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# **The Mystical and Sublime in Extreme Sports: Experiences of 'Psychological Well-Being' or 'Christian Revelation'?**

**Nick Watson and Andrew Parker**

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to examine the legitimacy of claims that athletes in extreme sports may encounter the mystical and sublime, when examined through a Christian theological lens. Drawing on the works of theologians and religious studies scholars, in particular, that of Richard Zaehner (1961), and social scientists that have written on the topic of the mystical and sublime in sporting experience, the two major themes explored are: (i) the differences and similarities between positive psychological states commonly reported in extreme sport, for example, the 'flow' experience and theistic mystical experiences articulated in the bible and in Christian theology, and (ii) the possibility of experiencing the sublime through the nature-person interaction in wilderness settings. As to whether extreme sport experience provides access to the mystical realms of the Holy that Rudolph Otto, St Paul, Jonathan Edwards and St. John of the Cross refer to, our answer is an emphatic no. That said, we wish to clearly articulate our endorsement of sports such as mountaineering, surfing and snowboarding. Within a balanced theology of leisure, they can be seen as forms of deep play, an avenue to well-being and growth, even spiritual expression in an aesthetic, creative sense that provides opportunities for meaningful, therapeutic and exhilarating wilderness activities. It is hoped that for those readers wishing to delve further into this challenging and complicated field of study, our argument has provided a 'position statement' that will provoke further scholarship and empirical research.

*Keywords:* extreme sports, mystical, sublime, well-being, wilderness

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past thirty years there has been a marked increase in writings that have identified the potential of sport to act as a vehicle for experiencing the religious and mystical dimension of life and in turn, a sense of psychological well-being. Ex-athlete and philosopher of sport, Howard Slusher (1967: 127) was one of the first to suggest that '... within the movements of the athlete a wonderful mystery of life is present, a mystical experience that is too close to the religious to call it anything else'. Indeed, modern athletes often describe self-transcendent experiences using 'religious and spiritual metaphors' that seem to point to a supernatural origin. There are numerous documented testimonies by athletes from both 'mainstream'—for example, football, hockey, golf and tennis—and so-called 'extreme sports', with no religious affiliation that have had experiences, which were interpreted as mystical, occult, or religious (Murphy & White, 1995). As Higgs and Braswell (2004: 195) suggest 'the language of athletes "in the zone" or maybe even transcending the zone is convincing and often extremely spiritual in tone, almost evangelical'.

Psychologists and sport theorists have conceptualised athletes' experiences of the mystical and being-in-the-zone, as: peak experiences (Ravizza, 1984), states of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), moments of deep play (Ackerman, 1997) and in the eastern tradition, Zen states (Herrigel, 1971/1999). These positive psychological states can be legitimately grouped together with mystical and religious experiences and broadly understood as altered states of consciousness (ASC). Psychologists of religion, Ralph Hood et al. (1996: 198) have defined an ASC as an 'introspective awareness of a different mode of experiencing the world'. Following this, it is clear that an ASC does not require a religious (supernatural) source and may be derived entirely from the psyche of an individual. Nevertheless, taking at face value athletes' ASC that are

frequently rich in religious and mystical language, a number of contemporary authors have made the questionable leap of suggesting that sports can provide an avenue to mystical and religious experience *per se*.

Whilst this small corpus of writings on mysticism in sport provides interesting and insightful commentary, one might argue that, at times, it lacks theological rigour whilst also demonstrating a degree of an etymological naivety. Theological terms, such as the 'mystical' and the closely related concept of the 'numinous' (Otto, 1968/1929: 1), are frequently applied to sporting experience with a liberality which may have alarmed their original proponents.

On this note, Higgs and Braswell (2004: 183) observe that 'the extraordinary things that occur in them [sports] in the flow of performance are admittedly "uncanny," that is, 'seeming to have a supernatural character or origin, that is, eerie and mysterious'. While acknowledging this, the authors, whom we are in agreement with, are deeply suspicious as to the suggested supernatural root (and validity) of, so-called mystical sport experiences. A critical analysis of the oft-cited symbiosis between sport and religious and mystical ideas is then warranted and a clearly defined philosophical and anthropological start point is necessary. Unfortunately, this foundation has been lacking in past work that has suffered from 'a general weakness in the quality of "conceptual tools," especially "definitions" and "distinctions", the foundation of Higgs and Braswell's (2004: 17) polemic.

