleus of every known high religion has been the private, lonely, personal illumination, revelation, or ecstasy of some acutely sensitive prophet or seer…**
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> **But it has recently begun to appear that these "revelations" or mystical illuminations can be subsumed under the heading of the peak experiences or ecstasies or transcendent experiences which are now being eagerly investigated by many psychologists. That is to say, it is very likely, indeed almost certain, that these older reports, phrased in terms of supernatural revelation, were, in fact, perfectly natural, human peak experiences of the kind that can easily be examined today, which, however, were phrased in terms of whatever conceptual, cultural, and linguistic framework the particular seer had available in his time." (Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences)**

Peak Experiences and Transcendent Truth

Maslow's study of peak experiences revealed a consistency in the experiential, emotional, and cognitive results among people of different ethnicities, religions, cultures, and historical time periods. Common to the peak experience are a profound sense of oneness with nature, unity with other people, an awareness of the universe's inherent meaning, and an intuition that death is not an absolute finality. This cross-cultural and

transhistorical consistency led Maslow to hypothesize that peak experiences point to objective, transcendent truths about human nature and our place in the cosmos.

> **"Also this kind of study leads us to another very plausible hypothesis: to the extent that all mystical or peak-experiences are the same in their essence and have always been the same, all religions are the same in their essence and always have been the same. They should, therefore, come to agree in principle on teaching that which is common to all of them, i.e., whatever it is that peak experiences teach in common (whatever is different about these illuminations can fairly be taken to be localisms both in time and space, and are, therefore, peripheral, expendable, not essential). This is something common, this is something which is left over after we peel away all the localisms, all the accidents of particular languages or particular philosophies, all the ethnocentric phrasings, all those elements which are not common, we may call the "core-religious experience" or the "transcendent experience."" (Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences)**

The Sacred and the Spiritual in Everyday Life

> **"I want to demonstrate that spiritual values have naturalistic meaning, that they are not exclusive possession of organized churches, that they do not need supernatural concepts to validate them, that they are well within the jurisdiction of a suitably enlarged science, and that, therefore, they are the general responsibility of all mankind." (Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences)**

A major lesson of peak experiences, according to Maslow, is that the sacred is found in the ordinary and mundane. The sacred is not the exclusive possession of any institutional religion or esoteric cult. Consequently, we do not need to travel to exotic locations, withdraw to a monastic lifestyle, or partake in specialized spiritual practices to encounter it. Instead, the sacred is intrinsic to all of nature, and a healthy psyche is naturally predisposed to connecting with it through the peak experience.

> **"The great lesson from the true mystics, from the Zen monks, and now also from the – humanistic and transpersonal psychologists – that the sacred is in the ordinary, that it is to be found in one's daily life, in one's neighbors, friends, and family, in one's backyard, and that travel may be a flight from confronting the sacred – this lesson can be easily lost. To be looking elsewhere for miracles is to me a sure sign of ignorance that everything is miraculous." (Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences)**

How to Promote the Peak Experience?

Peak experiences cannot be generated through an effort of the will. Instead, our goal should be to strip away the mental filters that habitually blind us to the miraculous nature of reality by cultivating a mindset of awe and wonder towards life's mysteries.

Maslow maintained that a primary barrier to peak experiences is a strictly materialistic or hyper-rational worldview. If we don't believe a peak experience is possible, if we don't think the sacred is immanent in reality, or if we reduce the peak experience to a physiological brain state, we are less likely to have such an experience.

> **"Any person whose character structure (or Weltanschauung, or way of life) forces him to try to be extremely or completely rational or "materialistic" or mechanistic tends to become a non-peaker." (Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences)**

Maslow also identified psychological pathology as a major impediment to peak experiences. Neuroses, depression, and addictions all act as formidable blocks. Peak experiences are more likely to spontaneously emerge in a still and quiet mind that is not consumed by intrusive thoughts or chronic worries and ruminations. The need for inner quiet and stillness is why so many religious and spiritual traditions recommend meditation to promote the peak experience.

> **"In general, all and any of the forces that diminish us, pathologize us, or that make us regret, e.g., ignorance, pain, illness, fear, forgetting, dissociation, reduction to the concrete, neuroticizing, etc. That is, not having core religious experiences may be a lower, lesser state, a state in which we are not fully functioning, not our best, not fully human, not sufficiently integrated. When we are well and healthy and adequately fulfilling the concept "human being", then experiences of transcendence should in principle be commonplace." (Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences)**

Two Ultimate Division of Mankind

Maslow regarded the peak experience as so vital to our human nature that he proposed that mankind can be divided into two classes: the peakers and the non-peakers. In the modern day the peakers are a small minority, but they are the men and women who keep alive the sense of the sacred, who discover the inherent meaning of life, and who actualize the greater potentials of the human potential.

> **"…the two religions of mankind tend to be the peakers and the non-peakers, that is to say, those who have private, personal, transcendent, core religious experiences easily and often and who accept them and make use of them, and, on the other hand, those who have never had them or who repress or suppress them and who, therefore, cannot make use of them for their personal therapy, personal growth, or personal fulfillment." (Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences)**