

Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rudolf Otto

Two names often grouped together in the study of religion are Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1884) and Rudolf Otto (1869-1937). Central to their understanding of religion is the idea that religious experience, characterized in terms of feeling, lies at the heart of all genuine religion. In his book *On Religion* Schleiermacher speaks of religion as a “sense and taste for the Infinite.”¹ It is “the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the infinite” and is “to know and to have life in immediate feeling” (OR, p. 36). In *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher grounds religion in the immediate self-consciousness and the “feeling of absolute dependence.”² Influenced by Schleiermacher, Otto too grounds religion in an original experience of what he calls “the numinous,” which “completely eludes apprehension in terms of concepts” and is as such “ineffable;” it can only be grasped through states of feeling. (*The Idea of the Holy*, p. 5). In this paper I will critically examine their views on religion as feeling. The first part of the paper will be devoted to understanding how both men conceived of feeling and the reasons why they believed that religion had to be understood in its terms. In the second and third parts of the paper I will develop the views of each thinker individually, contrast them with one another, and discuss the peculiar problems that arise in relation to the thought of each.

Common Elements in Schleiermacher and Otto

Both Schleiermacher and Otto insist that religion cannot be reduced to ethics, aesthetics or metaphysics. Schleiermacher notes it cannot be “an instinct craving for a mess of metaphysical and ethical crumbs” (*On Religion*, 31) and indeed insists that religious feeling is grounded in an original unity of consciousness from which both theoretical and practical reason proceed. Otto famously notes that both the rational and the irrational element in the holy, the numinous, are “*sui generis* and irreducible to any other;” (Idea 7) for this reason the holy “is a category of interpretation and valuation peculiar to the sphere of religion” (Idea, 5). Hence religion cannot be explained through categories that lie outside of it, but can properly be understood only “from within.” In order for it to be properly understood, religious feeling either must be presupposed or

evoked. To think that one can understand religion by reducing it to concepts derived from the natural or social sciences is to completely miss the mark.

There are several reasons why Schleiermacher, and Otto following him, believed that the category of feeling was the most appropriate for understanding religion. First is the influence of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant had argued that the concepts of the understanding could find application only insofar as they were schematized by the forms of intuition, namely space and time. As such, the categories of the understanding were applicable only to finite empirical objects given through sense perception; we therefore could not have knowledge of things in themselves. The object of religion, however, is not an object alongside other objects in the spatio-temporal continuum. It is not a thing limited in its being by other things. As such, it cannot be known through the schematized concepts of the understanding. Second, if the object of religion is indeed infinite, then it cannot be an object that stands over against a subject, for then it would be limited by that subject. For Schleiermacher a grasp of the Infinite is possible only through an original unity of consciousness that precedes the subject-object dichotomy. In the *Speeches* Schleiermacher notes:

How now are you in the Whole? By your senses. And how are you for yourselves? By the unity of your self-consciousness, which is given chiefly in the possibility of comparing the varying degrees of sensation. How both can only rise together, if both together fashion every act of life, is easy to see. You become sense and the Whole becomes object. Sense and object mingle and unite, then each returns to its place, and the object rent from sense is a perception, and you rent from the object are for yourselves, a feeling. It is this earlier moment I mean, which you always experience yet never experience. The phenomenon of your life is just the result of its constant departure and return. It is scarcely in time at all, so swiftly it passes; it can scarcely be described, so little does it properly exist (*Speeches*, p. 43).

This consciousness of the Infinite, in which both self and world are united, is given in a moment of immediate awareness that precedes the subject's awareness of itself *as* a subject over against a world of objects. The use of concepts, however, presupposes self-consciousness, that is, consciousness of the self as accompanying each of its representations, as well as an awareness of a representation as *distinct* from that which it represents. Since consciousness of the Infinite can be given only through such a moment

of *immediate* awareness that precedes self-consciousness, the Infinite cannot be apprehended through concepts. It is rather, given directly in an intuition and is apprehended through feeling; no representation, and hence no concept, can ever be adequate to it.