What follows, is in no way an attempt at such a broad-ranging and nuanced analysis, as Higgs and Braswell (2004), who gazing through a Christian theological lens, 'took to task' a group of scholars they aptly call the 'sport apologists'. While implicitly also challenging some of the 'sport apologists' overarching assumptions, the focus of this article is to examine the authenticity and validity of mystical and

numinous experiences in sport, specifically extreme sport. As the sports discussed are conducted in 'wilderness' settings, an additional aim is to explore the possibility of sublime experience through the nature-person interaction. There is a plethora of existing research and scholarship concerning spiritual and transcendent aspects of sport participation, using eastern religious paradigms, especially Zen Buddhism. Conversely, very little has been written on the mystical in sport from a monotheistic perspective, in particular adopting a Christian theological framework.

By way of corrective, a mainstream Christian theological worldview and anthropological understanding of human beings forms the basis for the present analysis of mysticism in extreme sport. To this end, discussion is predicated on the biblical position that all human persons are made in the image of God - *imago Dei* (Gen. 1: 27) and comprise soul, body and spirit (1 Thess. 5: 23). However, prior to embarking on our main arguments, we begin with a brief overview of the evolution of extreme sports and their defining characteristics.

The following section provides the reader with some background information on the evolution of extreme sports and their defining characteristics.

## SETTING THE SCENE

Although having its roots in the 1960s counter-cultural movement, during the past decade there has been an exponential increase in the popularity of what has been variously called 'extreme sports', 'lifestyle sports', 'action sports', 'adventure sports' and 'whizz sports' as an alternative to mainstream sports (Wheaton, 2004: 1). The launch of *The Extreme Sports Channel*, with an estimated audience of 20 million in

Europe alone and the world-wide proliferation of extreme sports as mainstream 'tourist activities', especially in New Zealand, Australia and South Africa, is evidence of this challenge to the previous dominance of mainstream sports.

The global nature of this phenomenon is also demonstrated in the evolution of the *X Games*, birthed as a parallel event to the Modern Olympic Games. In 1997 the X-Games had over 500 competitors from 20 different countries (Rinehart, 2000: 504). Predictably, this new generation of sports and in particular, the term extreme, has been exploited by media and marketing moguls, who have created a related (and highly lucrative) sporting sub-culture. This has led to virtually any alternative sport form being questionably classified (somewhat questionable in our view) as extreme. Following Russell's (2005: 2) philosophical analysis of *The Value of Dangerous Sports*, the term 'extreme' will only be used herein to define sports that may lead to serious injury or death. In a further attempt to maintain clarity and focus, only those activities that are undertaken in wilderness environments will be considered. Specifically, big-wave surfing, mountaineering and back-country skiing and snowboarding, as the role of the natural environment in triggering mystical experiences has been shown to be an important variable.

One of the most commonly cited reasons for the shift towards these alternative sport forms, is the apparent need of those concerned to escape from the increasingly materialistic, paternalistic and utilitarian western lifestyle. Implicit in this movement is the 'anti-mainstream [sport]' impulse (Rinehart, 2000: 504). As sport sociologist, Rebecca Heino (2000: 183) states 'the Zen of snowboarding is far removed from the competitive nature and bureaucratization of contemporary sport'. This is concurrent with the wider cultural revolution that has seen a gradual shift away from organised



religion towards a much more inclusive and eclectic understanding of 'spirituality' and 'well-being'. Both leisure theorists (see for example, Heintzman, 2003: 28) and theologians have acknowledged that a distinguishing facet of many new spiritualities, is the re-emergence of the relationship between religious and spiritual notions, the wilderness, and recreational activities. As mystical theologian, Bernard McGinn (2005: 12), argues, 'Today . . . forests, oceans, mountains . . . rivers, deserts and the wilderness are appreciated as natural cathedrals, sacred places and sanctuaries for humans to commune with the Holy'.

Besides the well-documented role of the wilderness, there are a number of other distinguishing features of extreme sports. Risk-taking and thrill seeking, a generally non-competitive ethic, periods of isolation that lead to opportunity for contemplation and varying degrees of suffering and discomfort, have all been cited as catalysts for encountering the spiritual and mystical (Lester, 1983; 2004). after

Having experienced a mystical state of transcendence during a life-threatening encounter alone on a mountain, extreme sport enthusiast and writer Rob Schultheis (1996: 50), has argued that there are clear parallels between extreme sports and Shamanistic and Zen Buddhist rituals and initiations. 'Many of the Shamanistic training rituals were really nothing more than extreme games, like mountaineering, distance running, trekking, engineered to deliberately induce the kind of power and ecstasy I had accidentally stumbled upon on Mount Neva'. Differentiating between 'nature mysticism' (natural) and 'theistic mysticism' (supernatural), will then be a key aspect in attempting to clarify the source and authenticity of the 'power and ecstasy' experienced in such circumstances. In the next section we consider theories of

mysticism and offer a foundational understanding of the topic and how it may be applied to extreme sport.

## TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING MYSTICISM IN EXTREME SPORT

### *Overview*

Scholars from the psychology of religion have studied about mysticism in a number of different contexts. Music, art, significant life events - birth and death, religious worship, mind-altering drugs, psychosis, artificial stimulation of the right temporal lobe, solitary nature situations, the practice of meditation and prayer, sex and stressful situations are some of the activities and states that have being shown to trigger mystical states. A review of the 'psychology of religion' literature reveals only one text, that of Fontana (2003: 127-129) that makes a passing, and uncritical, reference to sport as a potential medium for mystical experiences. Our first task then is to analyse the legitimacy of claims by scholars, as to the spiritual and mystical nature of positive psychological states often experienced in sport.

Accounts of psychological states, such as peak experiences and 'flow' in sport (a positive and transcendent type psychological state) are often tinged with mystical or religious undertone. Hence, boundaries between the operational definitions of peak experiences and flow and theological concepts, such as the mystical and numinous, are easily confused. Maslow's (1962: appendix) 19-point characterisation of peak experiences, for example, contains a number of dimensions that clearly allude to religious and mystical concepts, such as awe and reverence, feeling God-like and ego-transcendence. In relation to the experience of flow-states, Csikszentmihalyi (1990: 1-5) does not attempt to equate flow experience with mysticism or the Holy Spirit.

Others, however, have done so liberally, but with little accurate theological exposition or reference to primary sources. Whilst there is arguably a historical connection between 'flow' and the 'Holy Spirit' (if only at a conceptual and in-part experiential level), the important distinction to make here is that flow in sports can be more closely aligned, at the ontological level, to the experience of 'nature mysticism' that emerges from the psyche. Indeed, this theme is central to our overall thesis and will be examined in more depth in due course. First, however, some definitions and explanation of key concepts is required and a brief historical background to the study of mysticism.

Mysticism is to some degree inseparable from the related concepts of religion and spirituality and the fact that the terms are often used interchangeably further clouds conceptual boundaries between them. Religion has been defined as 'a system of beliefs in divine or superhuman power, and practices of worship or other rituals directed toward such a power' (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975: 1). Examples are Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. Spirituality is a term that Spilka (1993: 1) suggests is a 'fuzzy' concept that now 'embraces obscurity with passion'. It can be defined from a religious or humanist perspective, where personal meaning is derived from whatever people deem to be ultimate, and valued in and of itself. This has led to wide-spread 'semantic abuse' (Higgs & Braswell, 2004: 185), in the world at large and in modern sport, with very questionable parallels being drawn between popular terms such as 'sporting spirit' and 'team spirit' and the biblical understanding of the Holy spirit and Christian spirituality and mysticism.

Mysticism is not to be regarded as a religion itself, but the highest expression of all true religions and a means of directly experiencing the supernatural. 'The immediate feeling of the unity of self with God . . . in which the self and the world are

alike forgotten, the subject knows himself to be in the possession of the highest and fullest truth' (Woods, 1980: 20), is one amongst twenty-five definitions that have been proffered down the ages. Any worthwhile discussion of mysticism must then begin with clear definitions of terms and concepts.

Theologians suggest that all authentic Christian mysticism flows from 'Jesus Christ as the mediator, the God-man as we call him, the person in whom the incomprehensible Deity is communicated to us; translated so to speak, into a form accessible to our minds'. Macquarrie (2004: 243), has suggested ten characteristics of Christian mystical experience which include a direct relation to God, enhanced self-knowledge through cognitive elements of the encounter, a sense of awe, states of ecstasy or rapture, and perhaps most characteristic, and important here, a feeling of unity with God. For Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross (1542-1591), this 'state of divine union consisted in the total transformation of the will into the will of God' (St. John of the Cross, 1922: 2).

Accordingly, the Christian tradition has always taught that the only way to authenticate the claims of mystics is through evidence of inner transformation and the fruit shown in their lives (Gal. 5:22-26). Christian mystic, German Dominican Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) stresses this point in stating that, 'those who are out for "feelings" or for "great experiences" and only wish to have the pleasant side: that is self-will and nothing else' and 'what a man takes in contemplation he must pour out in love'. Do so-called mystical athletes undergo anything remotely resembling 'the soul's purification from vices' that has been the benchmark of Christian mysticism for the past two millennia? Do extreme athletes come away from these experiences with a conviction of the consequences of the encounter and 'a new commitment to humility', the essence of Christian discipleship? We suspect not. More likely, as McGinn (2005;

19) indicates in the introduction to his encyclopaedic commentary on mysticism, 'in common parlance, the word is often taken to refer to anything that is strange or mysterious', including it seems, 'uncanny' and 'meta-normal' sport experiences described by Murphy and White (1995: 1-5).

