

RUDOLF OTTO'S CATEGORY OF "THE HOLY"  
EVALUATED AND APPLIED

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by Emilio Chávez

INTERPRETATION OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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In The Idea of the Holy, Rudolf Otto discusses an ineffable "overplus of meaning" (p. 5) in the idea of "the holy," an element which transcends the notion of complete goodness which is part of the idea of the holy. Quite apart from ethics and other related aspects, the holy evokes a "unique original feeling-response" (p. 6) which "claims consideration in its own right." Otto coined the word "numinous" for this unique "category of value" and for the corresponding state of mind it elicits. "This mental state is <sup>perfectly</sup> sui generis and irreducible to any other" (p. 7f). Otto also calls this "creature-consciousness or creature-feeling": "It is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures." (p. 10) Otto says that the character of this feeling cannot be verbally expressed; some indication of what it is like might be conveyed indirectly, but it is something which must be experienced in order to be really understood.

In contrast to Schleiermacher, who speaks of a "feeling of dependence" from which we infer a cause (God), Otto believes that creature-feeling "is itself a first subjective concomitant and effect of another feeling-element, which casts it like a shadow, but which in itself indubitably has immediate and primary reference to an object outside the self." (p. 10).

The "object to which the numinous consciousness is directed" is for Otto a "mysterium tremendum et fascinans" (pp. 24ff.) The

mysterium refers to the numinous as "wholly other," as different from anything in our usual experience, as unintelligible and from another world (p. 26). Our reaction to it is "blank wonder" or stupor. Tremendum refers to the uncanny, <sup>ei</sup>wierd and eerie aspect of the numinous; it is awful, and evokes in the experiencer "the holy fear of God", dread, a shudder before the august majesty of God which absolutely overpowers us (p. 19). We acutely feel our creaturehood and nothingness before God. This is no natural fear; it is the daemonic dread of primitive humans, differing from natural fear not in intensity but in its element of uncanniness (p. 16). If we recoil from the tremendum, the fasci-  
nans aspect of the numinous attracts us uniquely. We begin to long for it as an end in itself; "the vita religiosa begins" (p.33) "The mysterium is experienced in its essential, positive and specific character, as something which bestows upon man a beatitude beyond compare". Solemnness is <sup>also</sup> a part of our attitude toward the numinous.

For Otto the holy is an a priori category "not to be evolved from any sort of sense perception," "an original and underivable capacity of the mind implanted in the 'pure reason' independently of all perception" (p. 112). "The numinous ... issues from the deepest foundation of the cognitive apprehension that the soul possesses, and, though it of course comes into being in and amid the sensory data and empirical material of the natural world and cannot anticipate or dispense with those, yet it does not arise out of them, but only by their means." (p. 113) A sort of pre-disposition is awakened by sensory data causing excitations.

I shall now recount an experience of the numinous which I had when I was four or five years old in Cuba. I attended a nuns' school near my house, and one day as my mother was speaking to one of the sisters I wandered into the cloister or the sacristy (where priests prepare themselves for the celebration of mass). I recall that the room was somewhat off-limits to the students; it was for priests and nuns and those who had to do with the holy things of God. I was therefore venturing into more or less forbidden territory. It was very quiet and there was no one else there. I was very curious about this prohibited place, but shortly after entering something absorbed my whole curiosity and my whole being: I was at the foot of a huge Spanish crucifix, with an almost lifesize bloodied Jesus on it (to me he seemed much larger than lifesize). What an impression he made on me! It touched me to the heart, but it was also extremely grisly. What I most recall about this experience is how dumbfounded I was. I was face to face with an ultimate reality, there could be nothing more important than what I was seeing. Here was a representation -- though to me it was very real, at least in terms of its evocative powers-- of a terribly suffering man, all bloody. I remember being close to his feet, pierced by a nail with a pointed head. The skin looked real, but with that eery color of death, somewhat bluish or gray. All kinds of feelings came to me all at once: I knew this was Jesus Christ Crucified, the Son of God Almighty. It was not just a poor man suffering. This was important and impressive enough to my sensitive nature, but joined with

all that I had been taught about Jesus, how good he was, how he died for us, how innocent, how much he suffered --it was all very overwhelming. There was something uncanny about this, weird (what other words are there to describe it?); it was a peculiar mixture of paradoxes that the crucifix represented, and no one of its elements could be separated from the others. To me it was the Suffering Servant on the cross, the Son in anguish, innocent and thus evoking the evil tragicness of it all. Did I also feel blame before this crucifix? Who knows what unconscious reservoir of feelings may have contributed to my stupor before Jesus crucified.

And yet there was an attractive element in the crucifix and in the place where it was. Both were holy. I had been taught to revere crucifixes, to feel good about them, they protected us. It was that I had never seen such an immense one! Here, magnified many times in a concentrated manner were all the aspects of my infant religiosity. The place, the sacristy or cloister, was also sacred and very quiet. I was all alone with Jesus; not that the idea of privacy or of a special favor occurred to me, but the circumstances were indeed very apt for a special religious experience. I had wandered into an eerie place, full of curiosity and, behold, I came upon Jesus himself on the cross. I felt privileged, because being a small child I had entered the place reserved for holy priests and nuns and had seen the mystery that dwelt in that place. And as awful as the crucified man was, so big and bloodied, he was Jesus-God who protected me always.