The feeling of which Schleiermacher speaks is not an *empirical* feeling aroused by an object given to the senses. In the *Speeches* he notes that since this moment of unity precedes the moment in which the self is conscious of itself as over against the world, knowledge of the Infinite can only be had through *anamnesis* or recollection, a movement towards the inmost depths of the self (*Speeches*, p.44). In *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher argues that the God-consciousness – the feeling of absolute dependence – can only be given in the immediate self-consciousness:

. . . any possibility of God being in any way given is entirely excluded because anything that is outwardly given must be given as an object exposed to our counter-influence, however slight this may be. . . . The transference of the idea of God to any perceptible object, unless one is all the time conscious that it is a piece of purely arbitrary symbolism, is always a corruption, whether it be a temporary transference, i.e., a theophany, or a constitutive transference, in which God is represented as permanently a particular perceptible existence (*CF*, 18, §4.4).

If the God-consciousness is to be experienced as a feeling of *absolute* dependence, then it cannot have anything in the world as its object, for anything in the world is ‘exposed to our counter-influence.’ As such, the self could not experience itself as *absolutely* dependent upon it. Rather, what is experienced in the feeling of absolute dependence is the “*Whence* of our receptive and active existence,” which is ‘not the world, in the sense of the totality of temporal existence, and still less is it any single part of the world” (*CF*, 16, § 4.4). Hence there is an important sense in which the feeling of absolute dependence is logically *prior* to experience of the world, since it does not arise from it.

In *The Idea of the Holy* Otto also speaks of both the rational and irrational aspects of the Holy as being *a priori*. He notes that in accounting for the concepts through which we think of God (such as absoluteness, completion and goodness) we are “referred away from all sense-experience back to an original capacity of the mind implanted in the ‘purest reason’ independently of all sense perception” (*Idea*, p. 112). More importantly, the irrational aspect of the holy, the numinous, is apprehended through a faculty in the

deepest recesses of the self, what mysticism calls the *fundus animae*, that is, the ground of the soul. In explaining how this faculty relates to the experience of the numinous Otto makes reference to the first lines of the Introduction to Kant's first *Critique*, where Kant notes that "though all our knowledge begins *with* experience, it by no means follows that all arises *out of* experience." If religion functions in such a manner, there can be no development of religion outside of historically conditioned experience, that is, the experience of the holy begins *with* experience. As such there can be no such thing as "religion in general," but only the historically conditioned expressions of the numinous and the feelings that correspond to them. On the other hand, Otto's point in referring to the holy as an *a priori* category is that experience of the numinous is not something that we can simply *acquire* through our ability to be receptive of stimulus from without. The numinous is not something that can be simply encountered in the world. As Otto notes, "it issues from the deepest foundation of cognitive apprehension that the soul possesses" The experience of the numinous is already present within the self and merely requires certain occasions for it to be brought to consciousness. As such, things in the world experienced as "holy" are not holy in themselves; they are rather mere occasions for the experience to be brought to consciousness. Beliefs and feelings about such objects are not evoked by natural sense perception, since it is not the objects themselves that are the source of the experience. Otto's next points are worth quoting at length:

They are themselves not perceptions at all, but peculiar interpretations and valuations, at first of perceptual data, and then—at a higher level—of posited objects and entities, which themselves no longer belong to the perceptual world, but are thought of as supplementing and transcending it. And as they are not themselves sense-perceptions, so neither are they any sort of "transmutation" of sense-perceptions. . . . The facts of the numinous consciousness point therefore—as likewise do also the 'pure concepts of the understanding' of Kant and the ideas and value-judgments of ethics and aesthetics—to a hidden substantive source, from which the religious ideas and feelings are formed, which lies in the mind independently of sense-experience; a 'pure reason' in the profoundest sense, which, because of the 'surpassingness' of its content, must be distinguished from both the pure theoretical and the pure practical reason of Kant, as something yet higher or deeper than they.