This eclecticism in the sports-mysticism literature generally stems from a pluralistic understanding of mysticism. For example, William James' and Abraham Maslow's psychological theories of religion and mysticism and the psychical research of Fredrick Meyers, provide the bedrock of much of Murphy and White's work. Because mysticism is a form of spirituality 'ideally suited to the post-modern age: experiential, individualistic and progressive' (Barnes, 2003: 278), it is not difficult to see why some authors have tried to 'mystify' and even 'deify' sport experience. One aspect of this has been a resurgence of interest in Jamesian thought in both academic and popular writings.

William James' (1842-1910), in his classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) was the first to seriously examine the phenomenology of religious and mystical experience and to consistently use the term. However, often overlooked is that this theme was implicit in the Protestant liberal theology of Fredrich Schleiermacher. (1768-1834). Having been heavily influenced by German romanticism, Schleiermacher constructed an experience based theology that had 'all the ingredients of the theory of a mystical core of religion in its primary sense' (Jantzen, 1990: 60). In his magnum opus *The Christian Faith* (1928/1830), Schleiermacher contends that religion is not to be found in doctrines, moral codes, or institutions, but in humans' immediate 'feeling of absolute dependence' on God. Following in part, James (1902: 401) advocated that 'personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness'.

Through his research (that is oft-cited by those advocating sports mysticism), James (1902) identified four defining factors of mystical experience: *Ineffability* – the experience is inexpressible, and it cannot be transferred to others; *Noetic Quality* – the experience offers insight or knowledge beyond the intellect; *Transiency* – mystical states cannot be sustained for long; and *Passivity* – a sense of being acted upon by an outside force (402-404). Talk of an *outside force* and absence of reference to a transcendent object, that is, God, indicates that James clearly could not swallow the core message of Schleiermacher theology, however liberal his interpretation of the Christian story. His definition of religious experience as 'the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine' (53), clearly reflects his lack of sympathy for monotheism. Despite this, James' classic work has been foundational to the phenomenological study of mysticism, in both western and eastern religious traditions. Further clarification of the yawning abyss that exists between the experiences of religious pilgrims and modern sporting mystics, can be found in Rudolf Otto's (1869-1937) landmark work on religious experience, *The Idea of the Holy*.

Otto's (1968/1923) phenomenological analysis of religious experience, in which he coined the term the 'numinous', describes the primal form of religious experience which is characterised by non-rational and ineffable feelings of 'awe', 'mystery', and 'fear'. Numerous scholars have drawn comparisons between the 'numinous' and the 'mystical', and have noted that they are two poles of religious experience that are ultimately united (Spilka et al., 2003). There are conceptual differences, however. The numinous is based upon an awareness of the "holy other" beyond nature that the subject feels in communion with, while mystical experiences

tend to engender a sense of unity or oneness with God, and/or with self, objects in the environment and/or the world.

The word 'numinous' is a derivative of the Latin term *numen*, describing the power within the sacred and transcendent object (God, Allah or Yahweh) that evokes the response from the subject. The transcendent object is what Hood (1995) calls the 'foundational reality' of a faith tradition. Often overlooked is that Otto recognised the holy as both a rational and non-rational (not irrational) aspect of human nature, but clearly sees the numinous as the 'innermost essence of religion'. He richly described the complete experience of a human-divine encounter as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (the awe-inspiring and fascinating mystery), drawing on powerful extracts from the Old Testament (e.g., Gen. 18:27; Ex. 23:27; Job. 9:34; 13:21), to illustrate the fear and 'ontological nothingness' that is felt when confronted by the transcendent God - the numinous object. This fear is not negative, as the well-known Proverb (9:10) communicates, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. 'Awe' is perhaps a better word to express this Godly fear, a 'realisation of one's own littleness and apparent insignificance in the face of that which is truly great' (Maquarrie, 2004: 242). American theologian and revivalist leader of the 'Great Awakening', Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) describes such an experience (Edwards and Smith, 2008: xxvii):

The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent . . . which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud. I felt an ardency of soul to be what I know not otherwise how to express, emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust, and to be full of Christ alone: to love him with a holy and pure love . . . to serve him and follow him; to be perfectly sanctified and made pure.

Reflecting on Edward's vivid encounter with the Holy, biblical revelation and the abundance of ancient and modern mystical writings, it is legitimate to ask whether the scores of anecdotal accounts from athletes reported as having a 'numinous dimension' bear any resemblance, to Otto's monotheistic model? After selectively presenting elements of Otto's thesis, Murphy and White (1995: 29) state that:

The athlete knows that being in perfect control of the football, or the puck, or the bat may be a matter more of grace than of will, and that one can only "do it" by letting it happen, by letting something else take over. And it is the awareness and the closeness to that "something else" that can lead to terror.

