

## The Religious A Priori in Otto and its Kantian Origins

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### Abstract:

This paper provides an analysis of Rudolph Otto's understanding of the structures of human consciousness making possible the appropriation of revelation. Already in his dissertation on Luther's understanding of the Holy Spirit, Otto was preoccupied with how the "outer" of revelation could be united to these inner structures. Later, in his groundbreaking *Idea of the Holy*, Otto would explore the category of the numinous, an element of religious experience tied to the irrational element of the holy. This paper first provides a brief account of Otto's account of the holy, especially its numinous, irrational elements. Second, the paper analyzes Otto's understanding of the structures of consciousness grounding the experience of the numinous and allowing the irrational element to be "schematized" by the rational element. Otto's exposition of these structures is heavily influenced by his reception of Kant's analysis of the two stems of human cognition, namely understanding and sensibility, and their possible relation to a common root, which Otto identified with what the mystics called the ground of the soul. Yet it is in Otto's reception of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* that all of these ideas find their completion, and it is here where we must look to understand the relation between the religious a priori and Otto's category of the numinous. Kant's aesthetic idea is a singular representation given in intuition; it is infinitely saturated and as such intimates the ideas of God, the soul, and the world as a whole. I show how Otto appropriates Kant's aesthetic idea and its relation to ideas of reason in order to make sense of how an empirically given revelation, for instance, an experience of the numinous, can connect with the inner structures of consciousness and thereby have the singular import that it does.

How can revelation be interpreted and interiorized? This was Otto's burning question at the heart of his dissertation on Luther's understanding of the Holy Spirit. There he had, among other things, reflected on two propositions from the Lutheran catechism: "The Holy Spirit does not work without means; he is bound to the Word and works through the Word."<sup>1</sup> Otto struggled with the validity and intelligibility of the propositions on several fronts. First, of itself the Word is not a *sufficient* condition of faith; it is only opened up through the Spirit, remaining dead to the natural human being. But insofar as the work of the Holy Spirit precedes, accompanies, and makes possible the understanding of the Word, this is a "work of the Spirit *before* the Word," and is, as such, an action of the Spirit "without means," (45) contradicting the first part of the formula. Second, Otto questions the intelligibility of the notion that the Holy Spirit works *through* the Word. This amounts to the claim that one energy works through another, and is just as nonsensical as the claim that light gives out its light

*through* warmth (46). A close analysis of Luther's claims leaves the question of the efficacy of the Word shrouded in mystery. Why is it received here in one way, and there in another? The Word is not a magical formula that immediately arouses faith; it has, instead, a significant content that must be interpreted and appropriated before it can give rise to a life-altering faith. This content can be variously received, and can even fail to have an impact altogether if the mind is altogether too preoccupied with other things, or if the individual has no sense for religion (48).

Already in the dissertation Otto was preoccupied with the human structures of consciousness that make *appropriation* of revelation possible, as well as the conditions of the possibility of genuine religious experience, concerns central to his oeuvre as a whole. This question, of how the "outer" of revelation could be united with the inner structures of consciousness was the basis of what he called a "science of religion," one founded on the groundbreaking philosophy of Immanuel Kant. By 1909 Otto had published two books stamped by his reception of Kantian philosophy: the first, *Naturalism and Religion* argued that Kant's transcendental idealism was uniquely suited to assign religion its proper place given the success of modern science.<sup>2</sup> Kant posited two distinct domains, phenomena and noumena. The first is the realm of appearances or empirical realities. Here nature is presented as the measurable and quantifiable and as subject to strict causal laws. It is a closed system, for every natural event must have a cause that is itself an appearance. As *appearance*, the realm of phenomena is not fully real, and Otto continually reminds his readers that this is something that the mystics were already aware of. On the other hand, according to Kant, phenomenal realities are grounded in the realm of noumena or things in themselves, which *as such*, make no appearance and remain unknown and unknowable. These are, Otto argued, the true realities that are the genuine subject matter of religion. One would search in vain, argued Otto, to find God among the real of the phenomena, all of which were subject to scientific explanation. To think of God as a God of the gaps in our knowledge of phenomena was a losing proposition. We must rather turn our attention to the intelligible world grounding the phenomena if we are to ground a science of religion (69). How this was to be possible was further expanded and contextualized in his second 1909 book, *The Philosophy of Religion Based on Kant and Fries*, in which he presents Kant's philosophy (as received by

Fries) in broad strokes.<sup>3</sup> Most significant in this work is his emphasis on Kant's *Critique of Judgment* as containing the key to the science of religion.

