

# Otto on the Numinous

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## I. Rudolf Otto

Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) was a German Lutheran theologian. His ideas represent the next stage of development in reflections on religious experience subsequent to William James during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His central contribution to the analysis of religious experience is his concept of the numinous – a term Otto used to designate the core of religious experience. (Carl Jung will develop the “numinous” between the 1930s and late 1950s.)

## II. From “the Holy” to “the Numinous”

- A. The Holy, though usually interpreted as a moral concept, has an important surplus value that Otto believed cut to the heart of religious experience.
- B. This surplus value cannot be adequately understood in the absence of actually experiencing it. Hence, the third person perspective can only partially illuminate it with analogical (similar) concepts that are experienced by those who have not had religious experience.
- C. Otto chooses the term “numinous” to refer to this extra-moral dimension to the term “holy.”
- D. The numinous is, roughly stated, the direct presentation to one’s consciousness of an objective or external reality that induces creature-feeling in a person. One is thereby aware of presence of a different ontological status.
- E. Unlike Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Otto believed that “the numinous” is not inferred from the “creature-feeling,” but the awareness of the numinous is directly experienced. Schleiermacher had argued that religious experience is the “feeling of absolute dependence,” from which God as an absolutely independent reality is inferred. This is why Otto says Schleiermacher’s approach is rational in nature: it makes the awareness of God depend on an inferential process, however spontaneous it may be.

## III. *Mysterium Tremendum*

- A. The numinous will be more precisely described in terms of the quality of this felt presence, which Otto calls *mysterium tremendum*.
- B. Mysterium: This signifies the numinous is *wholly other* than the self.
- C. Tremendum: This involves three features: (i) awfulness or unapproachability (similar to dread, fear, awe), (ii) overpoweringness or majesty, and (iii) energy or vitality (life force).

## IV. *Fascinans*

Otto adds an additional quality inherent in the numinous. He calls it *fascinans* (origin of the English word "fascination"). This refers to the attractive or charming aspect of the numinous. It draws us into itself, even though its other qualities induce feelings of unapproachability.

#### V. The Numinous and Mysticism

A. Otto says that mysticism involves "overpoweringness" without "unapproachability." This may better describe theistic mystical experiences since "otherness," "majesty," and "overpoweringness" suggest a separateness that is dissolved in monistic mystical experiences.

B. Otto also indicates that mysticism emphasizes the energetic aspects of *tremendum*. Cf. love is experienced as a vital or living reality, a fire.

C. *Fascinans* implies the intimacy with the other that characterizes unitive experiences.