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PROFESSOR RUDOLF OTTO AND *THE IDEA OF THE HOLY.*

By J. W. Harvey, Esq., M.A., Professor of Philosophy at Armstrong College, University of Durham.

IN the short time at my disposal I think I cannot do better than consider in succession what I take to be the four cardinal elements in Dr. Otto's contribution to religious thought, four central contentions for which he stands. Each of them represents a protest against an error or danger or distortion which either is or has been of influence on religious thought and life; and it may be easiest to characterise the positive contentions of Otto by designating these errors against which they protest.

But at the outset let me note one general mistake about his teaching. Dr. Otto is quite misunderstood if it is imagined that he is claiming to advance any "new doctrine"—a phrase used about him in a recent number of *The Modern Churchman*. Rightly or wrongly, Otto would certainly maintain that he is simply calling attention to aspects of religion and elements in the religious experience which have too often been neglected by theologians and philosophers, but which the entire history of religion unmistakably attests and illustrates. And I think that perhaps his greatest service is in the impressive assemblage of religious testimony drawn from all climes and ages which his books present—a truly illuminating contribution to the "comparative study of religion."

There is probably far more *novelty* in such a position as that of Karl Barth, though the latter owes something, I think, to the writings of Otto: but by the same token there is, I should say, inevitably less of truth. The more the claim is made to be interpreting something permanent and fundamental in human life and experience, the more suspicious should we be—and rightly—of the drastically novel. But we know well that novelty is not the sole or the best originality. And I think that even his critics admit that Dr. Otto has *re*stated, *re*discovered, *re*presented aspects of religion which he would himself claim to be "*uralt*," primeval, in a fresh, personal, original and valuable way.

What then are the central points in this restatement, to which I have referred above?

I think they might be put as a series of protests against a series of "isms": (1) against subjectivism and an undue preoccupation with religious "states of mind"; (2) against intellectualism and a too narrow interpretation of religious "knowledge"; (3) against what I will provisionally call "moralism," a tendency to identify absolute or sacred values with moral values in a wide sense of that term; (4) against naturalism and secularism, a protest on behalf of a supernatural interpretation of the world.

(1) The Protest against Subjectivism.

Some of the pages of *The Idea of the Holy* which have attracted most attention in this country are those which analyse the primitive and elusive elements of feeling which characterise the religious and also the pre-religious experience; the difference, for instance, between supernatural or "numinous" awe and ordinary fear; the intimate relation between the emotion of daunted creaturehood and the exuberant exaltation or exultation in the contrasted greatness of God. And hence it has been sometimes thought that Otto is concerned to emphasise the importance of the emotional life in religion alongside and supplementary to moral activity and enlightened intellectual belief.

There is, I think, this much of truth in such a view, that Otto's books have been a not unimportant influence in his own country towards bringing about a more sympathetic study of the "varieties of religious experience," especially of Mystical experience, in which the inner emotional life plays its very noticeable part. (The German public was undoubtedly much later than the Anglo-American in developing this interest in and sympathy with mystical literature.) But it is an almost ludicrous error to think of him as emphasising the importance, still less the primacy, of *emotional* experience in the religious life. If this were his position, there would be much more force in the sort of criticism excellently represented by Mr. Leonard Hodgson in his little book on *The Place of Reason in Christian Apologetic*. Mr. Hodgson urges that emotions merely as such must before being accepted and welcomed be subjected to rational examination and criticism. There would be a certain danger in any plea to cultivate (even were this possible) so-called "religious" emotions merely as states of mind. It may lead to the "introversion" of the psychologists, the unhealthy turning away from the outer reality; or to the sort of sentimentalism which characterised the more morbid type of "romantic." And I daresay it is a true criticism of some popular writing on Mysticism, that this unhealthy tendency is, to put it no more strongly, at least not too effectively discouraged.

But in point of fact Otto is throughout himself at issue with this tendency to dwell upon religious emotions for their own sake. Throughout he is concerned with the "objective reference" of religious experience, that it is concerned, as Dr. Oman tells us, with the relation of the individual to an Environment or Environer, which has to be acknowledged and in so far forth is knowable.

The misunderstanding here is due to the unfortunate ambiguity of the term "feeling," to which in fact Mr. Hodgson himself calls attention. There is the same ambiguity in the German word Gefuhl, and Otto has discussed it in an appendix to his volume on *Western and Eastern Mysticism* (not included in the English translation of that book). The point is after all simple enough. We say we feel joy, or fear, or boredom at something. Here there is,

it is true, *a* reference to an object, but the feeling specifies merely a state of our own mind, it is not a *cognition of* an object, but an emotion caused *by* it. But we also say, "I feel the presence of somebody," or "This gives me a feeling of familiarity." And here the word means a kind of awareness, though often not any knowledge that can be explicated and set out in clearly determined concepts. "Feeling" in this second sense may involve varied feelings in the first sense of emotional state, or perhaps none at all that can be noticed. Thus the feeling of familiarity may (the proverb tells us) prompt us to contempt, or it may entail boredom, or relief, hope, joy, according to the circumstances.