On several of these points Otto is in agreement with Schleiermacher. The beliefs and feelings at play in the experience of the numinous come from a "hidden substantive

source” already present *inside* the self. Otto can agree with Schleiermacher that the religious experience is ultimately a kind of recollection, since it springs from the very depths of human consciousness. Moreover, these depths are such that they are themselves the ground of both theoretical and practical reason. Nevertheless, despite these real similarities it is important to keep in mind that at several important junctures Otto sought to distance himself from Schleiermacher. For instance, what Schleiermacher called the intuition and feeling of the Infinite, Otto dubbed “the faculty of divination.” He criticized Schleiermacher for thinking that this faculty of divination was active in everyone; his own position is that it is a universal *potentiality* (Otto, p. 149). Only certain persons possessed of “divinatory natures” actualize this consciousness; and it is through them that others are awakened to it. For a large part of humanity the predisposition to religion consists only in “receptivity” and a “principle of judgment and acknowledgement” (Otto, p. 177). Further, Otto criticized Schleiermacher for not having recognized that not only are there capable of divining the holy, there are also persons, e.g., Christ, that are holy themselves. Hence he notes that in the fifth speech of *On Religion* “Christ is here introduced as the supreme divining *subject*, not as the *object* of divination *par excellence*” (p. 155).

Schleiermacher

Key to Schleiermacher’s “Copernican revolution in theology” is the idea that the basic datum of theology is not dogma, the letter of Scripture, or the rational understanding, but feeling. Prior to Schleiermacher it was thought that religious feelings were occasioned by the content of what was confessed in Scripture and the Christian creeds and confessions. For instance, classical Lutheran theology has the believer reacting with gratitude to the promises of God as revealed and fulfilled in Jesus Christ; this religious emotion is evoked by the content of what is believed. Schleiermacher’s theology turned this scheme on its head: religious feeling is the basis of doctrine. The heading of § 15 in *The Christian Faith* reads, “Christian doctrines are accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech.” And at the end of that section Schleiermacher remarks that “the doctrines in all their forms have their ultimate ground so exclusively in the emotions of the religious self-consciousness, that where these do not exist the doctrines cannot arise” (*CF*, § 15, p. 78). As such, revelation does not operate

on us simply as cognitive beings, but rather operates at a much deeper level, that is, at the level of the immediate self-consciousness itself. Revelation, and the doctrines arising from it, are not a set of theoretical propositions about the nature of God as God is in God-self and God's relation to the world. We have access only to God as God stands in relation to us, as the whence of our active and receptive existence.³ Hence we know God only as God is *experienced*, through the God-consciousness. The original expressions of piety are the poetic and rhetorical, out of which arise symbols pointing past themselves to the ground of all that is (*CF*, § 15 and 16). Christian doctrines are second order statements reflecting and systematizing these original expressions (*CF*, 79, § 16.1). Insofar as it is *immediate*, the fundamental religious experience has not been worked through by consciousness and is not yet, at this stage, understood in terms of historically conditioned thought forms and categories. However, the expression of this fundamental religious datum in poetry and rhetoric, and their subsequent systematizations, are thus historically conditioned since they have been mediated by consciousness.

While a condition of genuine religion is the immediate self-consciousness universally present in all human beings, Schleiermacher did not believe that there was such a thing as religion in general. Religion is always positive religion. It can only make its appearance in a historically conditioned moment, and as an expression of such a moment. Important in this regard is Schleiermacher's distinction between three grades of consciousness: the confused, animal grade of consciousness, the sensible self-consciousness through which the individual becomes conscious of the distinction between self and world, and the higher consciousness. In the animal grade of consciousness there is no clear distinction between the self as that which feels and is receptive, and the object it intuits (*CF*, 18, §5.1). Only at the level of the sensible self-consciousness is there a clear distinction between self and world; such a distinction, however, implies self-consciousness, since in order to distinguish between self and world consciousness must be able to make itself its own object. By the time that he writes *The Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher has refined the position initially developed in the *Speeches*: the higher consciousness only develops once there is self-consciousness and a clear distinction between self and world. Only insofar as the two are clearly distinguished can the individual become aware of the unitary ground of both. This awareness is

immediate insofar as it cannot become a thematized object *for* consciousness; paradoxically, however, it can only make its appearance once the self is clearly aware of the distinction between self and world and is therefore self-conscious. This is why the feeling of absolute dependence is a product of the immediate *self*-consciousness. Since the immediate self-consciousness is never thematized, it is always in the background, remaining self-identical throughout the changing states of an individual's sensible self-consciousness. The "consciousness of absolute dependence . . . is quite simple, and remains self-identical while all other states are changing" (*CF*, 21, §5.3). Decisive for the historically conditioned character of religion, however, is the relation of the higher self-consciousness to the sensible self-consciousness, which always approaches the world from a particular historically conditioned point of view, and hence through historically conditioned categories. In a key passage Schleiermacher notes