In 1911, however, Otto embarked on a journey through North Africa, the Middle East, and India, and in these travels had several remarkable experiences, one, especially, in a Jewish synagogue in Morocco where he heard the *Trisagion* of Isaiah.<sup>4</sup> These experiences, rupturing all rationalistic accounts of religion, gave rise to the phenomenology of religious experience described in the *Idea of the Holy*. There Otto describes the holy as containing 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.<sup>5</sup> Considered from the point of view of the phenomenology of the history 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.

Concerns similar to those found in his analysis of Luther are fundamental to his analysis in *Idea*, namely, those having to do with the structures of consciousness making these experiences possible. And while Kant's division of existence into phenomena and noumena, as well as his exposition of the holy in purely moral terms, could not *by themselves* accommodate Otto's remarkable insights regarding the holy's irrational aspects, Otto still believed Kant's philosophy singularly suited to illuminating the possibility of the religious experience, its ground in the structures of the soul, and the relationship between its rational and irrational elements. In this paper I first provide a brief description of Otto's analysis of the holy, in particular its irrational elements. I then move to discuss how Otto understood the structures of consciousness both grounding the experience of the numinous as well as allowing the irrational element to be "schematized" by the rational element. This analysis will take us deep into Kant's analysis of the two stems of human cognition and their possible relation to a common root, which Otto links to what the mystics called the ground of the soul.

### 1. 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 the human understanding, can be apprehended through concepts, and is especially associated with the ethical sphere. The

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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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 overplus 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. 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” (2). Now, it is important to note that the rational and non-rational elements of the holy are not two distinct *concepts* that we can simply predicate of the holy. To think of them in this way would be to treat both aspects of the holy as elements that can be comprehended in concepts, and while this may work well enough with the rational side of the holy, it would be completely inadequate to picking out the numinous quality of the holy. This, as Otto notes, can only be apprehended through *feeling*, which, as I will show in section two, is that 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 *alios*, and the Latin *sacer*.

A large part of Otto's oeuvre consists of a compelling phenomenological analysis of the feelings presaging the numinous. He identifies three principle moments in its apprehension, which is experienced as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. He first begins by providing an analysis of "*tremendum*," which can be further analyzed into 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" (*Idea*, 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 (οργη θεου) of God, 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 naïve analogy" (*Idea*, p. 18). The analogy is naïve 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'". *Idea*, 18). The strange story of the ark of the Covenant in second Samuel is illustrative: when Uzzah reaches out his hand to steady the ark, he is immediately struck dead.<sup>8</sup> 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 (Gen. 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. 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 not stint nor stay, which is urgent, active, compelling and alive" (*Idea*, 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 eleven of the *Bhagavad-Gita* are especially apt in capturing the awefulness, 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.<sup>9</sup> 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” (*Idea*, 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” (*Idea*, 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.<sup>10</sup> Here lies the genesis of negative or apophatic theology that stresses the fact 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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” (*Idea*, 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. Augustine’s famous words well express this fascination: “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” 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 (*Idea*, 36).

The numen is ultimately experienced as the source of unspeakable bliss, a bliss that is of completely different order from natural happiness. Otto speaks of the “*wonderfulness* and rapture that lies in the mysterious beatific experience of the deity” (*Idea*, 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.

## 2. The Religious A Priori and the Ground of the Soul

But how does Otto envision that an *a priori* feeling for the numen (the non-rational aspect of the holy) is possible?<sup>12</sup> It is through sensation that individual objects are given to us or intuited, but sensation is an empirical faculty, not an *a priori* one. In the first *Critique* Kant argued that space and time are *a priori* forms of intuition, but it is hard to imagine that the *a priori* intimation of the feeling elements of the holy are analogous to those forms. The other two *a priori* elements discussed by Kant in the first *Critique* are the concepts of the understanding and the ideas of reason, neither of them suitable candidates for Otto’s *a priori* feeling elements through which the numen is apprehended. Yet Otto stresses that without the *a priori*, the Word cannot be apprehended, received, or understood, and he invokes Kant’s claim that while “all knowledge begins with experience, it by no means follows that all knowledge arises out of experience” (*Idea*, 112-113). In a very significant passage he notes, “Kant’s rational ideas of absoluteness, completion, necessity and substantiality, and no less those of the good as an objective value” refer back to “an original and underivable capacity of the mind implanted in the ‘pure reason’ independently of all perception.” And he continues:

