SLEEP DEPRIVATION: ASCETICISM, RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND NEUROLOGICAL QUANDARIES

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The purpose of this chapter is to analyze a rather puzzling and seemingly irrational ascetic practice, one that can be found in the most diverse religious traditions, but that so far has not received much attention from social scientists and religious scholars. I wish to look at sleep deprivation as a form of religious experience in the way it has been, and still is, practiced in different religions, with special reference to Christianity. My objective is to compare and contrast the cultural meanings associated with sleep deprivation in religious traditions with current neurological and neuropsychiatric researches on the effects of this condition on contemporary Western individuals, and to use this comparison / contrast to advance some hypotheses concerning the status of religion as a human experience and the ways we can approach this experience from both a cultural-historical and natural-scientific point of view.

Asceticism is normally associated with the deprivation of whatever is seen as vital, such as food, shelter, sex or, as we shall see in some detail in what follows, sleep. Behind all these practices there is usually, as a principal motive, the will to keep the body under control, to submit the body to the rule of the spirit and to bring the soul toward divinity. The explanations of sleep deprivation provided by religious traditions are very diverse, but most of them are related to notions of ascetic practice and corporal discipline as means of spiritual purification. In the majority of cases sleep deprivation is part of a set of ascetic activities equally focused on the principle of discipline and self-mortification, such as fasting, sexual abstinence and other kinds of physical exertions. What gives sleep deprivation a more specific significance, however, lies in its associated notions of wakefulness, alertness, as a desirable condition of the soul, in opposition to the passive state that is related to sleep. Furthermore, due consideration should also be given to hallucinatory states and more general cognitive dysfunctions and alterations brought forward by long term...
sleep deprivation and, in particular, to the cultural-religious meanings attributed to them.

Sleep Deprivation in World Religions

I shall begin with a brief outlook at the ways in which some of the most important religious traditions have taken sleep deprivation as a form of asceticism. Information provided in this section will be very general since the extant literature for any one of the most important world religions is far too large and detailed to be included here. But for the purpose of this chapter a broad outlook will suffice.

Perhaps one of the oldest religious traditions where sleep deprivation figures prominently among its ascetic practices is Taoism. Taoists have always been suspicious of sleep because dreams cause a loss of control over oneself. Within the Quanzhen monastic order (twelfth century), such a fear induced ascetical practices of sleep deprivation and motivated collective meditation at night. In this context appeared, during the Jin and Yuan periods, the so-called “Poems of the Five Night Watches,” which contain descriptions of night-time meditation. Like soldiers, Taoists must fight against sleep and keep their inner citadel free from intruders. The five watches are marked within the monasteries by drum strikes, hence they become a very sensitive reality for the religious communities. The main purpose of these watches seems to have been the fight against the temptation of dreams. Especially feared were erotic dreams and the possible nocturnal emissions that they might provoke.²

It was understood as well by several Taoist practitioners that a sleepless night would bring them nearer the Truth. The spirit (shen) should be the master of the organism, both during the day and at night. Together with erotic dreams, sleep was also supposed to make the person vulnerable to the attacks perpetrated by demons, devilish hallucinations and evil spirits (shuimo). Control over sleep should be obtained gradually, night after night. No fast results should be expected, and the need to sleep should disappear ‘naturally.’ The night should be devoted to meditation, and that seems to have been the main purpose of the Poems of the Five