It is impossible for anyone to be in some moments exclusively conscious of his relations within the realm of the antithesis, and in other moments of this absolute dependence in itself and in a general way; for it is as a person determined for this moment in a particular manner within the realm of the antithesis that he is conscious of his absolute dependence. This relatedness of the sensibly determined to the higher consciousness in the unity of the moment is the consummating point of self-consciousness. (*CF*, 22, § 5.3).

The genesis of positive religion lies at this consummating point of self-consciousness. At the level of immediate self-consciousness the God-consciousness is always present and remains the same, but at the level of the antithesis it can express itself in varying degrees. The God-consciousness is transcendental; it is like a light that casts its rays on all the objects of consciousness affecting how they are understood, valued, and felt. Schleiermacher tells us that it "accompanies our whole existence" and "is never at zero" (*CF*, 16, §4.3). As such, the higher consciousness is in relation to every moment of the sensible self-consciousness. It can, however, be obscured and overshadowed through inattention to the influence of the higher (transcendental) consciousness upon moments of the sensible self-consciousness. The "evil condition" from which humans need redemption is precisely such an "obstruction or arrest of the vitality of the higher-consciousness, so that there comes to be little or no union of it with the various determinations of the sensible self-consciousness . . ." (*CF*, 55, § 11.2). In its most

extreme form it is “God-forgetfulness.” Nevertheless, even when “painted in its darkest colors,” the opposition between God-forgetfulness and redemption is always a relative one, that is, a matter of degree, since the feeling of absolute dependence is never at zero. Schleiermacher’s characterization of the evil condition is an important one:

Given an activity of the sensible self-consciousness to occupy a moment of time and to connect it with another: its ‘exponent’ or ‘index’ will be greater than that of the higher self-consciousness for uniting itself therewith; and given an activity of the higher self-consciousness, to occupy a moment of time through union with a determination of the sensible, its ‘exponent’ or ‘index’ will be less than that of the activity of the sensible for completing the moment for itself alone (*CF*, 55, §11.2).

How the moments of the sensible self-consciousness are *connected* is the key to the antithesis. In the evil condition, any given moment of the sensible self-consciousness is given more power to determine the next moment of consciousness than the transcendental consciousness itself. Since the moments of the sensible self-consciousness are made up of the opposition between self and world, the evil condition amounts to the belief (itself having determinative power) that what determines states of the self are intra-worldly causes. Each state of the self is understood as determined by prior states of the self and its interaction with the world in accordance with natural laws. As such, the grounds for each state can eventually be traced to events preexisting the agent. This way of understanding one’s situation amounts to a state of “captivity or constraint” (*CF*, 54, § 11.2), since one views oneself and one’s actions as ultimately completely determined by outside forces. Moreover, this frame of mind promotes identification of the self with the body. Schleiermacher defines sin as “an arrestment of the determinative power of spirit, due to the independence of the sensuous functions;” it is a “turning away from the creator” (*CF*, 273, §66.2). To value what is given through the senses independently of what grounds them promotes fear, for what is given through the senses is finite and corruptible. Schleiermacher remarks that if

. . . the predominant factor is not the God-consciousness but the flesh, every impression made by the world upon us and invoking an obstruction of our bodily and temporal life must be reckoned as an evil, and the more so, the more definitely the moment of experience terminates solely in the flesh apart from the higher consciousness. (*CF*, 316, §75.1)

The body, too, can be threatened, and to identify oneself with it also brings fear.

