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By Their Fruits You Will Know Them: Spiritual Narcissism and the Ambivalence of the Numinous

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, spiritual narcissism has emerged as a widespread phenomenon across both traditional religious frameworks and contemporary neo-spiritual milieus. This paper examines how spiritual discourse and practice may function as a vehicle for ego inflation when rooted in unmetabolized narcissistic vulnerability. The consequences are structurally significant: for the subject, chronic reliance on idealized self-representations, splitting, and relational instability; for those in proximity, experiences of instrumentalization, abrupt devaluation, and epistemic rupture regarding the sacred.

Central to this dynamic is the numinous experience — Rudolf Otto’s “mysterium tremendum et fascinans” — an archetypal encounter marked by awe, terror, and non-ordinary perception. In an integrated psyche, such experiences may foster symbolic capacity and ethical openness. However, when processed through a fragmented self-structure, the numinous is unconsciously co-opted as a defense: states of unity, revelation, or transcendence are reinterpreted as evidence of exceptional status, while relational others are subjected to cycles of idealization and discard.

The paper analyzes this mechanism through the lens of psychoanalytic theory (Jung, Kernberg, Bion), emphasizing the role of archetypal projection, splitting, and the transformation of transcendence into a narcissistic screen. It argues that spiritual narcissism does not signify a failure of faith, but rather a “pathological appropriation of the transcendent to stabilize a precarious ego”

The numinous, in this context, reveals its inherent ambivalence: it can open the psyche to mystery — or enclose it within a theater of omnipotence.

Keywords: spiritual narcissism; numinous experience; splitting; narcissistic vulnerability; archetypal projection; psychoanalysis; sacred; transcendence