

Background to Modern Theology

Rudolf Otto

30.10.2004

Sometimes, when people speak about their faith, it appears to be all up in their heads. Sometimes an intellectual stress can so dominate, that passion is seen as a sidetrack. Christianity can appear to be a set of beliefs which can be reasoned out to varying degrees. But what may be missing is the passion... the zeal to live it, not just know it. European Christianity in the late 1800's concentrated on ideas and head type belief.

Rudolf Otto wanted to argue that there was much more to religion, esp to Christianity, than just using our head. Much of the philosophy of religion up to the 1900's had rejected and neglected the mystery, overwhelming awe, and amazement of faith. He wanted to defend religious experience as being a valid, and important aspect of life. Otto was born in 1869 in Hanover, Germany. As a Lutheran theologian, he taught in Göttingen until 1914, then was Professor of theology in Breslau from 1914-1917, and moved to Marburg until 1929. He died in 1937.

In 1909, he published Religion and Naturalism. It stressed the autonomy of the human spirit, and how science could not effectively explain spiritual experience. Otto knew Christianity was not the world's only religion. He toured many times to learn more of other faiths, and he learnt Sanskrit in India from 1911.

His book The Idea of the Holy, was published in German in 1917, and in English in 1923. He adopted Kant's views of this world, but pushed them even further than Schleiermacher had.

Kant said God is not present in our physical / phenomenal world. God is beyond the gap in the spirit or noumenal world. We cannot identify God by any of our senses, so we can never know God, simply other people's impressions of God.

Schleiermacher said we can know God. Inside each person there is a deep need to recognise that we have absolute dependence on a higher being outside ourselves. So God is known in our absolute dependence. We are saved as we copy

Jesus, the most God-saturated consciousness who ever lived.

But Otto thought this was insufficient. He agreed with Kant and Schleiermacher that we cannot deduce God in our world, BUT God can break into our world and overwhelm us in moments of his presence, which fill us with awe and fear at the mystery of God.

In keeping with Kant's view of life, Otto suggested that inside our brains, apart from the section which makes us feel moral obligations (as Kant suggested), and apart from the part which feels absolute dependence (suggested by Schleiermacher), he wants to see a faculty of divination. This means that there is a spark in us which can be flamed into a fire, so we will actively seek God. (But, the Bible says that people are inclined away from God not towards him, and we are to implore people to seek the Lord while he may be found).

Otto defended his views by appealing to many religions. Like Schleiermacher, he stressed that Christianity is best, because, Otto said, it has the clearest focus of the holy out of all the religions. He made people once again take into account the awe and wonder of Moses meeting God in the burning bush, or Moses being overwhelmed by God, of prophets being so struck by their experience of God, and of Jesus at the transfiguration.

Like Schleiermacher, a major problem with Otto's work is that he interprets much of the Bible to emphasise one thing. He makes the Bible say that the impact of the Holy is **the** most important thing in life. And because he sees this as the central core of faith, he validates all other religions, denying the plain meaning of Jesus' words about Jesus being the only way to the Father. Christianity simply becomes the clearest expression of what everyone does.

However, on a more general basis, he gave Christians a ground for wanting to experience the presence of the Holy.

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A modified form of it is when people say 'I really felt God's presence in that service.' It may have been due to the music, the ritual, the teaching, or the events which occurred. People have a desire to want to feel God's presence, the '*noumena presens*'.

There is something helpful in this, however, there are at least 2 concerns which flow from this emphasis of wanting to feel the Holy presence.

[1] Otto knew that the holy awe did not occur all the time. They were special, often rare occasions, which enabled people to reshape their faith.

Yet many who picked up Otto's idea wanted to feel this fascinating and awe inspiring holy presence often, even each time they met together. And they associated it with pleasant things happening, not when they were uncomfortable. When uncomfortable, they claimed that God was not there, or His Spirit had left, or that God was not being honoured.

Was God present in the times of correction in the Bible? Was God present as Paul chastised the Galatians for accepting a different gospel? Was God present when Jesus turned the tables in the Temple?

Was God present in the cross, when 2 Corinthians 5:19 says *God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself*?

The times when we feel awe, are inspired or feel overwhelmed are great, but God is also present when the wheels fall off, when corrections are made, when sinners are chastised, and when we are bored. Our feelings are not God. Our feelings are a gift from God, and we must take care not to abuse them or totally reject them. And the second problem?

[2] Sometimes the experience of 'the Holy' becomes the main reason for knowing God. If the only reason we know God is true is our experiences of Him, we have big problems. A Hindu, animist or Moslem could argue the same.

It forces Christians away from the Bible's authority and cutting edge, and it is hard to argue why my interpretation of my experience is any more valid than yours. You end up with Otto, saying Christianity is the best expression of it, but nothing else is wrong.

History loses its importance. The facts of Jesus' death and resurrection move into the myth arena, and are no longer the anchor for faith.

It does not fit with the clear delineation in the Bible between truth and falsehood.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that a fact of history, Jesus' death and resurrection, is the basis of our faith. If it did not happen, throw Christianity away, for it is useless.

Otto tried to bring a badly needed corrective to modern philosophy of religion. However, because he grabbed one important idea, but not the core issue of God's dealings with us, he re-interpreted the Bible to say that our experience of the Holy is crucial for knowing God.

If he had read the Bible with a different presupposition, he might have noticed that the main focus of the passages where people felt the fascinating and tremendous awe, was not the fact that they felt it, but the stress is on the fact that our Holy God was relating to sinful people like you and me. God wants us to recognise our standing before him. We are sinners, He is Holy. He graciously has given us the absolute privilege of relating to him, which is only ever possible because of the death and resurrection of Christ. His ideal is not that we are consumed with the feeling of the holy, but that we relate to him as his forgiven and loved children because of Jesus.

The importance of the cross is paramount, for if Jesus did not die and rise again, we are still sinners about to be destroyed by our Holy God. And even if we do not feel God's presence in a special way, we know that He is with his children through His Spirit, and He will never leave us.

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Because of the uniqueness of God relating to His people through Christ, we can claim on the basis of the Bible, that though other religions may have some aspects of truth in them, they are not just a pale shadow of Christianity, because they lead people away from the true God. Grab hold of that truth, and see the world as lost without Christ. Let God's truth grab your feelings. Live the holy life, and encourage others to live for Christ too. For God loves them as much as he loves you. He wants to save them, not let them perish. That is the truly fascinating and tremendous awe of God.