...in the case of the non-rational elements of our category of the Holy we are referred to something deeper still than the ‘pure reason’, at least as this is usually understood, namely, to that which mysticism has rightly named the *fundus animae*, the ‘bottom’ or ‘ground of the soul’ (Seelengrund). The ideas of



the numinous and the feelings that corresponds to them are, quite as much as rational ideas and feelings, absolutely 'pure,' and the criteria which Kant suggests for the 'pure' concept and 'pure' feeling of respect are most precisely applicable to them. (*Idea*, 112)

How are we to understand this element that is "still deeper" than pure reason? Is Otto still working within the parameters of Kant's philosophy?

Yes, he is. There are two important places where we need to look in Kant's philosophy. Both of these places were significant for the Romantic reception of Kant's work and its opposition to Fichte, especially in relation to how Kant's thought was applied to religion. The first place is Kant's remark at the end of his introduction of the first *Critique* where he notes that the two stems of human cognition, namely sensibility and understanding "may perhaps arise from a common but to us unknown root," (A15/B29). This unknown root is original consciousness, that is, consciousness prior to its reflection in the "I think." If there is any place to look for the an idea corresponding to Otto's *fundus animae* in Kant, it would be here. The reception of Kant's work between 1785 and 1799 was marked by the attempt to understand the relation of this original consciousness to totality. For Fichte and those who followed him, an absolute philosophy of first principles was possible through a reflection on the activity of the I, that is, on the conditions of the possibility of the achievement of the identity of consciousness through the process of reflection: "the I posits itself as an I." Because the not-I is necessary for the positing of the I, it too was considered an achievement of consciousness. The Romantics countered this philosophy of first principles through their claim that original consciousness is factual and is given to us in feeling, namely the feeling of Being. While the totality of all existence is intuited in this original consciousness,<sup>13</sup> it cannot be penetrated by understanding and reason. There is, then, no philosophy of first principles, no absolute philosophy. The ground of existence surpasses consciousness and its conditions. We are confronted with the sheer facticity of our existence and are an enigma to ourselves. Instead of an absolute philosophy penetrating the very ground of being, what we have is epistemological modesty and a coherence theory of truth. What we can know is limited to what is given in reflection, that is, in self-consciousness. But the material given to reflection is but a fragment of

the totality of original consciousness and its awareness, and can never come close to capturing it.

The second place to look for Kantian influences in Otto is Kant's third *Critique*. Kant's successors sought totality in original consciousness, in the moment prior to reflection through which the I distinguished itself from the not-I. The Romantics argued that this totality was given in original consciousness as a purely factual one that remained unknown and unknowable. Kant believed we have *ideas* of such totalities—ideas of God, the soul, and the world as a whole, but these are merely regulative. They can be thought, but we can neither prove the existence of their objects, nor can their objects be given to us in intuition. Nevertheless, these totalities are represented to us in what he calls *aesthetic ideas*—saturated intuitions symbolizing them. What we have in Otto's idea of the Holy is precisely such an aesthetic idea, one that opens up consciousness in such a way that it is brought back to that moment of original consciousness in which the soul stands in direct relation to existence and its ground.

In the third *Critique* Kant refers to the “ground of the unity of the supersensible that grounds nature with that which the concept of freedom contains practically” (5:176).<sup>14</sup> Discussing his “critique of the faculties of cognition with regard to what they can accomplish *a priori*,” he remarks on his division between understanding and reason, the former having to do with what can be known of nature *a priori*, and the latter having to do with the legislation of pure practical reason. But to this he adds an “intermediary between the understanding and reason,” namely, the power of judgment, which contains “in itself *a priori*... a proper principle for seeking laws, although merely a subjective one” (5:177). These three, understanding, judgment, and reason are related to three faculties of the soul: “the faculty of cognition, the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, and the faculty of desire” (5:177). The third *Critique* is concerned with how an *a priori* feeling can be accounted for, or more precisely, how a judgment based on feeling can have universal validity. For example, aesthetic judgments have what Kant calls subjective universality. Here we have a judgment based on feeling, which is, as such, peculiar to the subject, but which nonetheless is valid for everyone. Kant answers that such judgments are possible in virtue of the harmonious exercise of the cognitive powers of the subject as it judges. This harmonious exercise pleases, and pleases universally. What then, is the power of

judgment, and how does it shed light on Otto's category of the Holy, both in its rational and non-rational aspects?

