

Rudolf Otto and the Idea of the Holy

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus reportedly commented on the nature of God to a woman from Samaria with the words “God is Spirit” (Jn 4:24). The statement was occasioned by a question about the place where God was to be worshipped. Jesus’ answer introduces a metaphysical dynamic: God is Spirit, and thus not bound by spatial constraints, the true worshippers of God must worship him in spirit and truth.

The invisible and incorporeal nature of God’s essential being is a problem for a humanity that gathers knowledge through senses that are tuned specifically to the empirical. Spiritual or metaphysical realities just do not register on our sense apparatus in a discernible or definite way. If the Divine exists it would seem that we are largely incapable of knowing it; cognitively we just do not possess the machinery to think about God. All our talk about God is based analogously on human attributes and traits that are made absolute rather than on direct empirical interaction with the divine being.

A. J. Ayer published a seminal work in 1946 that challenged the notion of whether or not it was even meaningful to talk about God.¹ Religious language was not verifiable and thus was not adding any real knowledge. Consequently, to talk about God was not profitable. Ayer set forth a particular verifiability formula by which all propositional statements were to be tested. Those which failed the test were deemed to be cognitively meaningless.

¹ A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 2nd edn (Dover Publications, New York, 1946).

Yet, all the world over, since the beginning of recorded history, humanity has been experiencing the Divine. Religion exists in very primitive and remote cultures as well as in more evolved and technologically sophisticated ones, and central to religion in most of these cultures is some notion or idea of divinity. Religion it would seem is predicated on the experience of divine presence or power. And its universal attestation would seem to imply that humanity has some kind of awareness of the divine. The various religious rituals and symbols are recognized or created with a view to bringing about some kind of existential recreation of the divine, that of arousing some kind of “spiritual” experience in the worshipper.

In conflict with Ayer’s verifiability principle, religion and religious talk has been meaningful for individuals and societies for millennia. Meaningfulness is not tied to verifiability, and apparently, in terms of human conduct, neither is truth. The experience of the divine in the lives of various individuals or of communities of worship would seem to be a case against such an empirical way of ascertaining a statement’s value. Ayer, along with the Vienna circle of scholars to which he belonged and for whom he spoke, seem to have devised a system that would deliberately shut out religious and metaphysical talk. By labeling it gibberish, they have removed it from the sphere of respectability and relieved themselves of the responsibility to listen to it and to address its claims.

Though the positivist movement was short lived, its impact on religion, and especially on “God talk” carried on for some time. Dan R. Stiver summarizes with the following words:

For various reasons, then, the fervor of logical positivism abated, and it is often said that no one would call himself or herself a logical positivist today. Nevertheless...it is not difficult to see a tacit or working employment of these principles in the approach of much of the scientific community. Moreover, the transmutation of the verification principle into the falsification principle proved to be as threatening to religious propositions as ever.²

This tacit acceptance of something like the verifiability principle clouds the whole area of religious talk. About this Stephen Beasley-Murray summarizes:

In the light of the mechanistic and evolutionary scientific philosophies, the claims of religion have come to appear empty. The whole fabric of religious language has been eroded away to meaningless nonsense for a large proportion of the thinking public. Its basic concepts are dismissed as empty and illusory creations of the mind.³

Almost any casual conversation with someone who does not have prior religious commitments will come around to the question of proofs, and these proofs almost inevitably are sought for in the empirical. Even among religious believers the matter of proofs plays a fairly dominant role. There is a great deal of effort expended in trying to justify one's own beliefs through the seeking out of empirical evidences that would in some way substantiate the things believed about God.

In partial response to this and in anticipation of what we hope to see in discussing Rudolf Otto, we note that understanding and consequently meaningfulness "is not

² Dan R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 47.

³ Stephen Beasley-Murray, *Towards a Metaphysics of the Sacred*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982), 1.

...tied exclusively to cognition, or to discursive and conceptual language.”⁴ Our psychological mood may have a part to play in our ability to experience or to become aware of the existence of something that has being, something that “is there”, though it eludes our conceptual and linguistic abilities to speak about it with clarity and is not empirically substantiated.

CONTEXT

Rudolf Otto’s book *The Idea of the Holy*⁵ investigates this whole area of feeling in religion. That the Divine can be experienced and that this experience is as valid as that which natural science would claim for its method is a central tenant of his book. It would appear that Otto is concerned to do primarily two things in *The Idea of the Holy*. First he desires to establish religion as a discipline that is distinct from natural science and consequently not testable by its criteria. He desires to demonstrate the intellectual autonomy of religion. In the second place he wants to release the concept of holiness from liberal moralizing that so often comes to characterize discussion about the holy and which was so dominant at the time of his writing.

The science of religion or comparative religious studies is largely influential in Otto’s development of the holy. A search for a cross-cultural and trans-historical ‘essence of religion’ was part of what this new development in the study of religion was all about. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries exploration and trade along with Christian missions into the East provided an opportunity for religious comparison. Melissa Raphael writes that out of this “Rationalists found evidence in

⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 163.

⁵ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd edn, John W. Harvey, trans (New York: Oxford University Press 1950).

the world's religions that the Christian revelation was not the axis on which the world turned—thereby challenging the intellectual and spiritual hegemony of the Church.”⁶

The search then began for some kind of common, natural religion behind the various religions regardless of their revelation claims.

Comparative religions as a discipline in this period was very influenced by Darwinist evolutionary theory. It presupposed a theory of development that provided a method for discovering the development of religion from the primal to Christianity.⁷

A search through the history of religious ideas revealed that certain elements recurred and that the idea of the sacred or holy constituted the key to explaining these common elements. The evolution was often perceived of as being very linear. Christianity was spoken about as the pinnacle of that process, the *telos* or goal and thus the more mature expression of religion.

