

Holiness

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The category of “holiness” or “the holy” lies at the very ground of all genuine religion. In its most general significance, it means that which is set apart from the everyday or profane. This, however, does not get us to its root meaning; it merely informs us of its sociological function. In his seminal book *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto decisively argues that its fundamental significance is quite complex, containing both rational and non-rational elements. Contrary to Kant and those who followed him in simply identifying the holy with the morally good (see Chapter 30, Goodness), Otto points out that in addition to its rational elements, the concept of the holy contains important non-rational elements that can only be apprehended through feeling. These feeling elements are, as he notes, “*sui generis* and irreducible” to any other mental states (Otto 1923, p. 7). Considered from the point of view of the history of the phenomenology of religions, they are what first appear in religious life, and they do so devoid of any properly ethical content. Only later are they gradually filled in with the ethical, what Otto calls the “schematization” of this primary datum.

One of the main issues arising from Otto’s analysis is the relation of the rational to the non-rational elements in the idea of the holy. How can what is felt as the awesome power and complete “otherness” of the divine, evoking feelings of terror and dread, be shown to be inherently linked to ethical categories? Without understanding how the two elements of the holy are linked, emphasis on the otherness of the divine can too easily lead to a radical voluntarism wherein God is *extra lege*, outside the law, or where the good is thought to be good only because God wills it (1923, p. 101; see Chapter 68, Divine Command Ethics). Commentators on Otto’s analysis have complained that his own solution to the problem is quite unsatisfactory, since it simply invokes one of the most obscure categories in Kant’s philosophy, that of the schema, in order to relate the rational to the non-rational aspects of the holy: for Otto, the irrational element of the holy, the numinous, eventually becomes schematized through the idea of the morally good. But what exactly he understands by the schema, or why such a schematization is necessary, remains completely undeveloped at the theoretical level.

This entry is divided into three parts. In the first, longer section I unpack Otto’s phenomenological analysis of the idea of the holy, especially its non-rational aspect. In doing so I provide examples from the history of religion that demonstrate the compelling character of Otto’s analysis. In the second I examine historical influences on Otto’s

thought, especially those of Kant and Schleiermacher. Making use of the insights gleaned from the second section, the last part of the entry will suggest a way to resolve some of the difficulties arising from Otto's analysis, especially regarding how the moral and rational aspect of the holy relates to its non-rational aspect.

Analysis of the Holy

According to Otto, what we understand as the holy contains two elements. The first is the rational element. It is amenable to human understanding, can be apprehended through concepts, and is especially associated with the ethical sphere. This note is especially sounded in the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. Amos, for instance, preaches, "Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps; But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos: 5:23–4). Immanuel Kant, famously, identified the holy with morality; in his *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, he defines holiness as "the absolute or unlimited moral perfection of the will. A holy being must not be affected with the least inclination contrary to morality. It must be impossible for it to will something which is contrary to moral laws" (Kant 2001, p. 409). According to Otto, however, this rational element of the holy is to be contrasted with its non-rational element.

Two features are particularly significant about this contrast. First, the non-rational element in the holy is first and foremost apprehended through *feelings* and intuitions, and not through concepts. Moreover, *what* is apprehended – what Otto calls the numinous – is felt to have a sheer surplus of meaning that cannot be adequately expressed through concepts; at best the experience can be suggested by what Otto calls "ideograms," metaphors and analogies that point to the experience and that help to evoke it. (For criticism of the view that concepts are inapplicable to religious experience, see Chapter 48, Religious Experience.) Second, the idea of the holy is *synthetic*. Rational and non-rational aspects of the holy are not contained in one another, that is, one cannot, through an analysis of one element, derive or unfold the other. Otto dubs the rational elements of the holy "*synthetic* essential attributes." While we are certainly justified in predicating rational attributes to the holy, "we have to predicate them of a subject which they qualify, but which in its deeper essence is not, nor indeed can be, comprehended in them; which rather requires comprehension of a quite different kind" (Otto 1923, p. 2).

This kind of comprehension is what Otto calls "feeling"; through it the subject apprehends the *numinous* quality of the holy. For Otto, feeling is the faculty through which something that stands outside the self is *directly* and immediately apprehended. The feeling elements through which the numinous is apprehended are simply the direct effects, so to speak, of the numinous itself on our psychological constitution. The numinous is not to be confused with these feeling elements themselves, but is rather that which evokes such feelings to begin with. Key expressions associated with it in Western literature are the Hebrew *qadosh*, the Greek *hagios*, and the Latin *sacer*.

A large part of Otto's oeuvre consists of a compelling phenomenological analysis of the feelings presaging the numinous, which is experienced as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. He first analyzes "*tremendum*," in terms of three distinct moments. These

are a) that of awefulness, b) that of overpoweringness, and c) that of energy or urgency. The three moments are intrinsically related and can easily pass over into one another.