Similarly, professor of comparative religion, Tom Faulkner (2001: 186), seems to teach his students that in attending an ice-hockey game they can experience 'fandom as a way of being religious' and even encounter the *mysterium tremendum*. Presumably, because of the 'fear and terror' that may ensue in the combative sport of ice hockey? In his chapter *Training into Transcendence*, Buddhist scholar, Charles Prebish (1993: 223), suggests in a similar fashion that 'in the religious breakthrough in running, in which ultimate reality is truly manifest, *time is transcended altogether*. By that I mean to say that time has no function whatsoever for the duration of the apprehension of what Rudolph Otto has called the "wholly other"'.

We find it perplexing after reading Otto and the Old Testament narratives of Abraham, Moses and Job that he points to, how these authors find these parallels. We would agree with Maquarrie (2004: 243), who remarks that for 'over-enthusiastic believers in the spiritual marriage, Otto's stress on the *tremendum* is a justifiable



corrective'. The experiences of athletes and fans therefore, although highly valuable in themselves, when accurately interpreted seem to be far from an experience of Otto's 'wholly other' transcendent object (God, Allah, or Yahweh).

Building on the work of Schleiermacher, James and Otto, a number of twentieth century thinkers such as Huxley (1954), Stace (1960), Zaehner (1961) and Underhill (1955/1911), have provided reflection on mystical experience across the world's religions. Predictably numerous models for mysticism have been developed. The typology of Richard Zaehner is useful here, as it provides a degree of clarity in the distinction between natural and supernatural mystical experience in sport and it is to this that we now turn.

#### *Nature Mysticism and Supernatural Mysticism in Extreme Sport*

In his well-respected study, Zaehner (1961) notes that only theistic based mysticisms are recognised as including union or oneness with a monotheistic God (as with Otto's numinous). Monistic mysticisms are those that involve feelings of union or oneness with 'self', objects in the experient's perceptual field, for example, in extreme sport, with the mountains or the ocean, and/or with God. For example, nine rock climbers in Csikszentmihalyi's (1975: 88) seminal study of flow categorised their experiences as a state of deep-flow, describing them as 'transcendent, religious, visionary, or ecstatic'. One participant reported, 'you don't feel like you're doing something as a conscious being; you're adapting to the rock and becoming part of it' (86). Another experienced, 'the Zen feeling, like meditation or concentration. One thing you're after is the one-pointedness of mind . . . somehow the right thing is done without ever thinking about it' (87).

Similarly, in other extreme sports such as big-wave surfing, participants often attest to their 'communion with nature' during participation, reporting feelings of 'oneness with the environment' and 'loss of self in the activity'. This is commonly experienced through the 'Holy Grail of surfing', that is, the surfer getting 'barrelled' inside a cylindrical shaped wave. For example, one 'soul surfer' suggests that this is a time when 'man and board are as centaur riding the waves, so that for a short spell they are indistinguishable, and all three unite with that sense of oneness and identification' and that it is a '... complete integration of man's natural body and spirit with the violent forces of nature in the most total and satisfying way possible' (Muirhead, 1962: 52). Surfers often use this type of language to capture the beauty of the activity (Farmer, 1992: 241), which can be traced back to the anti-establishment, counterculture of 'soul surfing' in the 1960s (Booth, 2004: 94). Arguably, this informal 'folk speech' that characterises the sporting sub-cultures of surfing, snowboarding and perhaps to a lesser degree mountaineering, is one of the main reasons behind the trend to describe sporting experience in a spiritual or mystical way (Segrave, 1997: 211). This characteristic aside, we should not entirely discredit the idea of mystical experience (in its broadest sense) in extreme sport, as 'nature mysticism exists and as is widely attested is not open to serious doubt' (Zaehner, 1960: 199).

The crux of Zaehner's comparative model, which seeks to differentiate theistic and nature mysticism as clearly as possible, is his critique of Aldous Huxley's famous book, *The Doors of Perception* (1954). Huxley, a novelist and social critic had in his later years personally experimented with the hallucinogenic *Mescaline*, a clinical drug capable of evoking a state similar to schizophrenia, or more accurately the manic state of manic-depressive psychosis. Huxley's superficial interpretation, that his ecstatic

experiences were equitable with those of religious mystics of all religions, was the chief reason for Zaehner embarking on his comparative study of mysticism. Unfortunately, like others who have stepped outside of their field of expertise (of whom William James and Freud are noteworthy examples), Huxley's suggestions were ironically utilised by Zaehner to buttress his argument for theistic mysticism. Proposing that nature mysticism is merely an 'expansion of the personality' Zaehner (1960: 200) concludes that:

By making the confusion one is forced into the position that God is simply another term for Nature; and it is an observable fact that in Nature there is neither morality nor charity nor even common decency. God then is reduced in sum-total of natural impulses on which the terms of 'good' and 'evil' have no meaning. Such a god is sub-human, a god for animals, not for rational creatures; and to experience such a god has rightly been termed 'downward transcendence' by Mr. Huxley .