Otto assumes just such an evolutionary process in *The Idea of the Holy*. He supposes that the origin of religion is sufficient to explain it, and that Christianity is the highest religious development. This leads him to unashamedly assert:

And thus Christianity, in the healthily proportioned union of its elements, assumes an absolutely classical form and dignity, which is only the more vividly attested in consciousness as we proceed honestly and without prejudice to set it in its place in the comparative study of religions. Then we shall recognize that in Christianity an element of man's spiritual life, which yet has its analogies in other fields, has for the first time come to maturity in a supreme and unparalleled way.⁸

⁶ Melissa Raphael, *Rudolf Otto and the Concept of Holiness*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁸ Otto, *IH*, 142.

CREATURE FEELING

The origins of religion as the clue to understanding its basic nature is a key element in Otto's thought. He returns to the most primal expressions of religion and surmises what an original must have looked like. And by doing this he draws attention to the inexplicable or the non-rational arousal in the consciousness of a "creature-feeling" or "creature-consciousness"⁹ that he defines as being the "emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures."¹⁰

The "creature-feeling" is a development of Schleiermacher's "feeling of dependence" which is not a feeling of dependence in the natural sense of the word. It is a specifically religious or pious feeling that has analogy with other feelings of dependence. And though Schleiermacher speaks of "absolute" and "relative" dependence, Otto thinks that this is a mistake. These analogies are not adequate to delineate the difference, they merely speak of degrees of difference. Otto is concerned to establish an intrinsic difference between them, and so he articulates it as being definable only in relation to itself. He writes: "It cannot be expressed by means of anything else, just because it is so primary and elementary a datum in our psychical life, and therefore only definable through itself."¹¹

To understand this basic experience, one must experience it themselves. Analogies break down and so are unable to convey the meaning of the idea. In fact so important is Otto's experiential element that he states up front that the reader who

⁹ Ibid., 9-10.

¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

¹¹ Ibid., 9.

has not had a religious experience of the kind about which he speaks is requested to read no further.¹² He despairs of ever being able to make the whole notion cogent to those who have no comparable experience that they can recollect.

The creature-feeling is also distinct from Schleiermacher's self-valuation. Otto is very concerned to point out that far from being a category of self-valuation, the creature-feeling itself is the effect of another feeling-element which has immediate and primary reference to an object outside the self. In this he draws upon the thought of William James' book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in which James seeks to establish that at least as far as human consciousness is concerned, there is a perception that the thing "felt" is an objective and independent reality. He says,

It is as if there were in the human consciousness a *sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call "something there,"* more deep and more general than any of the special and particular "senses" by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed.¹³

THE NUMINOUS

This objective and independent reality is what is experienced in the religious experience of Rudolf Otto's theory. And this object he has labeled "the *numinous*" which is derived from one of the basic Latin words for god. The creature-feeling is thus aroused by the "*numen*" being experienced as present.

¹² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), 66-7. Italics his.

At this we need to backtrack on Otto's thought, for he has already by this time introduced the "*numen*" and we are only just beginning to speak of it. The *numen* for Otto is defined principally as the Holy minus any ethical or moral derivations that have been attached to it. It also minus the rational aspects of dogmatic theology. And at this we come to one of the key facets of Otto's construction, for the Holy is for him a combined category. That is, it is a combination of two sorts of elements: the rational and the non-rational.¹⁴

He argues that rational elements of the Holy are unable to exhaust the idea of deity and in fact imply a non-rational or supra-rational Subject. These rational elements are essential attributes, all right, but they are predicated of the Subject they qualify and so are *synthetic* essential attributes.¹⁵ The Subject is not comprehended in these attributes nor can it be, since the Subject requires a different kind of comprehension than is possible through rational means.

The non-rational element is simply that which cannot be conceptually apprehended. Since it cannot be apprehended conceptually, and language is simply a means of conceptualizing, the non-rational element of the Holy is that part about which we can formulate no concepts—it is that which is "ineffable" or "unspeakable." We formulate what concepts we do based on our experience of the Holy, and these very often take the form of dogmatic statements or of moral valuations, though these are simply interpretations of the experience and not the experience itself. They are rationalizations.

¹⁴ Raphael, 8.

¹⁵ Otto, *IH*, 2.

When one eliminates any element of the “*numinous*” experience that overlaps with any other “natural” experience, that which is left is what constitutes the essence of the “*numinous*” or the Holy. The Holy is then thought of in terms of this “overplus” of meaning that cannot be attributed to anything else. Otto emphasizes that this “overplus” is not something that is acquired later by the concept of the Holy, but that it is that which was first and foremost only what was meant by the use of the word “holy” in Latin, Greek, Semitic and other ancient languages.¹⁶

The experience of the *numinous* then acquires in addition to this “overplus” or this essential core, various ethical and dogmatic elements. These elements schematize the Holy, making it comprehensible. By this schematizing process, the non-rational experience of the *numen* is made comprehensible as the concept of the Holy. The idea of the Holy thus comprises this non-rational core schematized by rational elements of morality and dogmatics.

Identifying the numinal experience is accomplished by indicating the determinative affects of the *numen* on the human mind. Otto speaks first of the experience as mystery. As mystery, the experience of the *numen* produces the feeling of something “wholly other” and can be analogously compared to feelings of stupor, absolute amazement, blank wonder and dumb astonishment.¹⁷ As a mystery, the *numen* can now be further explained as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. The former part of this definition “is the repelling and horrific component.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

The latter is the attracting and intoxicating component. The two form an inseparable harmony.”¹⁸

THE MYSERIUM TREMENDUM

The deepest and most fundamental element of religious experience is *the mysterium tremendum*. The *mysterium tremendum* is beyond understanding. It is conceptually extraordinary or unfamiliar. It is, however, a definite experience. If we might quote Otto at length it might help us to capture something of what he intends by it.