Otto describes the element of awefulness as the sense of the absolute *unapproachability* of the numinous. This is well illustrated in the story of the burning bush in the Hebrew Bible. When God calls Moses from the burning bush, God adjures him, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground," and Moses is afraid (Exodus 3:5). This sense of the unapproachability of the holy brings with it a peculiar dread of a completely different nature from the fear that can be experienced of objects in the natural world. To mark something off as hallowed is to mark it off by this feeling of peculiar dread, which recognizes its numinous character. For instance, after Jacob receives the promise in a dream at Bethel he is afraid and exclaims, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:17). Significantly, the story marks the origin of the northern sanctuary at Bethel.

Otto notes that this feeling of dread is the starting point in the evolution of religion. It first begins as the experience of something "uncanny" or "weird." The feeling can take "wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering" (1923, p. 13). Examples from the Bible include the *emah* of Yahweh (Fear of God), which Yahweh can pour forth to paralyzing effect. In the New Testament we find the strange idea of the wrath of God (ὀργή θεοῦ), analogous to the *ira deorum* of the Indian pantheon. As Otto notes, this *orge* "is nothing but the *tremendum* itself, apprehended and expressed by the aid of a naive analogy" (1923, p. 18). The analogy is naive because the notion of "wrath" implies purpose and emotion. But a closer analysis of the *tremendum* shows that no such purpose or emotion is involved, for the element of awefulness has two other features worthy of note. First, this *orge* is devoid of moral qualities. Second, the way that it is "kindled and manifested" is quite strange: it is "like a hidden force of nature, like stored-up electricity, discharging itself upon anyone that comes too near. It is 'incalculable' and 'arbitrary'" (1923, p. 18). The strange story of the Ark of the Covenant in 2 Samuel is illustrative: when Uzzah reaches out his hand to steady the ark, he is immediately struck dead (2 Samuel 6.6; see also the story in 1 Samuel, chapters 5 and 6). That the *tremendum* is experienced as such a force of nature is further evidence of the insufficiency of the analogy with the idea of "wrath," which has as its basis the idea of personal purposiveness.

Associated with the experience of awefulness is the experience of the *tremendum* as an overpowering might. Its concomitant is the feeling of the self as impotent, as a mere nullity, as something that is not entirely real. Abraham, for instance, refers to himself as "but dust and ashes" in the presence of the Lord (Genesis 18:27). Only the numen is felt to be absolutely real. This apprehension of the numen has both ontological and valuational components; the numen is not only that which is absolutely real, it is also felt as that which has absolute worth. This experience is at the heart of mysticism, which witnesses that the I is not essentially real, and which rejects the delusion of selfhood as manifested in the ego (see Chapter 83, Philosophical Reflection on Mysticism).

Lastly, partially implied by the experience of the *tremendum* as an overpowering might, but containing other elements as well, is the experience of the energy and urgency of the numen. This is the experience of the living God, of "a force that knows [neither] stint nor stay, which is urgent, active, compelling and alive" (1923, p. 24).

This energy is captured in the New Testament sayings “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31) and “indeed our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29). The energy of the numen is absolutely unendurable; even Moses cannot see the glory of God, but only God’s back, for “no one shall see me (God) and live” (Exodus 33:21). In love mysticism it is experienced as the fire of divine love that the mystic can hardly endure.

The horrifying images in chapter 11 of the Bhagavad-Gita are especially apt in capturing the awfulness, overpoweringness, and energy of the numen. When Aryuna desires to behold God himself in his own form, his petition is granted and he sees Vishnu “touching the heavens, glittering, many-hued, with yawning mouths”; people “hasting enter into thy mouths grim with fangs and terrible; some, caught between the teeth, appear with crushed heads.” And finally the grisly image spreads to include whole worlds: “Thou devourest and lickest up all the worlds around with flaming mouths; filling the whole universe with radiance, grim glow Thy splendours, O Vishnu!” The image conveys the absolute power of the divine over all finite being. This power is, however, like a force of nature; it is an all-consuming energy, its horrifying indifference to human purposes demonstrated by the fact that it consumes whole worlds containing both good and bad alike. After Aryuna has witnessed this, he asks to understand what he has seen, but the petition is not granted. What he has seen must remain incomprehensible to him. This brings us the next characteristic of the holy: its mysterious character.