Taking into consideration the 'moral relativism' that may ensue from Huxley's philosophical position, it is interesting to note that his ingestion of Mescaline was generally 'washed down with bourbon' and that he was a pioneer of recreational drug use in the 1960s. There are, of course, links here to the drug taking that was a 'source of counter-culture enlightenment' in the 1960s surf scene, a sub-culture that was deeply wedded to 'philosophical environmentalism and eastern mysticism' (Booth. 2004: 97). Hence, surfers anecdotal accounts such as, 'when I surf, I dance for Krishna', and 'claimed journeys to "inner truth"' often 'degenerate, on inspection, into puddles of vomit' (Caute, 1988: 40). Warning that 'though sports and play may

provide aesthetic pleasure, natural delight, and rest for the mind and soul, they are not inherently divine and should be watched over very carefully lest they show signs of corruption', Higgs (1992: 101), would then seem to have a valid point.

We would like to venture the thesis, that these seemingly very positive experiences in extreme sport are more likely a form of 'nature mysticism', or what Zaehner (1961) termed 'pan-en-henism', that is, they occur in the psyche of the athlete and are more accurately understood as flow-states, peak experiences or Zen-states, which often leads to the well-being of the athlete. Zaehner defines such mind-states as 'a unifying experience in which the sense of individuality is lost and merged in a blissful sense of unity of all nature' (180). In this view, Prebish's (1993: 69) observation that 'very often the mystical [in sport] is described in terms consistent with Asian religion', as are modern renderings of the peak experience in sport, brings to the fore one of the key aspects of our argument, the doctrine of 'pantheism'; a belief that still haunts the Christian mystics' doctrine of God.

Nature mysticism is intimately linked to the theological idea of pantheism. Pantheism states that God infuses the entire Universe, therefore 'all things', including humans and nature are inseparable (as in Hinduism and Buddhism). This theme is clearly evident in the results of Lester's (1983: 38) qualitative investigation of the psychological dynamics of high-altitude mountain climbing on a Mount Everest expedition. One climber shared that he 'always felt a very close spiritual association with the mountains. I love to be free completely free. I firmly believe that God exists . . . as I climb I begin losing contact, in a physical sense, with the world below . . . I feel an extremely intimate oneness with the universe'. Distinguished Christian mystics, such as German Dominican Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), advocated a creation-centred pantheistic theology, of sorts. Some 20<sup>th</sup> century

theologies, such as that of existentialist Paul Tillich, have also been in part at least, accommodating to pantheistic ideas, which considering the long history of theological debate around this issue may hold some credence. This said, this should not lead us to make the common mistake evident in many pantheistic writings, that theism proposes God's transcendence as distance between God and the world, whereas the true meaning of transcendence is difference between God and the world (Bauckham, 2003: 182). Whether legitimately so or not, pantheism in all its guises, is widely accepted as a dissent from Christian theological orthodoxy.

The reason for this is because it eradicates the qualitative distinction between creature (human persons) and the creator (God). The creature-creator distinction that Otto and others, such as the Protestant theologian, Karl Barth (1969/1933), were keen to emphasise as fundamental in appreciating the 'Otherness' and majesty of God. Heavily influenced by Hasidic mysticism and that of Nicholas of Cusa and Jacob Böhme, the topic of his doctoral dissertation, the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1952), was not convinced by Barth and others of a similar ilk. He argued that they had overplayed divine transcendence (a sovereign God 'out there') at the cost of divine immanence (opportunity for 'intimacy' and mystical encounter with God) in their quest to put Christ back at the centre of the theological project, following the liberal theology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Buber's moderate voice is perhaps wise in 'so difficult a field', where Stace (1960: 7) cautions, 'we cannot expect "proofs", "disproofs", "refutations", or "certainties"'.

On this theme, Smart (1978) reminds us that a natural mystical experience may also include a supernatural dimension. Indeed, many of the most notable Christian mystics, such as St. Theresa of Avila, were never completely certain whether their mystical experiences originated from God or Satan. What then, are we

to make of sporting mystics who suggest that 'I sought God and found him there easily, there in the waves and people of surfing' (Quinn, 1965: 82). Following Higgs and Baswell (2004: 219), we doubt that mystical experience with the 'other' 'is as uniform and handy as Prebish and other sport apologists make it appear'.