In redemption, on the other hand, the person understands his or her states as determined principally by the *whence* of his or her active and receptive existence. Central to Schleiermacher's understanding of the Christian faith is that redemption "has been universally and completely accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth" (*CF*, 56, § 11.3), whose own God-consciousness was perfectly and fully developed. In virtue of this fact Jesus is able to awaken the God-consciousness in all human beings and so redeem them. Insofar as the God-consciousness is awakened, the person understands herself as *free* in relation to the world, that is, not determined by intra-worldly causes. So Schleiermacher, "no one can doubt that the results of free activity take place in virtue of absolute dependence" (*CF*, 190, §49.1). He further notes that "the God-consciousness surely. . . has a content which relates exclusively to human freedom and presupposes it" (*CF* 260, §62.2). Awakening of the God-consciousness empowers the individual to work for the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. As such, the strength of the God-consciousness makes possible certain kinds of behavior, explored by Schleiermacher in his *Christian Ethics*. There he remarks that "The Kingdom of God on Earth, however, is nothing other than the manner and way of being a Christian, which must always be understood through action" (*Christian Ethics* 12, p. 26). The Christian religious emotions are such that "all pain and all joy are religious only in so far as they are related to activity in the Kingdom of God" (*CF*, 43 §9.2). The "will for the Kingdom of God" is "at once love to men and love to Christ and love to God," which is at the same time "Christ's love working in and through us" (*CF*, 520, §112.3). Hence the feeling of absolute dependence expresses itself in the activity of the Kingdom of God; this activity has as its basis love for God and neighbor springing from the God-consciousness itself. While sin and God-forgetfulness result in fear, in a contraction of the self (insofar as the self is viewed as merely passive and only suffering what happens to it), awakening of the God-consciousness spurs the self to the activity of loving through the love of Christ. Identification of the self with this activity expands the self insofar as the self no longer identifies itself with the limited and changeable body but with spirit.

For Schleiermacher the way that an individual *represents* the world (Knowing) and the spring of action (Doing) are the two prongs of human *activity* or spontaneity. This activity stands in contrast with receptivity, that is, how the person is affected from

without. Both Knowing and Doing are integral component of how the God-consciousness *expresses* itself in its relation to the sensible self-consciousness. While both Knowing and Doing are elements of piety, “they only pertain to it inasmuch as the stirred up Feeling sometimes comes to rest in a thinking which fixes it, sometimes discharges itself in an action which expresses it” (*CF*, 10, §3.4) Hence it must be stressed that the feeling of absolute dependence lying at the ground of Christian piety is *transcendental*, that is, it does not merely accompany the way something is represented *as a result* of its having been represented in a particular way. It is, rather, the ground of the manner in which representations at the level of the sensible self-consciousness occur. Piety (the God-consciousness) does not consist of “having certain representations” rather “representations as such are thereby always merely secondary” (*Christian Ethics*, 21, lines 4-8). Both Knowing and Doing, the way something is represented and the motive impulses for action, are related to one another in virtue of the fact that the immediate self-consciousness lies at the ground of both. Hence Schleiermacher notes that “A ‘Doing’ can arise from a ‘Knowing’ only ‘as mediated by a determination of self-consciousness” (*CF* §4.5, 12).⁴ Moreover, Schleiermacher recognizes that in all knowledge there is a connection between one representation and the next, and that this movement is due to the *activity* of consciousness; hence knowing, too, is a species of doing mediated by a determination of the immediate self-consciousness. He tells us that the “thinking activity . . . is also an endeavor to connect the apprehended truth with other truths or to seek out cases for its application, and thus there is always present simultaneously the commencement of a Doing. . . .” (*CF* §3.5, 11). The immediate self-consciousness ultimately grounds the transition from one representation to the next, the movement from representation to desire (as the spring of action) and vice versa, and the incentives to action themselves.

The problem of how to understand the relation between what is represented (what is known) to desire (the impulse to action) preoccupied Schleiermacher in many of his writings on ethics. His mature solution to the problem, found here in *The Christian Faith* and the *Christian Ethics*, is quite different from those proposed in his much earlier *Dialogues on Freedom* (1789) and in *On Freedom*. In the *Dialogues on Freedom* Schleiermacher argued that *desire* influences what is represented and how long it is dwelt

