

RUDOLF OTTO

THE IDEA OF THE HOLY

AN INQUIRY INTO THE NON-RATIONAL FACTOR
IN THE IDEA OF THE DIVINE AND ITS
RELATION TO THE RATIONAL

TRANSLATED BY
JOHN W. HARVEY

PAUL TILLICH

THE COURAGE TO BE

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THE IDEA OF THE HOLY

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THE COURAGE TO BE

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**DEDICATED TO
THEODOR VON HÄRING**

*Das Schaudern ist der Menschheit bestes Teil.
Wie auch die Welt ihm das Gefühl verteuere,
Ergriffen fühlt er tief das Ungeheure.*

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

TO THE SECOND EDITION

I

THE complete reprinting of this translation of Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige* enables me to include in a revised preface a tribute prompted by personal friendship and gratitude to the author, whose death in 1937 deprived the world of western Christendom of one of its most notable and individual religious thinkers. At the same time I have taken the opportunity, in reviewing the fortunes of his book in its English version during the twenty-six years since the translation was first published, to attempt to meet one or two misunderstandings which seem rather tiresomely persistent.

Rudolf Otto was born at Peine in Hanover in 1869, and his career at first was the normal one of a University teacher of theology; he passed through the University to become *Privat-Dozent* in Systematic Theology at Göttingen in 1897, and seven years later attained the status of *Ausserordentlicher Professor* in the same University, until in 1914 he was appointed to an official Chair at Breslau. In the meantime he had published his first book, translated in 1909 under the title *Religion and Naturalism*. It is a forcibly stated argument for the autonomy of the human spirit and the insufficiency of a naturalistic science to explain or comprehend spiritual experience. He had made himself thoroughly conversant with the scientific outlook of the nineteenth century and the tendencies in it, mechanism, neo-Darwinism, and the like, which were or might be inimical to religion. But there is nothing of special originality in the book. The significant year for the development of his own distinctive contribution to religious thinking was, I suspect, 1910, when he set out on a long journey to the East which was to take him round the world. Otto had already travelled in Europe: he knew England and France and Italy, and got on well with foreigners. But the long sojourn in the East in 1910-11 must have meant much more to him. He visited North Africa, Egypt and Palestine,

India, China, and Japan, returning in due time by way of the United States. In this and in later visits to the Near East and India (1925, 1927-8) he not only deepened an already profound study of the great religions of the East but was able to realize at first hand what in the religious experience which they enshrine is specific and unique and what on the other hand is common to all genuine religions, however diversely expressed in sacred writings, ritual, or art. He brought to the interpretation of the religious practices and beliefs of many lands an imaginative sympathy that was receptive without ceasing to be critical. One of the special interests in the last ten years of his life was the establishment at Marburg of a museum for the comparative study of religions, not as dead curiosities but as living faiths.

From the time of this first Eastern journey Christianity must have stood for Otto against a background not so much of west-European science as of the great world-religions of which he held it to be the culmination. In 1917 he was appointed to a Chair of Theology at Marburg-on-the-Lahn, quaintest and most fascinating of German university towns, and there he resided till his death. He had never married, but lived with a widowed sister and her daughter, and the household was a charmingly devoted one. And it was in this year 1917 that *Das Heilige* appeared. It is no doubt Otto's most central and important work. Those that followed it were all within the framework of its ideas, some of them being amplifications working out more fully points of the argument, others manifesting further the interest in Indian and other religions which is so unmistakable in the present work. Certainly *Das Heilige* appeared at an opportune moment, and its success was immediate. It ran rapidly through a number of editions and was translated into many languages, including Japanese. What Otto had to say did appear, in the phrase of George Fox, to 'speak to the condition' of many thoughtful people in that decade of disillusion that followed the First World War. It is noteworthy that he was one of the first German scholars to be invited after the war to lecture in the United States. Widely read as his books were, however, he never attempted to found a 'school', partly

because his influence cut across the denominational divisions, partly because he was much more a religious philosopher than a dogmatic theologian, but most of all because his whole bias of mind was towards emphasizing what religious men have in common rather than what divides them.