The numinous is apprehended as *mysterium*: it is something that “strikes us dumb,” and that brings with it “amazement absolute” (Otto 1923, p. 26). It is “wholly other” (*ganz Anderes*) since it is immediately grasped as something that is of a completely different nature than anything that can be known by the “natural” individual. The *mysterium* is “that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the ‘canny’ and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment” (1923, p. 26). As such, the numinous completely transcends the categories of the mundane. Concepts that are applied to things in this world are only analogically applicable to it, for it is of a radically different order than the world or anything in it. While we can have a positive experience of it through feeling, it eludes all apprehension through concepts (Otto 1937, p. 87). Here lies the genesis of negative or apophatic theology stressing that all our concepts are inadequate to it. The concepts we use to refer to it, such as *mysterium*, are mere ideograms “for the unique content of feeling.” In order to understand these ideograms the person “must already have had the experience himself” (1937, p. 39). What the numinous is “cannot, strictly speaking, be taught, it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind; as everything that comes ‘of the spirit’ must be awakened” (1923, p. 7). All of this carries with it the implication that the category of the numinous is *sui generis*, that is, it cannot be reduced to other categories such as that of psychology or the social sciences that strive to understand the human being in merely naturalistic terms.

Despite its daunting character, the numen is also experienced as *fascinating*: it is an object of search, desire, and longing. As such, the numinous ultimately must be sought out, for only it will quench the deepest desires of the soul. Otto notes that

above and beyond our rational being lies hidden the ultimate and highest part of our nature, which can find no satisfaction in the mere allaying of the needs of our sensuous, psychical, or intellectual impulses and cravings. The mystics call it the basis or ground of the soul. (1923, p. 36)

The numen is ultimately experienced as the source of unspeakable bliss, one that is of a completely different order from natural happiness. Otto speaks of the “*wonderfulness* and rapture that lies in the mysterious beatific experience of the deity” (1923, p. 32), an experience which is beyond comparison with any earthly joys. This element of wonderfulness is vaguely apprehended at the very beginning of the religious quest, and is at the heart of the fascinating element of the numen. Otto also distinguishes between the *fascinating* element of the numinous and its *august* character. The numinous is fascinating insofar as it is of subjective worth to us; it is august insofar as it is recognized as possessing an objective and intrinsic value far surpassing anything that can be considered as having worth in the natural sphere (1923, p. 52).

Influences on Otto's Thought

Important to understanding Otto's analysis of the holy is Kant's distinction between the two stems of human cognition, sensibility and understanding. This distinction lies at the foundation of Otto's distinction between the rational and non-rational aspects of the holy and grounds his phenomenological analysis.

In the introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant notes that “there are two stems of human cognition, which may perhaps arise from a common but to us unknown root, namely sensibility and understanding, through the first of which objects are given to us, but through the second of which they are thought” (1998, A15/B29). Through sensibility we intuit objects; through the understanding we think them, discursively, through concepts. Concepts and intuitions differ from one another in two important ways. First, concepts are *reflected* representations. As such, they are *mediate* representations since they never refer to an object immediately, but only to some characteristic of it that, in principle, it can share with other individuals. A concept, then, is a representation of a representation, since it can contain many individuals *under* it (its extension). Furthermore, a concept is the predicate of a possible judgment. Intuitions, on the other hand, relate *immediately* to their object, and in them a *singular* object is given. Second, while concepts are the product of the *spontaneity* of the understanding, for humans all intuitions are sensible and as such rest on *affections*.

The notion that the individual relates *immediately* to the Absolute, through intuition and feeling, is at the core of Friedrich Schleiermacher's understanding of religion, which had a significant impact on Otto's understanding of the holy. For Schleiermacher, who was also profoundly influenced by Kant, “intuition is and always remains something individual, set apart, the immediate perception, nothing more. ... The same is true of religion; it stops with the immediate experience of the existence and action of the universe, with individual intuitions and feelings” (1988, p. 26). If the subject is to grasp its relation to the absolute in all its *immediacy*, it can only do so through feeling, that

is, through its receptivity. Schleiermacher notes, famously, that religion is “the sensibility and taste for the infinite (p. 23) and that its essence is “neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling” (p. 22). This “feeling” is not one that occurs through the senses themselves, but rather through some deeper receptive faculty of the soul (Mariña 2008, pp. 109–45). In fact, for Schleiermacher as well as for Otto, this deeper receptive faculty can be identified with the *fundus animae*, the basis or ground of the soul so often referred to in mysticism (Otto 1923, pp. 36 and 112). Through the feeling of absolute dependence, according to Schleiermacher, we become aware of the “Whence of our active and receptive existence.”