upon. For instance, the individual that is madly in love may choose to ignore the signs that he or she is being cheated on by his or her lover. In such cases desire can influence what one chooses to dwell upon as well as the inferences that might be made from bit and pieces of information that are put out of mind. In *On Freedom*, on the other hand, Schleiermacher argued the opposite: *how* something is represented influences whether and how it is desired. There he notes that “even if in some particular case the preponderance of one impulse over others is based in such accidental determinations of the faculty of desire as having been produced through its preceding activities, these in turn have their first ground in the faculty of representation” (UF 237; 22). Here *how* one understands the world is key to desire, the spring of action. Hence if I tell myself that a co-worker is not doing his or her fair share of the work, I will have a different attitude to that person, and hence behave in different ways to him or her, than if I thought that s/he was doing more than was required. By the time that Schleiermacher writes the *Christian Faith* he concludes that what makes possible the transition from representation to desire (as the spring of action), and vice versa, is something much deeper than both and lying at their ground, namely the immediate self-consciousness. As such, the immediate self-consciousness lies at the ground of both theoretical and practical reason.

Because the immediate self-consciousness is foundational for both representation and desire, “the world will be a different thing to a man according as he apprehends it from the standpoint of a God-consciousness completely paralyzed or of one absolutely paramount” (CF, 267, §64.2). In other words, how one understands the world will depend upon the relation of the God-consciousness to the sensible self-consciousness. Schleiermacher continues,

. . . it will accordingly be possible to distinguish in the Christian life itself between what in our conception of the world is to be placed to the account of sin, and what to the account of grace. The like holds good also of the results of man’s action upon the world as far as these are realities to himself and come within his consciousness. (CF, 276, 64.2)

There are ways of looking at the world that are the result of grace, others that are the result of sin. Whether or not the God-consciousness is operative has an effect on the way the whole world is perceived, understood, and felt. Consequently, the world of the individual receptive of grace is a different one from the world of the individual whose

mind has been darkened by sin. The whole Gestalt is different. Schleiermacher understood well before Wittgenstein that *how* the world is perceived has an effect on *what* is perceived.

Rudolf Otto

While Otto was influenced by Schleiermacher, he sought to distance himself from him. In 1904 he was converted to the views of the neo-Kantian Jakob Freidrich Fries (1773-1843). While acknowledging his debt to Schleiermacher, Otto was often critical of him, preferring a Friesian analysis of feeling in religion. In 1909 he published *The Philosophy of Religion Based on Kant and Fries*, where he criticized Schleiermacher for never quite emerging from “that lack of precision” in the *Speeches*; Fries, on the other hand, is commended for his “exact anthropology” (174). Influenced by Fries, Otto speaks of *Ahnung*, an “utterly confused feeling which defies any symbolic expression” of the “depth and mystery of existence.” This feeling of the mystery behind all existence persists despite the understanding of the universe in terms of natural law. It “can surge up in the guise of a disconcerting force, from the deepest places of a man’s consciousness, and can make him quiver in every nerve. . .” (137). The Friesian neo-Kantian philosophy helped Otto consolidate his view that what can be known and conceptualized in terms of natural laws are mere phenomena, that is, appearances that are given to the senses. This knowledge, however, does not penetrate to what things are in themselves. This, as well as their ground, remains as mysterious as ever. Religion should not be used to fill in gaps in scientific knowledge. Science concerns itself with mere phenomena; religion, however, is grounded in the feeling for the mystery behind the phenomena themselves.⁵

Despite some of the similarities between Schleiermacher and Otto’s analysis of religious feeling, there are also marked differences between the two. While Schleiermacher’s analysis of religious feeling concentrates on the *transcendental* nature of the God consciousness, Otto explores how this feeling becomes manifest in elements given *to consciousness*.⁶ It is not that Otto denies the transcendental basis for the genesis of religious feeling, but his focus is on the phenomenology of the religious experience as it develops historically. Shortly into *The Idea of the Holy* he takes issue with Schleiermacher’s analysis of the feeling of absolute dependence on two counts. First he