Now in so far as Otto is concerned with "feelings," whether of the mystic or the non-mystic, it is nearly always as *apprehensions*, ways of knowing other than, perhaps more delicate and penetrating than, conceptual understanding. The feeling in the other sense, that of emotion or affect, is rather the reverberation which the response to the fact apprehended sets up.[1]

His emphasis is therefore strongly against "subjectivism." And I think he has contributed not a little to the liberation of modern religious thought from an excessive preoccupation with the mood and emotional attitude of the "religious" person, in a word the tendency to study "religiosity" apart from its context in the total fact that is religion. This is a tendency to which some forms of evangelical Protestantism have shown themselves liable. We welcome a teaching which helps to swing back the centre of gravity away from man and his attitude to God and towards God and His dealings with man.

(2) The Protest against Intellectualism.

This insistence upon the genuine awareness in feeling of a divine reality leads to the second contention I wish briefly to discuss. This is a protest against what for want of a better word may be called Intellectualism. The sub-title of *The Idea of the Holy* is "An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational."

Here the common misunderstanding turns upon the meaning of the term non-rational (*das irrationale*). Dr. Otto is not, in pleading for a clearer recognition of a "non-rational factor in the idea of the divine," arguing the cause of mere obscurantism. He is not rebuking man's reason for presumptuousness in venturing upon sacred ground. He is not reviving the *Credo quia absurdum*.

[1] A single example may perhaps suffice to show how objective his approach is. He is dissatisfied with Schleiermacher's famous formulation of the core of religious experience: "the sense of absolute dependence" because it is too much concerned with the self and its self-consciousness and too little with the transcendent fact of deity. For Otto the primary fact is—the feeling of—not our dependence,—but the "numen," "felt" as supreme over against us. And it is *from* this essentially *cognitive* consciousness, this awareness of a transcendent reality, that our self-consciousness as absolutely dependent is derived, as subsidiary and essentially secondary.

A prefatory note which he added to the later impressions of the English translation may be worth quoting.

" In this book," [he writes] " I have ventured to write of that which may be called non-rational or supra-rational in the depths of the divine nature. I do not thereby want to promote in any way the tendency of our time towards an extravagant and fantastic ' irrationalism,' but rather to join issue with it in its morbid form. The ' irrational ' is to-day a favourite theme of all who are too lazy to think or too ready to evade the arduous duty of clarifying their ideas and grounding their convictions on a basis of coherent thought. This book . . . makes a serious attempt to analyse all the more exactly the *feeling* which remains where the *concept* fails." . . .

He adds:

" I feel that no one ought to concern himself with the *numen ineffabile* who has not devoted assiduous and serious study to the *ratio aeterna.*"

To the difficult question as to the relationship between the two aspects of the divine nature here recognised and distinguished (*numen* and *ratio*) I return in a moment. But in view of the above statement I do not think that the criticism sometimes made against Otto can be sustained, namely that he seeks to base a religious apologetic upon the failure and abdication of human reason.

Just as before, it is easy to be misled by the ambiguity of a term, here the term *reason*. In the widest possible meaning that might be given to the word it might cover the whole of man's cogitative faculty, his endeavour to grapple with experience in reflection so as to grasp to the utmost its inexhaustible significance. " Reason " would then be man's whole cognitive faculty in action, and as the opposite of knowledge is nescience so the opposite of the rational would be the nonsensical. Whatever then is relevant and meaningful for man would be included within the scope of reason. In this sense of the word (and here I quote from a passage in a letter of Dr. Otto's)

" God is naturally altogether a rational object; for God would be for us no concern if we could not in some way or other have knowledge of Him; He is for us only relevant in so far as he is knowable (*erkennlich*), whatever overplus of being he has in himself beyond what we can know. But this will make the contention that an object of knowledge or cognition must necessarily also be a ' rational object,' a mere meaningless tautology."

But the sense which the words *reason* and *rational* bear in Otto's thought is, of course, narrower than this. They refer not to the total span of human apprehension but to knowledge of a certain kind, knowledge which is capable of explicit formulation in clearly grasped concepts, knowledge that can be stated, assessed, analysed. And in contrast to this he is pleading that religion must admit as at least equally fundamental *another sort* of knowledge, for which as we see he finds the term feeling indispensable, but for which he also adopts another special term, *divination*. This divination cannot in the strict sense of the word be expressed or communicated. It has to make shift with figurative and symbolic means, hint and intimation rather than statement, just because its object cannot

be formulated. Otto's name for this object, the numinous, simply serves to point a direction. For the content of this term he can only refer his reader to his own unmistakable intuitions. If we are honest with ourselves, we shall, he holds, recognise certain such feelings, palpable though not definable, which *mean* something, and that what they mean is an essential part of the meaning of holiness or sanctity.