Marburg University has always had the name of a centre of conservative and nationalist sentiment, and, it may be added, this reputation may well be perpetuated since (in 1946) the remains of Hindenburg and of Frederick the Great were transferred for reinterment in the great Marburg church of St. Elizabeth. Otto, however, was international and liberal in grain. He had served for a few momentous years (1913-18) as a member of the Prussian Parliament, but his heart was not, I am sure, in politics. He concerned himself with the political questions of the Weimar Republic not with any personal zest but as a matter of civic duty. This led him to adhere to the pathetically small party of Democrats or Progressives rather than to Social Democracy, for which, I think, he never felt much sympathy. The advent to power of Hitler and the Nazis must have outraged his deepest political convictions. He had become Professor Emeritus in 1929, so he had no active part to play in any academic resistance to the Third Reich, but one might certainly have expected that he would have been whole-heartedly on the side of the Confessional Movement of resistance to the subtle Nazification of the Lutheran Church. In fact, however, he felt, at first at any rate, little sympathy for this movement of protest, and for a time had hopes that the 'German Christian' movement might live up to its name and effect a rejuvenation in the religious life of his country which he felt was sorely needed. That hope cannot have survived for long. The political and neo-pagan development in Germany had become to him more and more heartbreaking, and when death came to him in March of 1937 as the result of a tragic accident, the grievous loss to his friends may have been to himself a merciful release. He must have foreseen clearly the inevitable catastrophe that loomed ahead, and caught the sound of Niagara thundering beyond the upper rapids.

II

I well remember my own first meeting with Otto, sometime in the very early twenties. It was an impression so surprising as almost to be daunting. This, whatever he was, was almost the opposite of the German *Gelehrter* as one commonly found him, and far removed indeed from the traditional figure of caricature (if indeed the latter was ever typical of the German professor at all), bearded and bespectacled, dreamy and pedantic. Otto's figure was tall and erect and suggested the soldier rather than the scholar, with his Kaiser moustaches and his tight, light, military-looking jacket fastened high at the neck. Nor was a diffident foreigner reassured by the touch of formality in his address, which later one came to recognize as merely the scrupulous respect he paid to the strict grammar of courtesy. But in a very short time the thin film of ice was effectively broken, and his, and his household's, unaffected friendliness had quite won his visitor's heart, aided by the dry humour that played about persons as well as things, shrewdly yet without malice, and was one of his most endearing qualities. There followed walks together in the lovely woodland country around Marburg, and talks upon every sort of topic, philosophical and political and educational and literary. I was soon deeply interested in *Das Heilige*, and it was an exciting privilege to hear the doctrines of this and other books expounded by their author. And if some lucky quotation or illustration appealed to him it evoked the most prompt and ungrudging recognition.

The first visit was followed by several others during the next few years. As his reputation spread farther afield his house became a place where visitors from foreign lands were more and more often to be found: now it would be a young American theologian, now a pastor from Sweden, now a scholar from India. To all he extended the same patient and cordial courtesy. But his health was wretched: he was a constant sufferer from asthma and racking headaches. Only when he was at his physically best could he enjoy his favourite walks in the forest across the valley, ending up, perhaps, with coffee at an *Aussichtsturm* restaurant. During the walk

there would be moments when in the course of the conversation the soldierly figure would come to an unexpected stop, as though 'stung by the splendour of a sudden thought', and his expression would grow grave and tense. It was as though a commander had suddenly glimpsed a new possibility in tactics or strategy; only here the tactics were dialectical, not military, and the campaign that of the quest for religious truth.

But for his poor health Otto would, before he died, have delivered a course of Gifford Lectures, and his subject would have been the ethical basis of theism. Had he been able to do so, he would almost certainly have corrected certain misconceptions as to his teaching to which I shall refer later. But as it was, he was able in the years before the Hitler régime closed down upon Germany to pay an all-too-short visit to this country in 1927, and delivered some lectures at King's College, London, on Mysticism. The first began with a deprecating remark to the effect that for a foreigner to speak of Mysticism in England was to bring owls to Athens or, as we should say, coals to Newcastle. Otto sometimes spoke with a delightfully impish humour of the theological *naïveté* sometimes shown by our professional instructors in religion; but he had a profound respect for the British contribution to Christian thought and teaching in the lives of saints, mystics, and poets, as well as religious thinkers.¹ He was very fond of reading English books, light as well as serious, and I remember how keenly appreciative he was of two English classics to which I introduced him, the poems of Blake with their supernatural thrill and *Wuthering Heights* with its sombre torment of passion. In the latter he found, and surely rightly, a supreme example of 'the daemonic' in literature.