faults Schleiermacher for making the distinction between the feeling of absolute dependence and the *relative* feeling of dependence on things in the world one of mere *degree*. Second, he argues that the religious category discovered by Schleiermacher was merely a category of “self-valuation, in the sense of self-depreciation.” As such the religious feeling is “directly and primarily a sort of *self*-consciousness, a feeling concerning oneself in a special determined relation, viz., one’s dependence.” One is first conscious of *the self* as absolutely dependent, and only of God secondarily, as the result of an inference. Putting aside the issue of whether Otto truly grasped the transcendental character of Schleiermacher’s analysis of religious feeling, Otto’s point is that a phenomenological analysis of religious feeling reveals that its primary datum is not the dependent self. According to Otto “the ‘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” (*Idea of the Holy*, 10-11). This object Otto identifies as “the numinous”, which is the irrational element in the Holy. The creature feeling, the feeling of being but “dust and ashes” is the result of another feeling that is prior to it, namely the feeling of coming into contact with the *tremenda majestas*, the “awful majesty” of God which cannot be apprehended through concepts but only directly intuited through feeling. The numinous is felt directly as an object *outside* the self. While Otto’s analysis is of the feeling states of the individual that comes into contact with the numinous, the numinous should not be confused with these feeling states themselves, nor is the numinous the mere result of an inference from a subjective state; it is apprehended directly as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

Much of Otto’s most famous work, *The Idea of the Holy*, is concerned with providing a phenomenological analysis of the feeling elements through which the numinous is apprehended. While the Holy is comprised of rational elements as well (these can be thought through concepts such as spirit, selfhood, reason, purpose and good will), it is with the category of the numinous that Otto is principally concerned. Because the numinous cannot be thought, only felt, Otto calls it *irrational*. The numinous is apprehended as mystery (*mysterium*), as an overwhelming force and overpowering might (*tremendum*), and as fascinating (*fascinans*).

Otto first provides an analysis of the *mysterium*. The numinous is apprehended as something that “strikes us dumb,” and that brings with it “amazement absolute” (*Idea*, p. 26). As such, the numinous is apprehended as “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 of the Holy*, 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.⁷ 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” (*Religious Essays*, 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” (*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.

The numinous, according to Otto, is also experienced as *tremendum* and as *fascinans*. The element of the *tremendum* 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 sense of its unapproachability brings with it a peculiar dread of a completely different nature from the fear that can be experienced of objects in the natural world. Hence to mark something off as hallowed is to mark it off by this feeling of peculiar dread, which recognizes its numinous character. 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 emanation 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 (*orge*) of God, which Otto finds 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 naïveté of the analogy consists in thinking of God as wrathful, thereby attributing to God human purpose and emotion. 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). 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. 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). In love mysticism it is experienced as the fire of divine love that the mystic can hardly endure.

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).

Further, the numen can be ultimately experienced as the source of unspeakable bliss; this bliss is of a completely different order from natural happiness. Otto speaks of the “*wonderfulness* and rapture which lies in the mysterious beatific experience of the deity” (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.

For Otto the rational aspect of the Holy, its attributes of reason, goodness, and purpose, are also *a priori*. Later parts of *Idea of the Holy* are concerned with a discussion of the relationship between rational and irrational aspects of the Holy. At the very beginning of the book Otto notes that the rational attributes of the deity do not exhaust the idea of deity, but rather “imply a non-rational or supra-rational Subject of which they are predicates. They are ‘essential’ (and not merely accidental’) attributes of that subject, but it is important to notice, *synthetic* essential attributes” (*Idea*, 2). In other words, the rational elements of the Holy cannot be derived from our concepts of the experience of the irrational elements, and that is why they are *synthetic*. The rational aspects of the Holy somehow schematize the irrational aspects (*Idea*, 140-141). Critics of Otto rightly point out that how this process of schematization occurs is not clear.⁸ This is important since Otto clearly holds that the experience of the irrational aspect of the numen is foundational to religion; only later does it become schematized. Hence it is not clear what relation the personal aspects of deity, and with these conceptions of God’s goodness and purposes for creation, have to the experience of the irrational numen.⁹ The relation of ethics to religion is a problem for Otto.