While this is so, it is important to note that within a Christian world-view all persons (Gen. 2:7) have the potential of spiritual awareness as they are made in the image of God. And through active contemplation on, and interaction with, the beauties of creation can undoubtedly glean something of the spiritual. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans (1:20), his most noted theological treatise, 'for since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-his eternal power and divine nature-have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse'. There is something of the recognition of the 'sublime' in this verse from Paul's letter to the Romans, which is preceded of course by many poetic accounts of the majesty and mystery of creation in the Psalms and Job.

## THE BEAUTIFUL AND SUBLIME: SPORTING EXPERIENCES IN THE WILDERNESS

In his critique of 'sport as religion', Higgs (1992: 94) argues 'sports belong to the realm of the beautiful, play the natural, and religion to the sublime'. While this may be so for traditional sports, the beauty and awe inspiring characteristics of the wilderness may provide opportunity for experiencing something of the religious sublime in extreme sports. 'Passive appreciation of natural beauty or in the active merging with the mountain through the dynamics of climbing', is how Mitchell (1983: 147) describes what he sees as the religious and sublime qualities of mountaineering.

This human capacity to encounter a deeper reality through the beauty of creation is something that has long entertained philosophers and theologians alike.

Throughout the twentieth century beauty in all its guises has been a major theme in the allegories and metaphors of literary giants, such as C.S Lewis and J.R.R Tolkien, and theologians and spiritual writers, such as Hans Urs von Balthasar and Thomas Merton. 'Every experience of beauty points to infinity', and 'the beautiful brings with it a self-evidence that enlightens without meditation' Balthasar tell us in volume I of his magisterial work, *The Glory of the Lord* (cited in Dubay, 1999: 117). Empirical studies by psychologists of religion (Hood, 1977, 1978) and data from Greeley's (1974: 141) well-known survey study, in which 45% of a national sample reported the 'beauties of nature' as a trigger of mystical type experience, support these literary and theological reflections. There are then 'underground connections between the mystical and aesthetic' (Stace, 1960:81), in which one may be confronted by a mysterious 'otherness'. This provides one potential root of the sublime encounters of extreme athletes amongst mountain peaks and raging seas.

A small number of sports scholars writing on the sublime in surfing (Stranger, 1999: 265), skydiving (Ilundain, 2002), mountaineering (Mitchell, 1983) and single-handed sailing (Hutch, 2005, 2006), have also discussed the role of fear and risk-taking. Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724/1790: 110-121), seems to express something of this in his famous discourse on the sublime: 'The *astonishment* amounting almost to terror, the awe and the thrill of devout feeling, that takes hold of one when gazing upon . . . mountains ascending to heaven', can provoke a 'a state of joy'. Kant's allusion to the awe and terror evoked by contemplation of nature identifies what we see as a weakness in the past literature, that is, the confusion between exciting or even neurotic fear experienced by athletes taking risks of their

own volition, for example, climbing the North face of Everest, and Kantian feelings of astonishment and awe when gazing upon 'boundless oceans rising with rebellious force' or 'mountains ascending to heaven'. In discussing what he calls states of 'soul-stirring delight', Kant (1952/1790: 111-112) alludes to this difference:

External nature is not estimated in our aesthetic judgement as sublime as far as exciting fear, but rather because it challenges our power . . . therefore nature is here called sublime merely because it raises the imagination . . . and gives us the courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.

Therefore, traditionally, the sublime has been used in a religious manner to name objects that inspire awe, feelings of joy and an elevation of the soul, not feelings evoked through volitional risk-taking. This is derived from eighteenth-century and Romantic aesthetics, primarily in the philosophy of Kant and Edmund Burke (1990/1757), although as Fludernik (2001: 2) notes the idea can be traced back to the 'rhetorical sublime' in neo-classical poetics of the seventeenth century. Interestingly, it was from the poetry of Alpine travellers during this period that the idea of the sublime gained access into literary theory. This is reflected in the following definition of the sublime by Fludernik (2):

The sublime . . . is closely linked to the experience of God in nature [not pantheism], its main effect being an elevation of the soul (the ethical and aesthetic component) and a feeling of being overwhelmed by the majesty of divine nature (the ideological component: man is nothing in contrast to God!).



This definition is based upon the Kantian understanding of the sublime, which comprised two elements (Kant, 1952/1790: 94-121). First, the 'mathematical sublime' relates to the overwhelming feelings of the magnitude (size/height/depth) and mere vastness of an object or thing in nature, that is, the size and power of large waves in surfing and sailing and the beauty and magnificence of the landscape in mountaineering. The second element of the Kantian sublime is the terror inducing 'dynamical sublime', which has an ethical impact upon the subject who is awed by the power and immensity of the thing in relation to us, that is, experience of fear and risk in relation to the wave, mountain or ocean. Both these dimensions of the sublime have been implicitly identified in writings and testimonies in the extreme sports literature. Although within Kant's conception of the dynamical sublime there are elements of awe and reverence, it was Edmund Burke (1990/1757: 53) who explicitly emphasised the role of fear and terror as one way of experiencing sublimity:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature ... is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all it's motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on the object which it employs.