Rudolf Otto was not only a great scholar and interpreter of religions; he was also a great liberal (in the deepest sense that means one who loves and prizes freedom); a great

¹ The Dean of St. Paul's (Dr. W. R. Matthews) who presided at these lectures in London, and who after Otto's death paid the tribute of an address in his memory at Marburg, writes that Otto 'formed the opinion that England was still the most religious country in the world, and he attributed this very much to the influence of the *Book of Common Prayer*. He was very anxious to produce a *Book of Common Prayer* for the German people.'

well-wisher and understander of England; and, most of all, a great and true Christian. Yet he was none the less German through and through. And so when we are told that all Germans are inherently and incorrigibly prepared to prostitute honest scholarship in the service of some ideology; that they are congenitally incapable of understanding the meaning of liberty; that they can never comprehend, still less truly appreciate, England or the English; and that beneath a Christian veneer every German is a pagan in grain: then those who have been fortunate enough to have the friendship of such a man as Rudolf Otto are not likely to accept these glib generalizations with any excessive credulity.

III

When the present translation of *Das Heilige* appeared twenty-six years ago it received an appreciative and generous welcome in many and diverse quarters, and the steady demand for the book ever since is the best evidence that Otto's work has been recognized by readers of very different denominational affiliations as still meeting a real need in the field of religious philosophy. But since the original book was published thirty-two years ago the climate of thought has noticeably changed, and were he alive to-day the author would certainly have wished that his argument should be so presented to a new generation of readers as to avert the distortion and wrong emphasis which interpreters, in many respects friendly, have often tended to give to it. I wish briefly to notice one or two of these distortions, which have been regrettably persistent.

In my original preface to the translation I mentioned three respects in which I thought that Otto's book should be a valuable corrective to contemporary tendencies. I noted that it had appeared at a time when a much more vigorous and a much more sympathetic study of religion had been gaining ground, but that this very sympathy might tend to misleading conclusions if on the one hand it led to missing what was common to religious experience in different climes and different times, in its normal and more representative forms, through an undue attention to the more interesting

and exceptional case: and also if it 'became so far absorbed in the subjective states of mind manifested in religious experience' as to ignore or half-ignore the objective significance of them. The first danger was illustrated by some of those whose special study of Mysticism led them into a one-sided account of religion as a whole: 'they do not see the wood for the trees; or, more accurately, they fail to get a true view of the common nature of the trees in their structure and growth through an undue preoccupation with certain particularly striking examples'. The second danger might be symbolized by the attempt to give a true description of the tree without regarding the sources that sustain its life or the fact that it is growing upward towards the light. And then there was a third danger—that of so far humanizing our conception of the divine and the sacred that a severance is brought about between the divine as immanent and as transcendent, between God as rational and moral Person and God (if indeed in this view the name could also be applied here) as Majesty and Mystery and superhuman Otherness.

In the intervening period I think it would be true to say that whereas the first of these errors has not proved very serious—and Otto's book has, no doubt, done much to avert it—the other two still persist tenaciously. And by what I can only judge to be a perverse misunderstanding Otto's book is sometimes taken to favour and commend aberrations which he recognized to be mischievous and against which he expressly warns the reader. At the same time I think it must be admitted that, if only by his choice of terms for the expression of his own doctrine, Otto did in some degree abet this misunderstanding.

Taking first the aberration towards an unduly subjectivist interpretation of religion, it is a complete error to suppose that Otto is mainly concerned to plead for, or indeed primarily interested in, the vindication of the emotional aspect of religion. There have, indeed, been periods and milieus when such a plea was necessary, when religious emotion was regarded as a sign of fanaticism or 'enthusiasm'. But in England at any rate, when theology in the nineteenth century passed from a rationalizing to an ethical atmosphere, a good

deal had been done to restore the balance by admitting emotion into its account at least in the sense of that 'moral passion' of which Mr. Shaw has written or that 'enthusiasm of Humanity' which Seeley found at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus. Matthew Arnold and J. A. Froude are both typical nineteenth-century voices in their uncompromising acceptance of the paramount importance of ethics in religion, but the former in his famous definition could speak of religion as 'morality touched with emotion', while the latter could write of religion as 'the consecration of the whole man, of his heart, his conduct, his knowledge and his mind', where 'heart' is clearly to be understood as a man's capacity for emotion. And even if there was need seventy years ago to urge that *feeling* in this sense has an essential place in religion, there was far less need when Otto wrote thirty years ago, and there is perhaps still less to-day, when the claims of man's emotional and affective life are being so effectively asserted.