The feeling of it [the *mysterium tremendum*] may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its ‘profane’, non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a mystery inexpressible and above all creatures.¹⁹

He then seeks to identify three elements that characterize the *tremendum*: Tremor, *majestas*, and urgency.

¹⁸ Beasley-Murray, 6.

TREMOR

Tremor is quite simply “fear.” But this is still only an analogy, since the tremor induced by the *numinous* is wholly distinct from that of being afraid. He draws the distinction between the words “fear” and “hallow” as a way to make the distinction more evident, defining the latter as the marking of something off by a feeling of a peculiar kind of dread, not to be mistaken for any ordinary dread.²⁰ He then fills this definition out a little more by explaining the dread as an appraisal by the category of the *numinous*.²¹

As with other elements of the Holy, the tremor is not simply different in degree and intensity from natural fear, but in its very kind. He illustrates by the common way in which daemonic dread is used in common speech as the chilling of blood and creeping flesh. He suggests that “cold blood” may indicate natural fear, but the phrase “my flesh crept” conveys something non-natural or supernatural. Beasley-Murray summarizes:

The tremor experienced in such *numinous* feeling is more and other than natural fear. It is unnatural because it is uncanny. It penetrates to the core of one’s being. The cause for such dread and shuddering has been rationalized as coming from encountered demons, ghosts, or spectres. Such august feelings purified of their false rationalizations belong properly to the *numen* alone.²²

The distinctiveness of the fear that the *numen* excites is what constitutes the tremor of the *mysterium tremendum*. It can be stimulated even in worship and is expressed

¹⁹ Otto, *IH*, 12-13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*

in the biblical texts by the three fold repetition of “holy”. It is experienced as the “creature-feeling” which shudders before the awe inspiring object of experience. And the referring of this tremor to the *numen* gives rise to the idea of ὀργή or wrath which in the New Testament is expressed as the ὀργή θεοῦ.

Otto considers this wrath to be a natural expression of the Godhead, and even an indispensable element of holiness itself. “This ὀργή,” he writes, “is nothing but the *tremendum* itself, apprehended and expressed by the aid of a naïve analogy from the domain of natural experience, in this case from the ordinary personal life of men.”²³ But the wrath is not an intellectual concept as such, but rather an ideogram of a unique emotional moment. A moment of religious experience which he suggests would be very daunting and especially disturbing to those who have recognized in the divine nature only such qualities as goodness, gentleness, love and a sort of confidential intimacy.²⁴ Although this wrath later comes to be rationalized in terms arising out of the practical reason, Otto maintains that “something supra-rational throbs and gleams, palpable and visible in ‘the wrath of God,’ prompting to a sense of terror that no natural anger can arouse.”²⁵

MAJESTAS

A second element of the *tremendum* is the *majestas* or the element of overpoweringness. In this instance there is an awareness of “might” or “power” and these in absolute manifestations. The *tremendum* can then be rendered as the *tremenda majestas* or “aweful majesty.” When a person experiences the *majestas*,

²² Beasley-Murray, 7.

²³ Otto, *IH*, 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

they become conscious of an object which is absolute overpoweringness resulting in a complete submergence of the self. In Otto's words:

It is especially in relation to this element of majesty or absolute overpoweringness that the creature-consciousness, of which we have already spoken, comes upon the scene, as a sort of shadow or subjective reflection of it. Thus, in contrast to 'the overpowering' of which we are conscious as an object over against the self, there is the feeling of one's own submergence, of being but 'dust and ashes' and nothingness. And this forms the *numinous* raw material for the feeling of religious humility.²⁶

Self-depreciation results from this sense of creatureliness, and it begins with a consciousness of the absolute superiority or supremacy of a power other than the self. The tremendum, first apprehended as "plenitude of power" become transmuted into "plenitude of being" and the whole construct takes an ontological form. There is a valuation of being that takes place and in the process the self is deemed to be less real than the tremendum of which it is conscious. Otto quotes an experience recounted in by William James:

The perfect stillness of the night was thrilled by a more solemn silence. The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen. I could not any more have doubted that He was there than I was. Indeed I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two.²⁷

URGENCY

²⁵ Philip C. Almond, *Rudolf Otto: An Introduction to His Philosophical Theology*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 71; Otto, *IH*, 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22-23; James, 76.

“Urgency” or “energy” comprise the third element of the *tremendum*. The energy is clothed in the symbolic expressions of vitality, passion, emotional temper, will, force, movement, excitement, activity, impetus. They are directly opposed to the rationalization of the *numen* and cannot themselves be rationalized, and this has helped to keep religion from being rationalized away.²⁸ This urgency may be understood as “absolute will” within the *numen*. The feeling of this mystic energy is beyond utterance, though the anthropomorphic analogues above may be used to suggest its nature. They are however merely ideograms for *numinous* feeling.²⁹ If the corresponding subjective response to the quality of tremor is the dread and insignificance of majestas, then impotence on the part of the subject corresponds to the urgency in the *Numen*.³⁰

MYSTERIUM

The *mysterium tremendum* is object to which *numinous* consciousness is directed. The mysterious element of the *tremendum* is that which gives rise to a sense of the “wholly other.” “The truly mysterious ‘object,’” Otto says

is beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently ‘wholly other’, whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in wonder that strikes us chill and numb.³¹

²⁸ Otto, *IH*, 23.