A big-wave surfer in the cult video *Metaphysical: Surfing on a Higher Level* (1997) encapsulates both something of the role of terror and fear in the Burkean sublime and Kant's mathematical sublime:

When you paddle out and see a [10 meter high wave] staring you in the face, it's like 'Oh my God . . . Being a surfer and being involved with nature all the time gives you a different understanding of where you might find God.

It is then plausible that the combination of the awe (dynamical sublime) and the physical features of the natural environment (mathematical sublime), which are characteristic of most extreme sports, may engender the religious sublime to some degree, that is, an awareness of something 'wholly other' than oneself (Rom 1. 20). Some readers may object to the tentative links we are making here between biblical creation narratives and the two dimensions of the Kantian sublime. However, Kant (1952/1790: 90-93) himself, although acknowledging distinctions between the beautiful and the sublime, also recognised that 'in experience' the two are inseparable. Perhaps, one reason why athletes and recreationalists have repeatedly gone 'back to nature' during historical eras of materialism and rationalisation such as the one that we find ourselves in at present, is this primal 'aching need for the infinite' (Dubay, 1999: 1), whether they are conscious of the fact or not.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of this article has been to examine the legitimacy of claims that athletes in extreme sports may encounter the mystical and sublime, when examined through a Christian theological lens. As to whether extreme sporting experience provides access the realms of the Holy that Otto, St Paul, Jonathan Edwards and St. John of the Cross refer to, our answer is an emphatic no. We are also quietly confident

that Judaic and Islamic scholars, representing the other monotheistic faiths, would be sympathetic to our thesis. To reiterate, however, the interpretative lenses through which we scrutinise the experience of others are far from perfect (1 Cor. 13:12-13), and we do not wish to propose a false dichotomy between the sacred and profane.

According to Christian theology, we are all spiritual creatures (Gen 2:7), made in the image of God and therefore we have 'a tendency toward mystery and the infinite' (Berdyayev, 1947: 62). Mountaineers' and surfers' sublime encounters in the bosom of God's creation may then be what Professor Peter Berger (1970: 52) called 'signals of transcendence . . . within the human condition'. A primal longing for something infinitely greater than self, a yearning, however, that is oft buried deep in the caverns of the mind. While this is so, we need to steer clear from any idealistic pantheism, recognising that all Christian experience of the transcendent, is an inward spiritual experience that manifests in the depths of the soul. 'The kingdom of God is within you', Jesus told his disciples (Luke. 17: 21) pointing to the crucifixion, the event in which God through sacrificial love reconciled humanity to himself. As the German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, emphasised in the opening sentence of his classic work, *The Crucified God* (1974), the inner criterion of any Christian theology that '... deserves to be called Christian' is the centrality of the cross.

Thus, talk of sport offering 'redemption as well as rebirth into a new type of reality, separated from ordinary reality by its sense of being permeated with ultimacy and holiness' (Prebish, 1993: 70) cannot be accommodated in a Christian worldview (John. 3: 3-8; 1 Peter. 2:24). It is this type of speculation that Prebish himself acknowledges is 'somewhat fanciful', 'anecdotal' and 'irreverent' (xix). When scholars suggest that sports can offer 'redemption', 'rebirth' and easy access to God's throne of

grace, it is, at this juncture we feel they have made a number of erroneous etymological and theological leaps.

Not to be misunderstood, we again wish to clearly articulate our endorsement of sports such as mountaineering, surfing and snowboarding. Within a balanced theology of leisure, they can be seen as forms of deep play, an avenue to well-being and growth, even spiritual expression in an aesthetic, creative sense that provides opportunities for meaningful, therapeutic and exhilarating activities in the wilderness. Perhaps St Irenaeus captures something of what extreme athletes' experience in famously suggesting 'the glory of God is man fully alive'.

The pillars of our main argument and our conclusions have been first biblical revelation, supported by a rich tradition of biographies and scholarly writings on the mystical. This said, as Nicholas Lash (1988: 234) warns, no amount of 'epistemological ingenuity' can reveal the incomprehensibility and deep simplicity of divine nature in subjective experience (in extreme sport). At the same time, Lash does not discourage our attempts to explore religious and mystical experience, suggesting that it can 'enlarge our understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live'. In this spirit of scholarship and discovery it is hoped that for those, sports men and women, students and scholars wishing to delve further into this challenging and complicated field of study, our argument has both informed and provoked.

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