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Shamans, Visions and Ghosts: Exploring spiritual and Religious Experiences

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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
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Rudolf Otto (1869-1937)

- Systematic Lutheran theologian at the Philipps-University of Marburg, Germany



Background

- Studied theology at the University of Göttingen, Germany, and wrote his PhD on Martin Luther and his understanding of the Holy Spirit
- His post-doc thesis was about Immanuel Kant
- Unique aspect: interest in other religions

Travels

- He visited England in 1889 and became interested in the Anglican High Church
- In 1891 and 1895 he visited Greece and encountered the Greek Orthodox Church
- In 1895 he also travelled to Egypt where he studied the Coptic Church and had his first encounter with Islam which he continued to study in 1911 while travelling in Northern Africa.
- Most influential was his first Asian journey in 1911/12 that took him to India, Myanmar, Japan, China and Russia.
- His interest in other religions led him to study Sanskrit [though apparently not very well (2014: 8)].
- Nevertheless, the encounters with other religious traditions made him an exception at his time.

Marburg

- In 1917, he was offered the chair in Systematic Theology at the Philipps-University in Marburg, Germany.
- Marburg was at that time one of the most prestigious Protestant Universities in the world. Its foundation in 1527 goes back to the time of Martin Luther who had persuaded the lord of the land to sponsor the foundation of the university by destroying the Catholic institutions set up at the pilgrimage site around the Saint Elizabeth

Religionskundliche Sammlung

- In 1927, for the 400th anniversary of the University, Otto persuaded the University to create a museum of religious artefacts which is still open and also hosts the Rudolf Otto archive

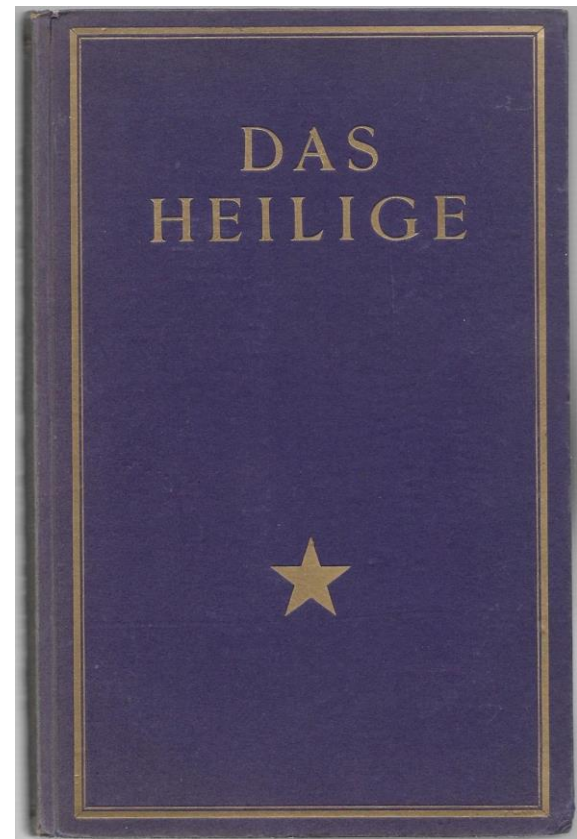




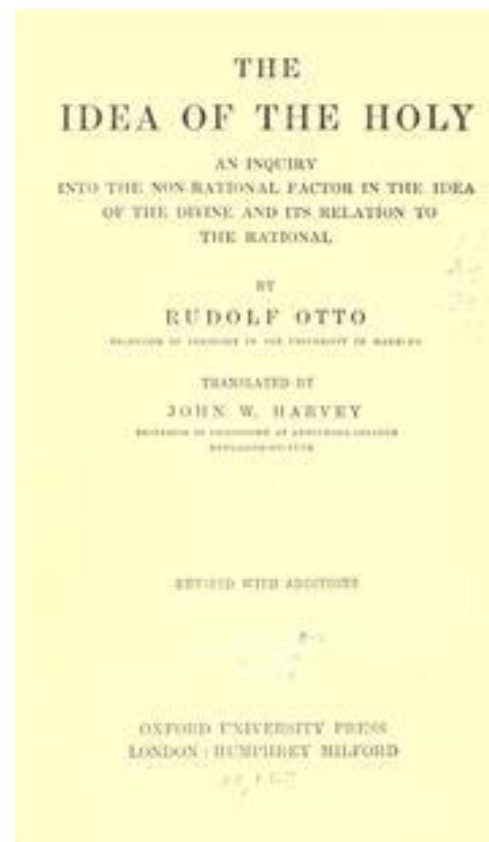


- Otto retired on health grounds in 1929 and died a few years later in 1936
- Despite of his relatively short time as professor in Marburg, his legacy is ongoing
- And this is mainly due to one book.