²⁹ Beasley-Murray, 7.

³⁰ David Steward, *Exploring the Philosophy of Religion*. 3rd edn (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992), 19.

³¹ Otto, *IH*, 28.

The incomprehensibility of the mysterium is not simply that we are faced with a problem we cannot solve, but that the thing we are experiencing is of such a different composition than we are that we do not have the cognitive tools to conceptualize it. The *Numen* is mysterious not because we don't understand it, but rather we are unable to understand it because it is by its very nature mystery. It is from this characteristic of the *Numen* that we fall on the terms "supernatural" and "transcendent. These terms help in that they appear to provide a positive way of speaking about the *numinous* by providing conceptual terms by which we can affirm it. And yet they simply refer to the positive feeling-content of the experience itself and thus as designations for that unique "wholly other" reality that we feel. They still fail to give it clear conceptual expression.³²

FASCINANS

Opposite the *tremendum* is the *fascinans*. The *fascinans* is that of the *Numen* that attracts and fascinates, it entrances us, captivating us and intoxicating us. It is this element of the *numinous* that interests us. "While there is within the experience of the *numinous* that which repels us, the awefulness, power, and urgency of the *numinous* also fascinate and attract and give rise to feelings that in their more developed forms are the basis of religion."³³

Philip C. Almond summarizes this intoxication or "Dionysiac" element of the *numinous* experience as being "the source of the quest for salvation and atonement,

³² Ibid., 30.

³³ Stewart, 20.

of self surrender to the *numen*, of identification with it, of self-fulfillment in exaltation and ecstasy.”³⁴ In Otto’s own words:

Widely various as these states are in themselves, yet they have this element in common, that in them the *mysterium* is experienced in its essential, positive, and specific character, as something that bestows upon man a beatitude beyond compare, but one whose real nature he can neither proclaim in speech nor conceive in thought, but may know only by a direct and living experience. It is a bliss which embraces all those blessings that are indicated or suggested in positive fashion by any ‘doctrine of salvation,’ and it quickens all of them through and through; but these do not exhaust it. Rather by its all-pervading, penetrating glow it makes of the very blessing more than the intellect can conceive in them or affirm of them.³⁵

This *fascinans* constitutes one of two values that can be attributed to the *numen*.

Values in the sense that they are special category of appraisal, a judgement of appreciation “of a unique kind by the category diametrically contrary to ‘the profane’.”³⁶ The ‘holy’ is then something that is recognized as commanding our respect, “as that whose real value is to be acknowledged inwardly.”³⁷ There is in the experience of ‘the Holy’ a recognition that the *numinous* object is real, having an objective presence that gives rise to this valuation. And yet at this point in his discussion Otto is not yet ready to infuse this element of valuation with the moral overtones that dominated so much of the theology of his day. The Holy is not the perfect, it is the ‘Other’, or more radically, the ‘Wholly Other.’ The valuation that

³⁴ Almond, 75.

³⁵ Otto, *IH*, 33-34.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

takes place is ontological and not moral, it is a value of being, the insignificance of the subject when confronted with the object of *numinous* experience.

AUGUSTUM

The second value then along with the *fascinans* is the *augustum*. The *augustum* is that about the *numen*, in so far as it is recognized as possessing in itself objective value, that demands our homage.³⁸ The *augustum* refers to the supreme worth or value of the *numen*, what Otto calls its illustriousness.

It is through this second element of value that notions of sin arise. Sin results from the schematization of the *numinous*. The experience of *numinous* awe give rise to the feeling of the profane in the creature, that somehow the creature “cannot forthwith approach the *numen*.”³⁹ Grace is experienced when the creature is consecrated, which results when the *numinous* confers something of its own quality to make communion with the creature possible. Thus atonement arises to deal with this element of defilement, disvalue and profanity. Otto concludes:

Here, then, comes in the felt necessity and longing for ‘atonement’, and all the more strongly when the close presence of the *numen*, intercourse with it, and enduring possession of it, becomes an object of craving, is even desired as the *summum bonum*. It amounts to a longing to transcend this sundering unworthiness, given with the self’s existence as ‘creature’ and profane natural being.⁴⁰

From this purely sacred understanding of sin, moral development takes place. Certain activities are seen to defile and thus increase the ontological distance

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

between the creature and the *numen* and give rise to the *tremor*. Other activities are seen to be sacramental and atoning, and these minimize the ontological distance, thus allowing the creature to experience the *fascinans*. These purifying activities become secularized and soon constitute a mode of conduct that operates rationally apart from the experience of the *numen*. When this is taken to the extreme, religion is so rationalized and the *numen* so completely managed that the activities of worship no longer stir up the experience of the *numinous* and dead orthodoxy comes to replace religious experience.

When this happens, many of the primary elements of religious practice take on a kind of 'optional' character. The idea of redemption or of atonement are minimized since a rationalized notion of "sin" no longer perceives of "sin" as a violation of the *numen* and of a defiling of the creature. Yet in the Christian religion, these notions are at the fore and are developed to a high degree, balanced by a rationalized understanding, but not dominated by the rational. To this Otto remarks:

The God of the New Testament is not less holy than the God of the Old Testament, but more holy. The interval between the creature and Him is not diminished but made absolute; the unworthiness of the profane in contrast to Him is not extenuated but enhanced. That God none the less admits access to Himself and intimacy with Himself is not a mere matter of course; it is a grace beyond our power to apprehend, a prodigious paradox.

Otto rejects any notions of an irrational religion. Fanaticism results when the rational is not allowed to schematize the irrational elements. However before we deal with

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

these elements, we need to discuss how it is that the *numen* is experienced, since as we have pointed out, we are not sensible of its existence through normal experience.