To the person who has had "a numinous experience" Rudolf Otto's concept of the holy is very meaningful and elucidative. What is a numinous experience? Its outstanding characteristic is first of all its uniqueness and indescribability. It relates to something outside of oneself, something terribly overpowering, giving an irresistible impression of great force or immenseness. We here have already been forced to use words which do not apply: there is no "force" that moves or "immenseness" which is seen. Yet the words attempt to connote the "ultimacy" or supreme "value" or "greatness of being" of the object of the numinous experience. And it is important to note that the experience which "the numinous" elicits does indeed refer primarily to an object outside the self. Truly the numinous overrides in capacity to command attention anything in the self; in face of it we lose self-consciousness at least for a time, since the numinous presents itself as supremely "interesting" and absorbing. This, at least, is one important way to describe or to define "the holy". In other words, we may with Otto define the holy as a category which is unique in that it in a unique way is capable of commanding our full attention, and this because it is intuited or felt to be or represent "the ground of being", the "ultimate", the most important or "powerful" thing, that capable of "holding" us completely, that in the face of which we suspend everything else, that which is more important than life itself, and so on. By definition, then, the holy refers to something which can evoke the above-mentioned responses as nothing else (or earthly) can. We

good!

very good

right

too long and awkward sentence

may assert that empirically nothing which is not "the holy" does in fact cause such suspension of activity and all-absorbing stupefaction. We then distinguish sharply between those things which can enthrall and absorb us (e.g., certain movie stars, music, <sup>good part but spent out now</sup> the Pope, an immensely rich man or his mansion, certain theologians, power, etc.) in a "natural" or "earthly" way and that which in entralling and absorbing us is intuited or apperceived to be preternatural or "not earthly."

Is this distinction valid? Otto and many persons who have had experiences of the "numinous" say that these experiences are qualitatively and essentially different from any other, non-numinous experience. Presumably the "earthly" experiences of those individuals who have had numinous experiences (let us call them "Ottonians") are the same as the experiences of those who have had only earthly experiences (the "non-Ottonians"). The Ottonians would therefore be able to authoritatively affirm that the numinous experience far surpasses in "absorbingness" and sense of "ultimacy" (and the accompanying feelings of creaturehood, etc.) all earthly experience. Or perhaps more modestly the Ottonians would assert that the numinous experience is unique and irreducible to any other experience, and this claim is hard to contest. In the true, full numinous experience, in which the elements of both the tremendum and the fascinans are present in the form of mysterium, the feelings of absolute dependence and creaturehood and of being in front of something not of this world would indeed seem to be unique and distinguishable from any other feelings that earthly things evoke in us.

It is then <sup>that</sup> Otto's claim that the holy is an a priori category corresponding to "an original and underivable capacity of the mind" is seen to be useful. Those persons who have had a numinous experience cannot be satisfied with comparing it to some other experience or category. There remains "an overplus of meaning" that can only be correlated to the other-worldly. It is telling of what Otto is on to that those persons who have not had such an experience readily indicate as much in any discussion; hearing such talk of the numinous does not ring a bell. From the other categories with which they are familiar they cannot draw much help. The Ottonians, however, can "relate" to what Rudolf is talking about.

This much having been said, let me return to my numinous experience. Certainly all the sensory, ambiential and psychocultural factors were optimally present. I was a highly impressional boy of four or five being educated by devout, possibly Spanish nuns. I had wandered into a more or less forbidden, holy place with which I was unfamiliar. I had never seen such a large Spanish crucifix before, at least not so close or under similar circumstances. This was the context, the kairos, for my numinous experience. Apart from Otto's somewhat muddled explanations on pp. 113f., there does seem to be something quite over and above the "merely psychological," if by this we mean something which is preponderantly an effect in our mind, such as we may have when contemplating nature or seeing a wounded or dying child. Certainly the object of our perception in these cases is "fascinating" in the sense of holding our attention as <sup>being</sup> extremely interesting.



It may even suspend our faculties or create in us a sense of urgency, e.g., to help. But if it is not numinous it lacks the unearthly quality that the crucifix represented for and elicited in me. Certainly my upbringing and my formed attitudes toward religious objects and places were necessary conditions for my experience. But it is precisely because I was able to recognize what --or rather, who-- the crucifix represented that its great (if not full) force came down upon me in a way that the explanations of a psychiatrist or a cultural anthropologist do not mitigate. It is the "overplus" which does not allow itself to be put in a category like our "earthly" categories which the word "numinous" attempts to label.

I have tried to present more or less comprehensively the category of the numinous as the mysterium tremendum et fascinans in relation to a religious experience I had. Both aspects of the mysterium seem to be found in my experience of the lifesize crucifix. Therefore, even in this ample notion of Otto's I found great applicability to my experience. As Otto expanded on his topic his exposition became more and more questionable and inapplicable to what may be the variegated experiences of many people. Otto himself speaks of primitive people as perhaps experiencing only the dread aspect of the mysterium (p. 32). In some mystical experiences perhaps only the fascinans aspect is experienced, with its concomitant solemnity. But taking Otto's main concept of the numinous as having the two aspects of overpoweringness and "fear"-inducing awe and an irresistible "bliss"-creating attraction, I found it characterized well the uniqueness of the experience I had.

Emilio;

You wrote an excellent paper. It is very sympathetic as well as critical, very scholarly as well as personal. You excel yourself in these two requirements for the paper. You reconstructed your early experience so convincingly. I especially appreciated your consistent spirit of self-criticism to be able to see your experience in the light of others' experience too. Perhaps you could have analyzed Otto's idea of the holy a little more, however. I found that your direct analysis of the holy is somewhat not enough at least for the pedagogic purpose. But still your understanding of the idea of the holy is so excellent. I really enjoyed to read your work.

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