In an important passage in *On Religion*, Schleiermacher notes:

All intuition proceeds from the influence of the intuited on the one who intuits, from an original and independent action of the former, which is then grasped, apprehended, and conceived by the latter according to one’s own nature. If the emanations of light – which happen completely without your efforts – did not affect your sense, if the smallest parts of the body, the tips of your fingers, were not mechanically or chemically affected, if the pressure of weight did not reveal to you an opposition and a limit to your power, you would intuit nothing and perceive nothing, and what you thus intuit and perceive is not the nature of things, but their action upon you. (1988, pp. 24–5)

Perception, then, depends upon the particular *capacities* of the individual to be affected in a particular way. Otto, well versed in the philosophy of both Kant and Schleiermacher, would not have missed the importance of this idea. His phenomenological analysis of the non-rational aspects of the holy has to do with how the numinous confronts the religious individual immediately and hence through feeling. The senses, however, cannot think, and herein lies the difficulty in relating the non-rational aspects of the holy to its rational aspects. Otto recognizes the provenance of each of the two elements comprising his analysis of the holy: its rational elements having to do with how the holy is thought, its non-rational elements having to do with how it is *felt*. This is why he brings in the idea of the schema, which in Kant’s philosophy mediates between sensibility and understanding. In the next section I assess Otto’s assertion that the non-rational elements of the holy are “schematized” by the rational elements.

Possible Solution

Reflection on Kant’s two-faculty psychology reveals both the ingenuity of Otto’s analysis and the challenge involved in understanding the relation between the holy’s rational and non-rational elements. If Kant’s two-faculty psychology is correct, then it would make sense for the holy to be apprehended in one way through *feeling*, and in another way through *thought*. In each case a different set of features of the holy would be apprehended because of the different faculties involved in doing the apprehension. However, it would still be a single ultimate reality that is being experienced. Now, according to Kant’s two-faculty psychology, intuition is that faculty through which I *directly* apprehend particulars; through concepts I think of several individuals at once through a common attribute. The ethical sphere involves *concepts* under which many individuals

can be ranged, for instance, the concept that qualifies a being as an end in him or herself, or as morally considerable. Nevertheless, according to the Kantian system to which Otto is indebted, the two stems of human cognition must work together in order for cognition to be possible, sensation providing the matter, and cognition providing the form; as Kant so famously noted, “Intuitions without concepts are blind and concepts without intuitions are empty” (1998 A51/B75). How the material of sensation is made amenable to the functions of the understanding is one of Kant’s most difficult and obscure notions, involving both the schematism and the activity of the imagination. Roughly following Kant’s psychology, Otto suggests that the rational elements in the idea of the holy, which are themselves also *a priori*, eventually serve to “schematize” the non-rational elements (1923, p. 140). This rationalization and moralization of religion occurs quite naturally in the historical development of religions as human beings themselves develop rationally.

Critics of Otto’s analysis often complain of the unsatisfactory character of this move. Exactly how this process of schematization occurs is never explained. It must nevertheless be pointed out that Otto is correct to claim that as religion develops the moral imperative to treat others humanely emerges as a significant element within it. John Hick has cataloged the widespread character of the golden rule in world religions. Just a few of its formulations, he notes, are the following: the Buddha’s affirmation that “Life is dear to all. Comparing others with oneself one should neither strike nor cause to strike”; Confucius’ saying, “Do not do to others what you would not like yourself”; in the Taoist *Thai Shang* we find the words that the good man will “regard [others’] gains as if they were his own, and their losses in the same way”; and in Luke 6:31 we read: “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Hick 2004, pp. 309–14; see also Chapter 84, Religious Pluralism).

A significant problem stands in the way of understanding the relation of the moral demand within the holy to its non-rational elements: how are we to *derive* the command to love the neighbor from the character of the numen apprehended as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*? Simply pointing to the different faculties involved in the apprehension of the holy will not get us very far. This is because the very *objects* of thought (or even the “materials” given to the receptive faculty, which are then ordered through the understanding) are in each case different: in the first case it is the neighbor, and in the second it is the numen itself.

It seems to me the only way to link the moral imperative to a valuational imperative stemming from the numen is to point to the numinous character of the soul itself, which is, in its depths, capable of reflecting the divine. Otto refers to the numinous character of the soul, maintaining that “the soul and its bottommost depth lie hidden away, ineffable as God himself,” and cites Gregory of Nyssa, who claims that “inasmuch as the nature of our spirit is above our understanding, it has here an exact resemblance to the all-sublime, representing by its own unfathomableness the incomprehensible Being of God” (1923, p. 194). As such, the other is *immediately* apprehended as a numinous being, for the presence of the absolute can shine through the spirit, and it is this that grants the individual his or her inestimable worth. Note, however, that here the material for the ethical imperative is intuited *directly*, in and through the felt presence of the other, although the value of this presence is felt to be directly linked to the value of the absolute itself. At this initial stage both the presence of the numen and that of the

neighbor are intuited immediately; in the case of neighbor-love the material for the moral imperative comes directly from the claim that the neighbor's presence makes upon me. What we have in the moral imperative taken as a divine command, then, is a conceptualization of these intuitions and feelings. This, I think, helps us to better understand the relation of the two great commandments, and makes more intelligible the interrelations between the rational and non-rational aspects of the holy.

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