THE A PRIORI CATEGORY OF THE HOLY

The “holy” is a combined and complex category. The combined elements being its rational and non-rational components. But in both of these, the holy is an *a priori* category.⁴¹ He writes, “seeking to account for the ideas in question, we are referred away from all sense-experience back to an original and underivable capacity of the mind implanted in the ‘pure reason’ independently of all perception.”⁴² It is here that his indebtedness to Immanuel Kant is most observed. The *a priori* category in Kant is that which appears to be universal and rationally necessary in the interpretation of human experience. Robert F. Davidson, sympathetic to Otto, summarizes,

Religion originates and finds its characteristic expression ... in unique feelings and valuations that precede all intellectual belief, including even the primitive mythology... The development of religious attitudes and ideas in the group presupposes a native religious capacity in the individual as its necessary foundation.⁴³

The way to throw light upon the region of what Otto calls “the sub-human psychical life” is by understanding it as a predisposition of some kind. This predisposition is however a predisposition to form the faculties that actually develop in the mind, and so are merely in an embryonic state at best. But these predispositions are

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Robert F. Davidson, *Rudolf Otto's Interpretation of Religion*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), 162.

nonetheless able to receive the *numinous* and so give rise to the emotions and psychical states of *numinous* experience.

The development of the faculties that arise from these predispositions manifest the religious impulsion, and as such is universally shared among the whole species.

Otto summarizes it in this way:

It begins in undirected groping emotion, a seeking and shaping of representations, and goes on, by a continual onward striving, to generate ideas, till its nature is self-illuminated and made clear by an explication of the obscure *a priori* foundation of thought itself, out of which it originated.⁴⁴

The *a priori* category in Otto is not a purely epistemological norm. It is, rather, “a category of value by which religious feelings and convictions are conditioned.”⁴⁵ The idea of the *numen*, understood as God, arises through the interpretation of religious experience. The religious *a priori* is primarily valuation, an autonomous category of meaning and value; it is not the acceptance of any particular religious dogma as an epistemological first principle. This *a priori* category does, however, provide knowledge of an objective, transcendent reality. As a religious category of meaning that is both ultimate and *a priori* in the mind, the experience that it yields is objectively valid. This objectivity gives rise to the epistemological value of the experiences that arise from it. A lengthy quote from Otto in this respect may beget of the reader as an expression of how this is understood by him.

⁴⁴ Otto, *IH*, 116.

⁴⁵ Davidson, 166.

The proof that in the *numinous* we have to deal with purely a priori cognitive elements is to be reached by introspection and a critical examination of reason such as Kant instituted. We find, that is, involved in the *numinous* experience, beliefs and feelings qualitatively different from anything that 'natural' sense-perception is capable of giving us. They are themselves not perceptions at all, but peculiar interpretations and valuations, at first of perceptual data, and then—at a higher level—of posited objects and entities, which themselves no longer belong to the perceptual world, but are thought of as supplementing and transcending it... The facts of the *numinous* consciousness point therefore—as likewise do also the 'pure concepts of the understanding' of Kant and the ideas and value-judgements of ethics or aesthetics—to a hidden substantive source, from which the religious ideas and feelings are formed, which lies in the mind independently of sense-experience; a 'pure reason' in the profoundest sense, which because of the 'surpassingness' of its content, must be distinguished from both the pure theoretical and pure practical reason of Kant, as something yet higher or deeper than they.⁴⁶

The a priori is this "something higher or deeper" than pure theoretical or pure practical reason. It is the deepest foundation of cognitive apprehension that the soul possesses; it is what in mysticism is called the *fundus animae*, the 'bottom' or 'ground of the soul'.⁴⁷

By his drawing on Kant, Otto is appealing for the foundation upon which his argument for the autonomous validity of religion is to be constructed. And that is that is possible to claim that "though religion may have its point of origin in experience, it can only arise through the actualization of the universal human capacity for *numinous* experience."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Otto, *IH*, 113-114.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 113, 112.

⁴⁸ Almond, 96.

THE RATIONAL

The subtitle of Otto's book is "An inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational." So far we have been largely concerned with the non-rational or supra-sensible elements in Otto's construction. However, as the subtitle suggests, for Otto the non-rational are not enough. The non-rational elements in the religious a priori may form the foundation of all religion, religion in the full sense is only present where both the rational and the non-rational elements are intimately combined.⁴⁹ For Otto the relationship between the rational and non-rational element in the idea of the holy is one schematization. In this process, the non-rational *numinous* fact is schematized by the rational concepts and yields the complex category of 'holy'.⁵⁰ The rational concepts are those which are developed through an analogy of the human with the divine. Precisely it is the absolutizing or completing of certain human attributes, such as spirit, reason, purpose, good will, supreme power, unity and selfhood.⁵¹ He explains this in the following way:

The *tremendum*, the daunting and repelling moment of the *numinous*, is schematized by means of the rational ideas of justice, moral will, and the exclusion of what is opposed to morality; and schematized thus, it become the holy 'wrath of God,' which Scripture and Christian preaching alike proclaim. The *fascinans*, the attracting and alluring moment of the *numinous*, is schematized by means of the ideas of goodness, mercy, love, and so schematized, becomes all that we mean by Grace...the 'moment' *mysteriosum* is schematized by the *absoluteness* of all rational attributes applied to the Deity.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ibid., 97.

⁵⁰ Otto, *IH*, 45.