" The non-rational in the idea of deity " is not therefore that which is beyond knowledge, but that which we do *know* but cannot conceptually understand.

" St. Paul " [he writes in the letter already cited] " speaks of a peace that passes understanding. He does not mean a peace of which man can know nothing, for that would interest nobody, but an eternal good that transcends our ' comprehension ' by conceptual thought, and which we at the same time *know* far better than all that we can grasp by the conceptual understanding. . . . ' Le cœur a ses raisons que la Raison ne connaît pas.' "

In quoting this famous challenge of Pascal, Dr. Otto does, I think, lay himself open to misunderstanding. Pascal was in many ways defiantly an *anti*-rationalist : he almost glories in the frustration of Reason when it attempted to plumb the abysses of religion. But Otto has no such disparagement for the activity of the mind operating with clearly grasped concepts. Reason is indispensable but insufficient, and there are religious realities knowable in other ways. Reason has its indefeasible rights and its honourable place in apologetic. It is against reason in the sense of a narrow and self-sufficient intellectualism that a protest has to be entered.

But the relationship between the two ways of approach, the rational and the non-rational, is not merely that the latter *supplements* the former. It is something far more intimate. This is a point of crucial importance in Dr. Otto's presentation, and it may be considered in connection with the third main protest which I recognise him as making.

(3) The Protest against " Moralism."

In speaking of this as the protest against " moralism " I mean by this term the tendency which in its extreme form would virtually reduce religion to an ethic ; or, in a less extreme form, would interpret the meaning of holiness or sacredness virtually exclusively in terms of the values recognised in ethics.

Here more than before, Dr. Otto has perhaps risked misunderstanding by the exaggeration of his emphasis. If I am concerned to plead the claims of X, there will always be people found to accuse me of denying those of Y, whereas the fact may simply be that I have taken these as unquestioned. If it is true that Otto is not disparaging the intellectual reason, still less does he misprize the moral values. (As a matter of fact, his principal teaching for some time past has been, I believe, on Ethics.) But I think his statements do certainly almost suggest that he does. His argument in *The Idea of the Holy* is directed so markedly towards expounding the

limits of the bare ethical that it is hardly surprising that he has been held to disparage it.

The sort of one-sidedness against which he is contending may be illustrated by a quotation from a very typical representative of the "moralising" school, and the moralising period, namely the British Victorian age. Rather than refer to Matthew Arnold's famous dictum about religion consider some words of the hardly less characteristic figure of Froude. Religion, says Froude, is "the consecration of the whole man, of his heart, his conduct, his knowledge and his mind." This could hardly, perhaps, be bettered, but everything turns on the meaning given to the term consecration; and we see what it means for Froude when we find him saying in the same paper, that "the religious history of mankind is the history of the efforts which men have made to discover the moral law and to enforce it in so far as it is known." Religious consecration, in fact, is whole-hearted devotion to the ideal of moral good. This implies that the holiness of God which claims our worship is simply his perfect and absolute "moral" goodness.

This position, which would probably be widely accepted, is emphatically rejected by Otto. He maintains that the feeling or divination of the numinous which cannot be thought out or thought home carries with it an appreciation of a value, which likewise cannot be exhausted by our moral conceptions of goodness, nor even if we add to that the other absolute values of the traditional triad, goodness, truth and beauty. This overplus of meaning can, he holds, be recognised if we let the import of terms like *holy*, *hallow*, *sacred*, make its full impact upon the mind. He has nothing more to say to one who, having in all sincerity exposed his mind to the full pressure of those meanings, yet finds nothing more there than what is contained in the idea of "perfect goodness."

Dr. Otto's exposition has, I think, been obscured and confused by an unfortunate terminology, drawn from Kant, which he employs in attempting to intimate the interconnection of "rational-moral" with "numinous" values which together make up the full meaning of "holiness." But he often contents himself with metaphor, and metaphor is here perhaps wiser than a parade of logical technicalities. Thus the two "moments," the "rational-moral" and the "numinous," are said to blend like notes in a chord; or (a favourite figure) they are like the warp and woof of a fabric. They are at any rate distinct and yet not in essence separable.