The power of judgment is "the faculty for thinking the particular as contained under the universal" (5:179). There are two kinds of judgments possible: determining and reflective. When the universal is given, and the particular is simply subsumed under it, judgment is *determinative*. However, when only the particular is given the universal must be searched after, judgment is *reflective*. Now what is significant about reflective judgment is that it is concerned with a singular intuition, and how it is that this intuition is to be grasped in such a way that it can be taken *as an individual* that falls under a concept. Longuenesse rightly points out that there is an aspect of reflection even in the application of the categories, "for it presupposes a progress from sensible representation to discursive thought: the formation of concepts through comparison/reflection/abstraction, which is just what reflective judgment is: finding the universal for the particular" However, the third *Critique* is concerned with *merely* reflective judgment, and what happens in such a case is that "the effort of the activity of judgment to form concepts fails"<sup>15</sup> In reflective judgment we are first and foremost concerned with given intuitions. In the case of merely reflective judgment, an intuition is so saturated and rich that it is impossible to find a single rule of synthesis adequate to it, and as such the individual cannot be grasped in such a way that it can be subsumed under a given concept. This happens in the case of judgments concerning the beautiful and the sublime, as well as in the case of teleological judgments. In these cases, the particular is so saturated and has such an overplus of meaning that it breaks all bounds of inner-worldly significance and intimates the rational ideas of God, soul, and the world.

Kant defines spirit as "the animating principle of the mind" which works through the purposive setting of the "mental powers into motion, i.e., into a play that is self-maintaining" (5:314). This setting of the mental powers into motion occurs as the mind tries to find a rule of synthesis for the saturated individual that we find in the aesthetic idea. Importantly, Kant relates the aesthetic idea to the ideas of reason. He notes that the animating principle of the mind

is nothing other than the faculty for the presentation of **aesthetic ideas**; by an aesthetic idea, however, I mean that representation of the imagination that

occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., **concept**, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible. – One readily sees that it is the counterpart (pendant) of an **idea of reason**, which is, conversely, a concept to which no **intuition** (representation of the imagination) can be adequate. ...they [aesthetic ideas] at least strive towards something lying beyond the bounds of experience, and thus seek to approximate a presentation of concepts of reason (intellectual ideas), which gives them the appearance of an objective reality; on the other hand, and indeed principally, because no concept can be fully adequate to them, as inner intuitions (AA, 5: 314).

In what way is the aesthetic idea a counterpart of the idea of reason? In the first *Critique* Kant had argued that, unlike the concepts of the understanding, the ideas of reason cannot, in principle, have any objective validity. While the concepts of the understanding have corresponding schemata that direct and limit their application, these are lacked by the ideas of reason. Furthermore, because ideas of reason are ideas of unconditioned totalities, no intuition can be adequate to them. As Kant notes, “If they contain the unconditioned, then they deal with something under which all experience belongs, but that is never itself an object of experience; something to which reason leads through its inferences, and by which reason estimates and measures the degree of its empirical use, but that never constitutes a member of the empirical synthesis” (A 311/B 368). On the other hand, all objects of possible experience are members of the empirical synthesis, and are, as such conditioned. The ideas of reason are greatly significant in two regards: first, they have a regulative function, in that lead us to unify principles (“the unity of principles is a demand of reason” (B362), and they have supreme importance in the practical sphere, since among them are found the ideas of freedom, the moral law, and a maximum of virtue. Moreover, it is through practical reason and our *interest* in the meaning of our existence from a first person point of view that ideas of unconditioned totalities such as God, the soul, and the world gain significance: these condition the core of our existence and the arena in which it must play itself out.