The relationship between the rational and non-rational is judged to be one of correspondence and not simply connection. The correspondence is itself an a priori, and “since the non-rational is the core of religion, all religious doctrine can be seen as the result of an operation of the rational upon the non-rational.”⁵³

The consequence of this union of the rational with the non-rational is that religion is guarded from both rationalism and fanaticism or “mere mysticality.”⁵⁴ The joint presence of both elements is one of the measures by which religions can be ranked. It is almost unnecessary to remark, that Otto perceives Christianity as having the most developed balance between the two, catapulting it to the place of honour. He writes without a modicum of shame that “Christianity, in the healthily proportioned union of its elements, assumes an absolutely classical form and dignity” and “we shall recognize that in Christianity an element of man’s spiritual life...has for the first time come to maturity in a supreme and unparalleled way.”⁵⁵

Earlier we pointed out that the *numen* is *augustum*. As *augustum*, the *numen* possessed value not just for the individual, but in a real and objective way. *Numinous* value is “the nonrational [sic] ground and source of all values,” Otto writes.⁵⁶ The rational side of the holy is reflected in God’s creation of the moral order and manifests itself in God’s call on humanity to be righteous.⁵⁷ This rational element thus schematizes the non-rational and the resultant idea of holiness thus

⁵¹ Ibid., 1.

⁵² Ibid., 140.

⁵³ Almond, 99.

⁵⁴ Otto, *IH*, 141.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 142.

⁵⁶ Almond, 102. This is a quotation from the 1936 *German Das Heilige*, which Almond translates for us.

⁵⁷ Raphael, 121.

includes both the *numinous* awe and the moral imperative. There is then a development of evolution of religious consciousness, in which the divine is filled out and charged with ethical meaning. He writes of this that:

The histories of religion recount indeed, as though it were something axiomatic, the gradual interpenetration of the two, the process by which 'the divine' is charged and filled out with ethical meaning. And this process is, in fact, felt as something axiomatic, something whose inner necessity we feel to be self-evident.⁵⁸

Raphael explains this by suggesting that the *numinous* feeling, although self-generating or *sui generis*, becomes conjoined to the moral through the analogy of moral value as *augustum* and *fascinans*. "*Numinous* experience and moral experience may in their analogous relation, 'reciprocally excite or stimulate one another and cause one another to appear in the mind', and in doing so create a permanent inward connection: a *schema*."⁵⁹

SCHEMATIZATION

The schematization that Otto proposes is the least developed element in *The Idea of the Holy*. Both Almond and Davidson are unconvinced by it. Davidson remarks that "no aspect of Otto's thought has been more widely criticised, and none for that matter as generally misunderstood by British and American critics", and that "Otto's idea of 'schematization' is much too obscure and poorly defined in his own mind to merit very serious consideration."⁶⁰ Almond begins his discussion on schematization by saying that "exactly what Otto intends by the use of this term is extremely difficult

⁵⁸ Otto, *IH*, 136.

⁵⁹ Raphael, 122; *Ibid.*, 44, 46.

to ascertain. Virtually all commentators...agree that Otto's account is obscure"⁶¹ He concludes more positively, but with no greater certainty that "it is crucial to Otto's whole theory of religion that the connection should be an a priori one, even if it is based on the somewhat light logical weight of a feeling of certainty."⁶² Nonetheless some have found development of Otto's thought in his later writings to be helpful. His conclusions that all value originates in the eternal, original value of the divine being is what powers his conviction that all modes of moral value emerge from the *numinous* depth of the Godhead. Thus while secular moral law may possess objective value, it is grounded in the value of the holy as the perfectly good essence of divinity.⁶³

Schematization is an attempt to show how these two become related or connected, and how the moral development is really a rationalizing of the non-rational idea of the holy as experienced in *fascinans* and *augustum*. The assertion of the divine will as an "immeasurable self-dependent value-depth" that is in itself good and holy, implies the subordination of all mundane values to the transcendent value apprehended in the *numinous* experience.⁶⁴

THE FACULTY OF DIVINATION

Otto's religious *a priori* is not something that everybody possesses, but such that everybody can possess it. It is something that needs to be awakened through the instrumentality of other more highly endowed natures.⁶⁵ It functions as a faculty of

⁶⁰ Davidson, 181, 192.

⁶¹ Almond, 97.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶³ These thoughts are largely taken from Raphael, 128.

⁶⁴ Almond, 104.

⁶⁵ Otto, *IH*, 177.

receptivity and a principle of judgement and acknowledgment. In some this faculty is more highly developed than in others, and those who are so developed become “holy men” whose receptivity of the *numinous* or the divine is recognized by others. Otto in speaking of this faculty of receptivity remarks, “let us call this faculty, of whatever sort it may be, of *genuinely* cognizing and recognizing the holy in its appearances the faculty of divination.”⁶⁶ This faculty of divination is that which is genuine and not that which arises from confounding the category of the holy with other outward things that might resemble it. In the faculty of divination, Otto is dealing only with authentic recognition of the holy, that is, genuine experiences of authentic *numinous* experience.

Otto equates this faculty of divination with the theological conception of the ‘*testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*’ or the ‘inner witness of the Holy Spirit.’⁶⁷ A name which he calls the “only right one.” This internal witness of the Spirit is made possible by the mental predisposition to recognize the holy and respond to it. The human mind is so constructed that it can receive and immediately frame an impression of the *numinous* or holy object that it experiences, even though it has no experience of the holy from the natural realm by which to categorize it. It is this innate ability to experience the divine or that comprises this *a priori* category

This *a priori* as we have seen is not possessed by everyone, but every one has the capacity of possessing it. The *a priori* itself is something that must be awakened,

⁶⁶ Ibid., 144.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 145.

and in Christianity this awakening takes place through the bestowal of the Spirit or through the new birth.⁶⁸

The faculty of receptivity and the principle of judgement and acknowledgment are universal predispositions. Those, however, who have the capacity to produce the cognitive conditions independently for themselves are prophets, a special endowment that is explained as being the universal dispositions on a higher level and at a higher power, differing in quality as well as in degree from the first stage of these dispositions. The higher stage is not derived from the first stage of mere receptivity. It is more than simply the *testimonium Spiritus internum*. Rather it is a person in whom the Spirit is revealed as the power to hear the inner voice and the power of divination, which are creative rather than simply receptive in nature. Beyond the prophet in whom exists the creative power of divination there is one in whom dwells the plenitude of the Spirit, and this one is more than Prophet. He is Son.