- *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*
- [original title: *Das Heilige: Über das irrational in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*] (1917)



- *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational* (1917, 1926 in English)



- The book became the bedrock text of Religious Studies soon after its translation into English.
- It also established the influence of a Protestant understanding of religion and experience

- In his approach to religion, Otto was influenced by German Romanticism and in particular the philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768—1834)



- Important philosopher of religion
- “feeling of the infinite” was present in all religions
- Main work: *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799)

Schleiermacher on religion

- Subjective approach to religion in theology
 - religion is not a matter of metaphysics or morality, but of feeling and relationship.
- In the heart of all religions is a feeling of piety (Frömmigkeit)

Impact on Otto

- Influenced by Schleiermacher, Otto developed two features that distinguished him from other scholars in his time:
- The idea of the Holy is
 - present in all religions
 - And in reach of every human being
 - >a personal experience

- Though he referred in his book mainly to Jewish and Christian rituals that inspired religious feeling, he also described that during his various journeys he attended rituals of various religious traditions that also inspired in him feeling of awe and fascination.
 - the Sufi Mevlevi (Whirling Dervishes), the observation of silence in Quaker meetings, and the cantillation in a synagogue

- Though he often indicated his preference for the Protestant experience of God, he argued throughout the book that the sense of the Holy, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, was a universal religious factor.

Following Schleiermacher, Otto argued that religion arises from experiences which are potentially within the reach of every human being

- religion is not only based on the experience of some exceptional individuals

Personal experience

- The personal experience someone has when encountering the wholly other was, according to Otto, the root of religion.
- To describe this experience Otto used words from Latin as he felt that no ordinary words can describe this feeling accurately

Religious Experience

- Religious experience as a feeling of awe and fear in the presence of God
- However, Otto identified as the essence of this feeling, not a feeling of dependence, but of 'creature-consciousness' – being aware of one's nothingness in the presence of God

Genesis 18:27

- The key sentence that illustrates Otto's understanding is in the Bible, in Genesis 18:27
- "Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the LORD, though I am nothing but dust and ashes"
- Abraham's response reflects the emotion of someone overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all.

Bhagavad Gītā

- Another example from chapter eleven of the Bhagavad Gītā where Krishna reveals his universal form to a trembling Arjuna

- Arjuna said: My dear Lord Kṛṣṇa, I see assembled in Your body all the demigods and various other living entities. I see Brahmā sitting on the lotus flower, as well as Lord Śiva and all the sages and divine serpents
- O Lord of the universe, O universal form, I see in Your body many, many arms, bellies, mouths and eyes, expanded everywhere, without limit. I see in You no end, no middle and no beginning....

Religious experience as

- ... the personal encounter with the Wholly Other whose overpowering character renders human existence small and insignificant
- To describe it Otto referred to Latin in order to emphasis the uniqueness of the experience

Numinous

- At the beginning of his book Otto discusses the usefulness of the term The Holy.
- The Holy often carries moral connotations
 - E.g., when one speaks of the Saint Elizabeth, one reflects at once on her morality
- But the idea of the Holy has for Otto a more primary sense that is devoid of moral associations.

Numinous

- from the Latin word *numen* = presence or power, though nowadays also often associated with sacred
- Used by Otto for the essence of the Holy
- “accordingly in our enquiry into that element which is separate and peculiar to the idea of the holy it will be useful, at least for the temporary purpose of the investigation, to invent a special term to stand for ‘the holy’ minus its moral factor or ‘moment’ and ... minus its ‘rational’ aspect altogether.” (Otto p. 6)

- Otto describes the personal encounter with the *numinous* whose overpowering character renders human existence small and insignificant with three elements
- as *Mysterium tremendum et fascinas*
- [the fearful and fascinating mystery]

mysterium

- *mysterium* emphasizes that god is wholly other, unknowable
- Mysterium = Wholly Other, experienced with blank wonder

tremendum

- *tremendum* brings out the aspect of majesty and power that underlies religious experience
- Tremendum = sense of terror, dread, awe, absolute unapproachability, but also the majesty of God's might and a sense of one's own nothingness in contrast to its power

fascinans

- *fascinans* develops the interrelated themes of awe and fascination
- Fascinans = powerful charm, attractiveness in spite of fear, terror

To sum up

- Otto argues that religion arises “out of ... not just the experience of religiously outstanding individuals, but by experiences which are potentially within the reach of each and every one of us” (Thrower, p. 49).

- Otto insisted that religious experience is unique from other forms of experiences and feelings
- We need specific tools to understand religious experience
 - *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*

Critique against Otto

- -> Otto takes religion "out of the realm of social scientific analysis as a construct that is part of culture. Religion becomes something separate from other human constructs; it is based on its own faculty, and thus can only be understood in its own terms." (Kunin p. 63)

Excerpt from letter

- “Ich rechne, daß, da ich durch mein Heiliges in Marburg wohl einigermaßen unmöglich geworden bin, Wobbermin, der so wie sie der Nächste sein würde, hinkommen würde”
(letter to Hermann Multert, quoted in Kraatz 2014: 3)
- [I believe that I am probably unacceptable in Marburg due to my The Holy and that Wobbermin who is probably the next on the list will come to Marburg]

Steven Ballard about Otto

- “As a phenomenologist of religion, he cannot do other than interpret the signs of the Holy without noticing the similarities that present themselves. As a Christian theologian, however, a major item on his agenda is to demonstrate, through a process of comparison and contrast, where certain religions (and here we cannot help but think he has Christianity principally in mind) are superior to others” (Ballard 2000: 137).

X. IAHR Congress in Marburg (1960)

- At the Congress the tensions between religiously engaged scholars of religion and scholars who study religions from a historical-critical distance broke out and Otto was seen among the first group (Kraatz 2014: 6).

Rainer Flasche

- Like Friedrich Heiler and Gerardus van der Leeuws Otto distinguished between two different kinds of religions:
 - “Gelehrten-Religion” (religion of the elite/educated)
 - “Religion des Volkes” (religion of the people) (Flasche 1991: 251).