While an idea of reason is one to which no intuition can be adequate, and is as such “indemonstrable,” the aesthetic idea is a representation of an individual so rich in

significance that no concept is adequate to it. It is what Kant calls an “inexponible representation” (5:342). Through its saturation and innumerable connections with the entire field of experience it intimates the supersensible objects to which the ideas of reason refer. Kant notes that the aesthetic idea “serves [the] idea of reason instead of logical presentation, although really only to animate the mind by opening up for it the prospect of an immeasurable field of related representations” (5:315). The aesthetic idea “cracks open” the understanding, which continually strives to grasp the intuition, but fails to find a concept adequate to it, as the realm of the understanding is limited to the conditioned appearances. The saturation of the aesthetic idea and its innumerable connections thereby become symbols of the comprehensive ideas of reason.

Since the aesthetic idea is the counterpart of an idea of reason, it is more closely associated with Kant’s sublime than with the beautiful; earlier in the third *Critique*, Kant remarks: “the beautiful seems to be taken as the presentation of an indeterminate concept of the understanding, but the sublime as that of a similar concept of reason” (5:244). He lists the “wide ocean, enraged by storms, whose visage is horrible” (5:245) as provoking the sublime. In the dynamically sublime nature is presented as an overwhelming might that annihilates our own; as such, it invokes fear; so Kant, “nature can count as a power, thus as dynamically sublime, only insofar as it is considered an object of fear” (5:260). The sublime, however, is not constituted by this fear alone, but by the thought that the whole might of nature is inferior to the “moral law within.” For Kant, the moral individual and her connection to the supersensible is superior to all possible terrors of the natural world.

It is, however, clearly the understanding of the aesthetic idea as *inexponible* that was to have such importance for both the Romantics and for Otto. Both in *Philosophy of Religion* and in his *Idea of the Holy*, Otto underscores Kant’s understanding of spirit and its relation to both aesthetic and rational ideas as Kant’s most important contributions. In *Philosophy of Religion* he mentions Herder as having fully grasped the importance of Kant’s aesthetic ideas, noting that “in the whole of poetry Herder saw a creation that urges upwards from the secret and mysterious depths of the soul, a creation of the unconscious, the unwilled, and the uninvented; an inspiration that springs from the profound regions of the spirit, under divine influence....”<sup>16</sup> And in *Idea* the faculty of divination through which the Holy is intuited is related to Kant’s aesthetic judgments,

in particular to that which is “not-unfolded” or inexponible: he notes: “in contrast to logical judgment, it [the aesthetic judgment] is not worked out in accordance with a clear intellectual scheme, but in conformity with obscure, dim principles....” (*Idea*, 146); he further mentions Goethe’s “daemonic” “which “goes beyond all ‘conceiving’, surpasses ‘understanding’ and ‘reason’, and consequently is ‘inapprehensible’ and cannot properly be put into a statement” (150) in which all elements associated with the numen recur. Otto repeatedly affirms that *both* rational and non-rational elements of the numen are *a priori* elements, claiming that “in its content even the first stirring of ‘daemonic dread’ is a purely *a priori* element. In this respect it may be compared from first to last with the aesthetic judgment and the category of the beautiful” (134). It is clear, then that Otto conceived of the numinous in terms of Kant’s aesthetic ideas as well as his understanding of the sublime.

The experience of the numinous is an experience of a *particular* that both terrifies and fascinates, and which, however, also represents unconditioned totalities. For example, insofar as it is experienced as an overwhelming might, the numen symbolizes the very ground of all power. The numen has an “overplus of meaning” and thereby functions in the same way as an aesthetic idea. Because it is given in an intuition in which distinct elements are united, *synthetic* judgments can be made of it. This brings us to one of the more obscure elements of Otto’s presentation of the Holy, the necessary synthesis between its rational and non-rational aspects. The rational aspect is not contained in the irrational aspect; these are two distinct predicates, and one cannot be derived from the other (136). They are, however, united in the object, and necessarily so; hence Otto claims “the same *a priori* character...belongs...to the connexion of the rational and non-rational elements in religion, their inward and necessary union” (136). He notes that the irrational element of the holy is “schematized” by its rational element and “is filled out and charged with rational elements.” Now the schema, according to Kant, is a rule of synthesis, generated by the imagination, through which an image adequate to a concept is generated. In the case of aesthetic ideas, of course, these rules of synthesis are never adequate to the intuition, and conceptualization fails. The aesthetic representation is “inexponible.” Otto, too, notes that even as this necessary schematization occurs, the non-rational aspect of the holy is never fully taken up into its rational aspects; there is an overplus that still eludes rationalization and is “even

intensified” as the revelation proceeds (135). Yet insofar as an aesthetic representation suggests the rational ideas, it must ultimately be taken up or synthesized in such a way that it is understood in accordance with moral and religious ideas having to do with the ultimate significance of human life.