Both Schleiermacher and Otto make religious experience foundational to religion. The way that they conceive of this experience, while initially grounded in similar assumptions, turns out to be rather different. Schleiermacher develops a sophisticated transcendental analysis of the conditions of the possibility of religious experience. While

Otto was highly influenced by Schleiermacher's thought, it is not clear that he grasped the transcendental character of Schleiermacher's analysis. Otto, on the other hand, developed a very powerful phenomenological analysis of the religious experience. Through certain minor revisions it can be made compatible with Schleiermacher's analysis, i.e., through stipulating that the transcendental experience grounds the possibility of the phenomenological experience of the numinous. Moreover, some of the problems briefly pointed out above in Otto's analysis of religion, i.e., how to relate rational to non-rational elements, may have the genesis of a solution in Schleiermacher. For Schleiermacher, it will be recalled, the immediate self-consciousness is the ground of both theoretical and practical reason. As such, rational concepts about the deity, as well as precepts regarding the ethical life of the believer, proceed from it as well. Hence the God-consciousness ultimately expresses itself in symbols and concepts having direct ethical implications.

¹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, translated by John Oman, (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1958), p. 103. This is a translation of the third edition of Schleiermacher's *Speeches*. All subsequent citations of the *Speeches* will be to the Oman translation and will be indicated inside the body of the text by *OR*, with page numbers following. The first edition has been introduced, translated and annotated by Richard Crouter, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

² Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, H. R. MacKintosh and J. S. Stewart (eds.) (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), §4, p. 12ff. All future references to the *The Christian Faith* will be contained in the body of the text, indicated by *CF* followed by the paragraph and page numbers.

³ Kant's argument that we cannot have knowledge of things in themselves, but only of phenomena given to the senses no doubt played a role in Schleiermacher's turn to the grounding of dogmatics in religious *experience*. In the first edition of the *Speeches* (1799), Schleiermacher notes that "All intuition proceeds from the influence of the intuited on one who intuits. . . . What you thus intuit and perceive is not the nature of things, but their action upon us. What you know or believe about the nature of things is far beyond the realm of intuition" Crouter, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-105. This passage was slightly altered in later editions, where the word "intuition" is often replaced by "feeling". On the nature of intuition, Schleiermacher follows Kant, for whom intuition is that through which a cognition "relates immediately" to objects. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 172; A19/B33. In the *Speeches*, Schleiermacher defines intuition as an "immediate perception" (Crouter, *op. cit.*, p. 105).

⁴ Cf. §3.4, p. 8, of *The Christian Faith* ". . . the immediate self-consciousness is always the mediating link in the transition between moments in which Knowing predominates

and those in which Doing predominates so that a different Doing may proceed from the same knowing according as a different determination of self-consciousness enters in.”

⁵ “Instead of crude Dualism, the conviction now begins to gain ground that Nature and Nature’s happenings, and obedience to her laws, are rather to be regarded as inadequate, mere phenomena, an image of real things conditioned by limited comprehension, and therefore insufficient as an image of the real world, which is a world free from laws of Nature, free from mathematics and mechanics, a world of spirit and intelligence, a “realm of grace”, a world of God.” *The Philosophy of Religion Based on Kant and Fries*, Rudolf Otto, trans. by E. B. Dicker (London: Williams and Norgate, 1931).

⁶ Critics of Otto believe that his theory is problematic precisely insofar as it weaves together an empirical, phenomenological analysis of the religious consciousness with philosophical considerations borrowed from Kant and Schleiermacher. Philip Almond, for instance, notes that “it is exactly in the attempt to interweave his empirico-psychological account of religion with his theoretical assumptions as to how it ought to be that the fabric of Otto’s analysis unravels. The empirical analysis of religious states of consciousness does imply a *variety* of religious experiences, whereas, by contrast, the presuppositions of Otto’s philosophical analysis of the Holy entail a *unity* of religious experience.” Philip Almond, *Rudolf Otto*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 63. Cf., David Bastow, “Otto and Numinous Experience,” in *Religious Studies*, 12, 159-176.

⁷ 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).

⁸ See for instance Almond, who quotes Bernard Häring’s assessment: Otto’s “theory of the ‘schematization of numinous by the rational-moral has met with almost universal criticism.” Almond, *op. Cit.*, p. 98. These criticisms are developed by Almond in subsequent pages.

⁹ On this point see Melissa Raphael’s excellent study, *Rudolf Otto and the Concept of Holiness*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), chapters 4 and 5.