Christ Jesus is the One in whom the plenitude of Spirit is manifest—he is embodied Spirit. Those who truly experience Jesus and whose *a priori* capacity to receive the *numinous* experience is awakened, and in whom the category of the holy or *numinous* is not overly rationalized are able to recognize that he is “holiness made manifest.”⁶⁹ The Gospel narratives give repeated testimony to the experience of Jesus in the lives of others. They regularly testify to the *numinous* impressions that he made on them. This Jesus was recognized as more than just a mere man. To quote Otto at length, he summarizes,

⁶⁸ Ibid., 164.

To this place belong further the belief in Jesus's supremacy over the demonic world and the tendency to legend that began to take effect from the start; the fact that His own relatives take Him for a man 'possessed', an involuntary acknowledgement of the '*numinous*' impression he made upon them; and in an especial degree the conviction that breaks spontaneously upon the minds of His disciples as by a sudden impact, won not from His teaching but from the very experience of Him, that He is the 'Messiah', the being who stood for the circle in which He moved as the *numinous* being *par excellence*.⁷⁰

Jesus is experienced by those who meet him as "a holy man." This experience is not unlike, but more intense than if he were just a holy man. Peter's confession that he is "the Christ, Son of the living God" (Matt 16:16) demonstrates this most vividly. But even in this experience it is an understanding in Peter that emerged or to use Otto's term, was "discovered" by Peter after a time. In this is demonstrated the importance of the *a priori* category in the receptivity and valuation of the *numinous* experience. Peter was unable to explain the things about Jesus that were not explainable through correspondence with other men, other natural phenomena, and so he makes the profound leap and postulates that he must be God. This is the mature religion at its height. The holy impresses itself upon the mind and is received by the subject, who divines that it is an experience of God that he is having. The result which flows from this is an evaluation of all of life against this object of *numinous* experience, so that everything else is made to serve this object and increase the possession of it in the present and into the future. This process of valuation and ordering is the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 155.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 159.

rationalizing of the non-rational experience that results in a moral law to govern and to guide life. It is that which maintains purity by dealing with profanity and uncleanness and guarding against future violations of the holy. It is a communication of holiness from the *numinous* to the human subject of the *numinous* experience.

EVALUATION

There have are several places at which Otto has been critiqued. Especially we think of his *a priori* category and his schematization. Simon Chan notes that it is no longer generally thought that human religious spirituality has come through some kind of primitive instinctual experience of a religious nature. Cultural-linguistic communities into which we are born predefine our experiences making it virtually impossible to conceive of a purely primal or uninterpreted religious experience.⁷¹ In this respect, Otto's whole notion that we are able to postulate the nature of primitive religious experience from ancient expression is under a great deal of pressure to prove itself. When Otto was writing, there was a kind of expectation that things evolved, and he assumes this Darwinistic framework in the working out of his own thesis.

We are learning that primitive civilizations are not necessarily culturally less developed than our own. And in many cases we are coming to realize that what appear to be rather undeveloped civilizations are hardly as primitive as they seem. In many cases they may be more fully developed than our own lopsided and technologically excessive society, especially in areas of religious devotion, discernment and development.

⁷¹ Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 241 n. 18.

Two things that seemed to be lacking in Otto's presentation are the aspects of faith and divine personality. God is given personal pronouns by which to reference him throughout, but He is never developed as a person who is omnipotent and sovereign. Sovereignty is retained in part, namely that God is only experienced when God seeks to reveal himself, but the nature of the experience is such that it can be misunderstood and confused with other things. In the writings of the Old and New Testaments God is presented as a being who is making successful attempts a communication. This communication is almost always verbal and propositional. God is a personal God who relates to the human creature through conversation.

The very first instance of God-human interaction in the scripture is in intimate personal conversation. God is reported as being one who walks and talks with the man (Adam) in the garden. Even the later prophetic utterances are prefaced by the declaration that "this is what the Lord says" and not by something approximating "this is the meaning of the *numinous* experience presently being received." The whole idea of God coming to us purely in numinal experience and resonating with some a *priori* category of receptivity and valuation does not seem to mesh with the framework of our Scriptures.

The *a priori* category that Otto has posited would seem to be a substitute for faith. For faith is certainly something that not everyone possesses but everyone is capable of possessing, and which only needs to be awakened. Furthermore, faith is that by which the divine is received. And this category of faith would seem to be an innate capacity, as Otto's *a priori* category almost is, except that it would appear to be more

immediately tied to the rational in the first instance than simply in the second or third one.

Faith is that which enables the human creature to grasp hold of the divine. It can be crudely likened to a radio receiver that is specifically tuned to the divine frequency. In receiving the divine, one receives/experiences the new birth that Otto waits until almost the end of his book to introduce—and this only by way of allusion and not as a main point. I would suggest that we need to begin here. The *a priori* of the Christian religion is faith, and that faith receives the word spoken about Jesus and through an assessment of that word comes to possess the Spirit itself. Once the Spirit is received, it becomes the interpreter of the Christian's further experiences of the Divine and with the Word of the Scriptures assists in rationally discerning the nature of each experience as either genuine or not.