How then, does the aesthetic idea illuminate the a priori structures of consciousness that make it possible for revelation to have significance for us? In the aesthetic idea we have a symbol of the mystery that is given in original consciousness. This symbol awakens the mind and brings it back to that first original moment prior to reflection. The Holy, much like the aesthetic idea, can only be adequately interpreted from the first person point of view. Both the aesthetic idea and the representation of the Holy have subjective universality. It is because each of us is a finite creature who acts, who must understand and both self and world, and who must reflect on his or her own significance in relation to the indemonstrable totalities with which religion is concerned that the Holy is of utmost significance. Its non-rational elements concern our finitude and powerlessness in the face of an ultimate reality against which we must measure the significance of our lives;<sup>17</sup> its rational elements concern those moral concepts through which we must measure what we have done and should do, and which necessarily schematize and fill out the non-rational elements of the Holy. In the Holy, much like in the aesthetic idea, I am presented with a particular object of experience that works on the spirit in such a way that it is confronted with ultimate totalities, with the enormous power of the ground of being, both terrifying and fascinating, but which nevertheless is necessarily schematized by rational moral ideas. Otto notes that “once enunciated and understood, the ideas of the unity and goodness of the divine nature often take a surprisingly short time to become firmly fixed in the hearer’s mind” (Otto 139). Rational ideas are always already present in our reason and need only be awakened.

Following Kant, Otto stresses that we cannot ignore the moral or rational element of the Holy. In *Religion* Kant stressed that “on the basis of revelation alone,” without the moral concepts of pure practical reason, “there can be no religion, and all reverence for God would be *idolatry*” (6:169). Hence we cannot simply remain with the idea of God as “wholly other,” which Otto coordinates with the idea that the intuition of the numinous is “inexplicable.” The intuition of the Holy must necessarily be schematized by moral concepts. As Otto notes, were we to fail to do so, God would

remain *ex lex*, outside the law, and we could only relate to God in terms of power (*Idea*, 101). As Kant had argued in his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, we would then be left with a religion of mere servility, one bereft of the moral ideas that alone confer on the human being genuine worth.

Although it certainly sounds questionable, it is in no way reprehensible to say that every human being *makes a God* for himself, indeed, he must make one according to moral concepts (attended by the infinitely great properties that belong to the faculty of exhibiting an object in the world commensurate to these concepts) in order to honor in him *the one who made him*. For in whatever manner a being has been made known to him by somebody else, and described as God, indeed, even if such a being might appear to him in person (if this is possible), a human being must yet confront this representation with his ideal first, in order to judge whether he is authorized to hold and revere this being as Divinity. Hence, on the basis of revelation alone, without that concept being *previously* laid down in its purity at its foundation as touchstone, there can be no religion, and all reverence for God would be *idolatry* (AA, 6: 169).<sup>18</sup>

In the numinous, the individual is confronted with her finitude and conditioned character in a radical way. Otto repeatedly draws attention to the understanding of the self as “but dust and ashes” in the face of an overpowering might that is symbolized in ideograms whose significance is ultimately recognized by the soul at its ground. But how must the individual respond to this overwhelming might? To simply respond to it in such a way that *all* that an individual recognizes is an overpowering might ultimately leads to fear and the strategy of self-preservation. Here there are no higher values, and no way that the self can really move beyond itself to recognize the value of others for their own sake from within itself. Otto is of a mind with Kant on this: reason generates its own ideas of totality that must ultimately be synthesized with the totalities intuited at the ground of the soul. Hence the ideogram points upwards and downwards, downwards to the ground of the soul and the totalities intuited through original consciousness, and upwards to the ideas of reason in which totalities are thought but not intuited. In the ideogram and through the imagination’s attempt to grasp it, the two, namely reason and intuition, are brought together. This synthesis is not one that can be



proven, but is one that is achieved through the moral individual that makes a moral decision: *faith* that at the heart of existence there lies a moral order.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Otto, *Die Anschauung vom Heiligen Geiste bei Luther*, Göttingen: Dandenhoek und Ruprecht, 1898, 45.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Otto, *Naturalistische und religiöse Weltansicht*, Tübingen, 1904; English translation: *Naturalism and Religion*, trans. J. Arthur Thomson and Margaret R. Thomson, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1907, 68ff.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Otto, *Kantisch-Fries'sische Religionsphilosophie und ihre Anwendung auf die Theologie*, Tübingen, 1909. English translation: *The Philosophy of Religion Based on Kant and Fries*, trans. E. B. Dicker, London 1931.