There are difficulties of interpretation here which I cannot pretend to solve. A central one concerns the whole problem of religious development. For Otto, it is clear, the first beginning of religious apprehension is of the "numinous," "felt" as awe-inspiring (and therefore as possessing value), but not esteemed as possessing specifically ethical value. The supernatural is "awed" as holy before it becomes reverenced as good. But he will not admit the contention of some of his critics, that the progress in religious insight is precisely that by which non-ethical awe *passes into* ethical reverence; that is, an object worthy of awe is found

to be an object demanding reverence. The sense or feeling for the "numinous"-holy is not a stage of almost animal susceptibility, outgrown as man grows into moral personality and increases in moral insight. Rather, the story of religious development is the tale of *both* a growth in "moral" enlightenment *and* (if I may so put it) a growth in "numinous" enlightenment. The difference between the sublimity of the God of high religion and the weird, unearthly, awed object of primitive cults is certainly an ethical difference; but it is not *only* an ethical difference. In the "holiness" apprehended by the higher religions, that of the God of Isaiah, or of Christ, there is "felt" a unique value over and above that of "moral perfection."

He puts this definitely enough thus in a letter:

"Let me say, then, that in the Holy a value quite of its own supervenes upon the merely moral value. And this is not merely a gradation of the moral value from mere relativity to absoluteness. . . . God Himself would not by the possession of all moral goods even in absoluteness be thereby 'the Holy One.' The words: 'Be ye holy for I am holy' do not amount to 'Be ye absolutely good, for I am absolutely good.' We have only to put the two sentences together to recognise the frantic absurdity of such a contention."

He goes on to urge that there is "something palpably anthropomorphic" in the attribution of moral goodness, the good will of Kant, to God.

"Still less is it possible, however, to say or to express in words or comprehend by the reason—what the real nature of an absolutely holy will is, and how it is characterised. As Christians we have a real and deep knowledge that it is and what it is, for we experience it by way of contrast in our own consciousness of sin (which is something more than the consciousness of moral delinquency). But we know it in feelings that cannot be expressed. Scripture itself shows this. It simply assumes that our conscience is aware of what God's holiness is, but nowhere is there any attempt made to state what it is—except in symbols, analogies, and figures that are manifestly anthropomorphic."

I do not feel that I can appropriately offer any criticisms of the point of view Dr. Otto is here putting forward.

"The judgment of the sacred," must, he would say, contain some unique recognition of an element that ordinary experience does not take into account.

(4) The Protest on behalf of the "Supernatural."

This may seem a hard doctrine: it leads me to the last main point upon which I wish to touch, which has indeed been implied in the other three. I have spoken of Dr. Otto as standing for the claim of religion to be concerned with a supreme objective reality and not merely with a human attitude: as standing for the validity of a kind of knowledge which cannot be reduced to purely rational or conceptual terms, or judged at the bar of the reasoning intellect: and as standing for the reality of "values" which cannot be reduced to moral values, but contribute an indispensable part of its meaning

to the recognition of sanctity and holiness. And all this implies an emphatic and absolute rejection of secularism and naturalism, or whatever name be given to the view which holds that in the mundane nature, his own or that of the external course of events, with which man deals in his ordinary thought, is the final truth about the world.

A full generation ago, in 1904, Otto had joined issue with evolutionary naturalism (then more prosperous than to-day) in his book, *Naturalism and Religion* (translated by Sir J. Arthur Thomson), which I fancy has had fewer readers in this country than it deserves. In his later writings the same note is sounded most clearly in his reiterated insistence upon the *Ganz andere*, the aspect of inexhaustible otherness, transcendence, beyondness, incommensurableness, in the supreme divine supernature. I fancy that if there seems more than a touch of exaggeration in this emphasis, it is due to the fact that Dr. Otto was trying to correct what was at the time, and indeed still is, an over-dominant note upon the other side. The *Zeitgeist* is even now over-indulgent to easy accommodations between cultural humanism and a would-be scientific "deism," half-hearted alliances between a religion increasingly chary of the supernatural and a common-sense "science" not unwilling to borrow on easy terms all the "uplift" possible to assist its commerce with the natural: the result being, as Mr. Needham puts it,[1] a diluting of science and religion "or a mixing of them into one grey mass, where science is not very scientific and religion not very religious." Against this tendency, fatal to religion, some exaggeration of protest may be excused. And it should be remembered that Otto's most characteristic work preceded by some years the counter-attack by Karl Barth and his school against this naturalising of religion, a counter-attack in which, as it seems to me, the opposite position was extravagantly exaggerated. Had he been writing with the Barthian doctrine in view, Otto would certainly have put the stress elsewhere.

In concluding this short notice of Dr. Otto's teaching I will myself venture upon a similitude. If a man is to live as a physical being he needs food to eat and air to breathe. He must be capable of digestion and of respiration. And so with religion and the human soul. If religion is to revive and the soul of man not to wither, we need that grasp upon clearly comprehended rational and moral truth which is like the food without which we starve: but also and no less that acknowledgement of the burden of the divine mystery, that responsiveness to the further inspirations of its meaning which are like the air without which we stifle. And it seems to me that Dr. Otto's writings have done a real service in reminding us particularly of this latter need.

[1] In his book *The Great Amphibium*.