Otto is a significant help in establishing that religious experience cannot be simply discounted. As we pointed out at the very beginning of this essay, religious experiences are a very common part of the human experience, universally attested among all of human existence. It may not be possible to follow Otto in understanding them simply as undefined and conceptually empty experiences that have come to be filled with rational content and moral value. God is not an impersonal presence that imposes himself on his object, but rather is a personal and creative being. He is also a God who has his reasons (Isa 1:18). To assert that rational explanations are merely a process of schematization may not be an honest way to understand the communication God has given.

The personal nature of God has led him to enter into relationships with human beings. These relationships in their most broad portrayal are the covenants that God has made with them. The covenants are conceptually defined and based not upon primal *numinous* experience, but upon positive and definite conceptual revelation. God 'appeared' to Moses and 'called out to him'. The narrative context of the call of Moses gives every indicator that Moses held a verbal conversation with God. In fact we are told in the scriptures that Moses talked with God as a person talks with a friend (Exodus 33:11). The starting point it would seem is not in universal religious experience as Otto has attempted, but in the specific revelation claims that comprise the sacred writings of the scriptures.

Another criticism of Otto is the non-ethical nature of his religion. Granted he understands the ethical demands of Old Testament and of the New Testament as being appropriate rationalizations and developed expressions of *Numinous* experience, it seems at the same time to forget that in the experience of Israel, moral instruction was an essential element from the start. God established a relationship with them which was then defined by various moral and cultic responsibilities. It may seem to make sense from a History of Religions point of view to understand these as the evolved expressions of the *numinous*, but it seems at least for Israel, they were to be understood as primary. God is presented as a God of Justice and Righteousness, each of which bears an ethical and forensic nature to it. They are highly charged ideas morally.

While Otto's work does not adequately explain religious experience, it does take it seriously. Seriously enough not to allow an encounter with God to be made subject

to the rules of empirical observation. It has established that different criteria are needed to organize and evaluate religious experience. It may very well be that the idea or category of the holy is not sufficient to do this, but certainly the idea that we may possess some kind of capacity to be able to receive 'spiritual' or 'numinous' experiences is not without merit. To be created *imago dei* is one way of understanding how it is that we can relate to and interact with the divine. Humans are patterned after the divine being in some way that we can be called an image and likeness of God.

Otto also does not understand the *numinous* experience as irrational. It may be non-rational or supra-rational, but it is not irrational. The rational is still able to organize the non-rational aspects of the *numinous* experience and make them somehow intelligible. And yet the element of mystery that remains does suggest rather strongly, that Otto would find mystical expressions of Christianity healthy if not allowed to run unchecked.

Furthermore, the desire of the *numinous* experience as expressed in the *fascinans* reminds us that cultivating a healthy spiritual life, one which is open and accepting of spiritual experiences is an essential part of the Christian religion. Services of worship ought to satisfy this desire by preparing the heart to receive God. Since in Otto's thought it is not possible to explain these experiences, the way to help others is to lead them into numinous experiences of their own. The gathering of Church for worship is in part about experiencing the presence of God. This being so, it is a place which should cultivate these experiences.

In contrast to Otto, I would argue that is done by the word. The word of scripture is the testimony of the ultimate experience of God demonstrated in the incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus of Nazareth. Because Jesus is God, and not simply an extension of God, his coming as a human helps to define what an experience of God is all about. As a human, Jesus was able to 'divine' the will of God. In this he demonstrated his capacity to experience and hear from God. Furthermore, he is expressed as the Word or ultimate self revelation of God. To experience Jesus is not simply to experience one who experiences God in a very unique way, but to experience God. Jesus primary communication was by word.

With the use of scripture and preaching the Church is able to communicate God to those who gather for worship. In this context where the presence of God is invoked, God is very often pleased to join his Spirit to the word preached and read and meet those gathered in a real and powerful way. The affects of this meeting may be duplicated by other means, possibly even genuinely, however it seems that from the Scriptures themselves, which are the testimony of the Church's experiences with God the instructions on how that is to be sought, would seem to place primary emphasis upon this word coupled with the Spirit.

Religious experiences are often recorded as coming about through the preaching of the word of God. By presenting Jesus by word, people are brought into his presence and set face to face with him. In this context they experience God. How else are we to understand the response on Pentecost when the people who are described as being "cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37 NIV) sought for help in responding to this experience?

The individual experience is the heart of Otto's interest. It is subjective in that it is private experience and generally cannot be communicated. And yet so much of religious experience is communal in nature or comes to have community interests. This is also very true in the most simplistic reconstruction of primal religion. Religion and politics have always been inextricably united, because the success of any given political structure is deemed to be based upon the will of the gods. Maintaining the favour of the gods is the heart of so many religious activities, and apply not just to individuals, but to communities. In ancient Israel, the individual was so much a part of the community, that the sins of an individual, such as Achan who kept for himself some of the spoils of war that were placed under the ban, brought about the defeat of the Israelite armies at Ai (Josh 7). Otto's explanations do not take into account the interest of the community in the individual's holiness and in this regard would seem to be a very modern Western explanation of religion. It would have a very large appeal to our contemporary religious milieu, with its very individualistic and private religious interest.

Otto's intentions were not specifically to account for the Christian experience of God. His was a more general one of understanding the primal nature of religious experience and expressed across the whole spectrum of the world's religions. In this it is clear that even the concept of deity is not sufficient to explain religion. However, it may almost be fair to say with Otto, that the idea or concept of holiness or 'The Holy' is able to do this. There do exist religions that do not demand a god concept, but yet share this element of the sacred (cf., Buddhism). In this task, Otto has done a great service.

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