<sup>4</sup> On this point see Robin Minney, "The Development of Otto's Thought 1898-1917: From "Luther's View of the Holy Spirit" to "The Holy," *Religious Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 507.

<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, translated by John W. Harvey, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923, 7. Henceforward this work will be cited as *Idea*, with the page number following.

<sup>6</sup> All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), Amos: 5:23-24.

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, translated and edited by Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 409; AA, 28: 1075.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Samuel 6:6. Another example is the story of the bubonic plague that the ark brings with it when it was captured by the Philistines in 1 Samuel chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>9</sup> Lest anyone be tempted to think that this frightful image of the divine is merely indigenous to Indian religion, compare with the following statement from Luther: "Yea, He is more terrible and frightful than the Devil. For He dealeth with us and bringeth us to ruin with power, siteth and hammereth us and payeth no heed to us. . . . In His majesty He is a consuming fire. . . . For therefrom can no man refrain: if he thinketh on

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God aright, his heart in his body is struck with terror. . . . Yea, as soon as he heareth God named, he is filled with trepidation and fear.” Cited *Idea*, 99.

<sup>10</sup> Otto notes, “The divine transcends not only time and place, not only measure and number, but all categories of the reason as well. It leaves subsisting only that transcendent basic relationship which is not amenable to any category” (*Religious Essays*, 87).

<sup>11</sup> Rudolf Otto, *Religious Essays: A Supplement to “The Idea of the Holy”* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 39.

<sup>12</sup> While critics of Otto have argued that his thought is inconsistent in that he moves from philosophy in his *Philosophy of Religion* to phenomenology in *Idea of the Holy*, this section demonstrates the consistency in Otto’s thought in relation to the two books. This consistency is further evidenced if the Romantic reception of Kant’s thought is fully understood, which brings together two elements, namely the emphasis on the feeling of Being and the impossibility of knowledge of the objects of Kant’s regulative ideas of reason. The Romantic reception of Kant’s thought, especially as found in Schleiermacher, had a huge influence on Otto. For a discussion of some of these criticisms, see Minney 519ff. For another defense of the consistency of Otto’s thought, see Philip C. Almond, *Rudolf Otto: An Introduction to his Philosophical Theology*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984. For a discussion of the Romantic reception of Kant’s thought, especially as it came to bear on the understanding of religion, see my forthcoming “Romanticism and Religion,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Early German Romantic Philosophy*, ed. Elizabeth Millán.

<sup>13</sup> The point is made by Friedrich Schleiermacher, among others, in his *On Religion*, where he claims that “religion is sensibility and taste for the infinite” (23); he argues that intuition of the infinite is given in that “first mysterious moment” before “intuition and feeling have separated,” that is, the infinite is given before the process of reflection. At this moment the soul “lies at the bosom of the infinite world.” This moment is “the natal hour of everything given in religion” (32). Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, translated and edited by Richard Crouter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 1996. There is no doubt Otto was significantly influenced by Schleiermacher; in 1899 he produced a centenary edition of

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Schleiermacher's 1799 version of the *Speeches*, and discusses Schleiermacher in *Idea* (10) although he takes issue with Schleiermacher's understanding of the feeling of absolute dependence, stressing the phenomenological precedence of the intuition an "overpowering might" over the feeling of dependence.

<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 63. All future references to the third *Critique* are to this translation and will be indicated by the Academy Edition pagination, in this case AA 5:176.

<sup>15</sup> Beatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*, translated by Charles T. Wolfe (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 164.

<sup>16</sup> Otto, *Philosophy of Religion*, 184.

<sup>17</sup> On the development of this idea by the Romantics, see my "Romanticism and Religion," forthcoming.

<sup>18</sup> In *Religion and Rational Theology*, 189).