When, therefore, Otto uses so frequently expressions like 'the numinous *feeling*' (*das numinose Gefühl*) he must not be taken to be merely repeating the claim of 'affect', subjective emotion, to a place in any genuine religious experience. But it would certainly have been better had he always preferred the alternative phrase 'the feeling *of* the numinous'. The word 'numinous' has been widely received as a happy contribution to the theological vocabulary, as standing for that aspect of deity which transcends or eludes comprehension in rational or ethical terms. But it is Otto's purpose to emphasize that this is an objective reality, not merely a subjective feeling in the mind; and he uses the word *feeling* in this connexion not as equivalent to emotion but as a form of awareness that is neither that of ordinary perceiving nor of ordinary conceiving. Certainly he is very much concerned to describe as precisely and identify as unmistakably as possible, by hint, illustration, and analogy, the nature of the subjective feelings which characterize this awareness; but that is because it is only through them that we can come to an apprehension of their object.

The ambiguity attaching both to the English *feeling* and the German *Gefühl* should not therefore mislead us. We do

after all speak of feeling the beauty of a landscape or feeling the presence of a friend, and our 'feeling' in these cases is not merely an emotion engendered or stimulated in the mind but also a recognition of something in the objective situation awaiting discovery and acknowledgement. It is analogously to such uses that Otto speaks of the 'feeling of the numinous' or (less aptly) the 'numinous feeling'. As one of his compatriots, the philosopher Rickert, put it: 'by the "numinous" is indicated not the psychological process but its object, the Holy'.

So far then, from stressing the place of the subjective state of mind in the religious experience, Otto's emphasis is always upon the objective reference, and upon subjective feelings only as the indispensable clues to this.

IV

The other misunderstanding may be dealt with the more briefly inasmuch as Otto wrote a special foreword for the second impression of this translation (see p. xxi), in which he took the opportunity to make his own standpoint unmistakably clear in a few lines. He *was*, as has been said, really opposing the subjectivist trend in religious thought: he was definitely *not* opposing the attempt of reverent minds to interpret the divine nature in rational and ethical categories. He was urging, on the contrary, that the rational and moral is an essential part of the content of what we mean by holy or sacred: only it is not the whole of it. There is an overplus of meaning which is non-rational, but neither in the sense of being *counter* to reason on the one hand nor *above* reason on the other. The two elements, the rational and the non-rational, have to be regarded (in his favourite simile) as the warp and the woof of the complete fabric, neither of which can dispense with the other.

This is, indeed, made so clear in the text of the book that one can hardly but suspect carelessness or obtuseness in those critics who have persisted in mistaking Otto's meaning. Here again, however, his choice of words perhaps did something to further the error. I have sought to mitigate the unfortunate suggestion of the key-word 'irrational' in the original

by rendering it 'non-rational', but the implication of a repudiation of reason has not perhaps been entirely dissipated. Another phrase is perhaps more misleading: 'das ganz Andere', the 'wholly other', the quite different. This is a phrase that has occupied a more prominent place in some of the writings of the neo-Calvinist school of theology associated with the names of Barth and Brunner, and there it is used in a way which to many does seem to break completely and utterly with the religious claim that the divine Spirit may enter into communion with the spirit of man. But Otto, who was, I think, the first to make this religious use of the phrase, is not open to the criticism of exaggerating and isolating the divine transcendent Otherness. God for him is not, so to speak, *wholly* 'wholly other'. That aspect of Deity, the mysterious overplus surpassing all that can be clearly understood and appraised, is asserted emphatically against any excessive anthropocentric tendency to scale down the Sacred and Holy to the measure of our human reason. But it is an aspect only, one note that has to be preserved in (to use another favourite phrase) the 'harmony of contrasts'. And here it seems to me that his teaching is more wholesome (and may I add, more Christian?) than that of those who would stress exclusively the one note or the other and so oversimplify the harmony into a monotone. Every such one-sided interpretation can only, and must inevitably, provoke its opposite extreme, and indeed we have seen this happen. Had Otto ever been able to deliver the course of Gifford Lectures upon the religious basis of ethics which he was planning, I think he would have been able to give a final statement of his position in this matter which would have done much to bring together points of view, each based on authentic experience, which cannot fall irreconcilably apart without disaster to religion.

And yet, for those who read it fairly, all had been said clearly enough in this book. And for that matter the double note was sounded long ago by Pascal in his *Pensées*, in a passage which it is strange that Otto did not quote, but which admirably expresses his own attitude: 'If one subjects everything to reason our religion will lose its mystery and its supernatural character. If one offends the principles of