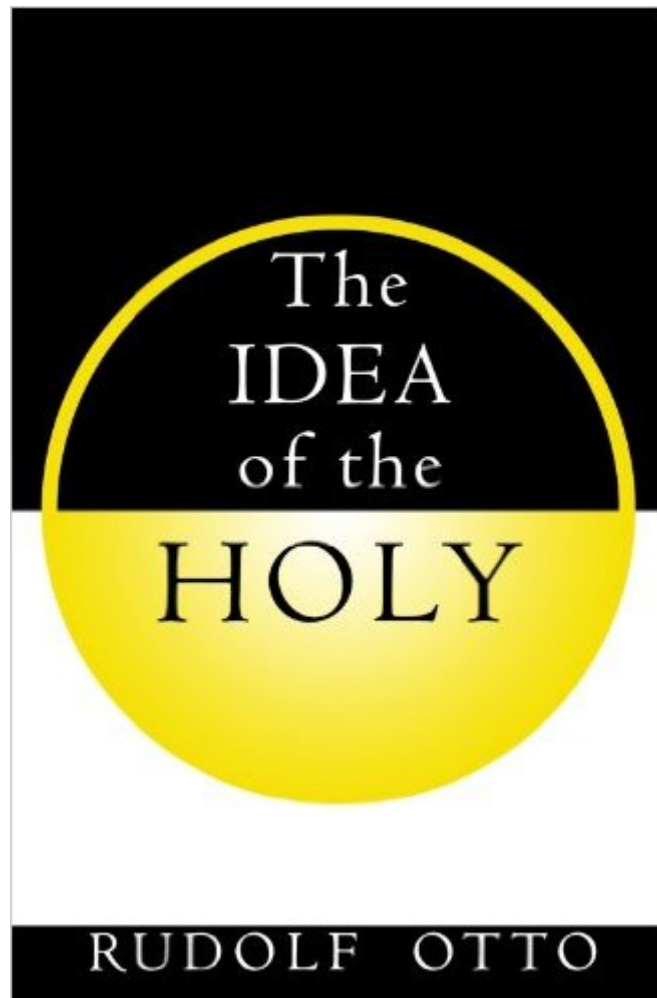


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The Idea Of The Holy



Synopsis

Since the English translation first appeared in 1923, Rudolf Otto's volume has established itself as a classic in the field of religious philosophy. It offers an in-depth inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational.

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Customer Reviews

C.S. Lewis once wrote, "I believe that many who find that 'nothing happens' when they sit down, or kneel down, to a book of devotion, would find that the heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology with a pipe in their teeth and a pencil in their hand." This pronouncement applies to Rudolf Otto's classic *The Idea of the Holy* (which Lewis had read.) This book explores the esoteric and ineffable, and is best approached with a pen or pencil in hand to underline passages and write in the margins. It is not a lengthy book (less than 200 pages in the edition I own) but chewing the sinewy theology takes some work to digest. Traditional theology has usually concerned itself with doctrine, with focus on the rational aspects of God. Otto, following the tradition of mystics, gave careful consideration to an oft-neglected aspect of theology: the non-rational aspects of God. In doing so, he coined the word "numinous" to depict that which transcends or eludes comprehension in rational terms. It suggests that which is holy, awesome, and 'wholly other.' He also applies the expression "mysterium tremendum" to the numinous, describing that which is hidden, esoteric, beyond conception or understanding, awe-inspiring, fear-instilling or uncanny, an absolute overpoweringness of an ineffable transcendent Reality. Otto illustrates his

concepts with scripture passages such as Isaiah 6, where the vision of the Lord and his robe filled the temple. God's holiness overwhelmed Isaiah, who cried, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." Other illustrations include the feeling of the numinous evoked by Bach's Mass in B minor, the 'Popule meus' of Thomas Luiz, or the contrast of light and darkness found in cathedrals or forest glades. Most helpful to me was his analysis of the book of Job, showing how God's answer to Job about the mystery of suffering demonstrates the numinous in the character of God. Otto seems, for the first time in my reading experience, to give helpful insight for why Job never received a direct answer to his questions about suffering. Otto's terse classic has unfortunately been largely forgotten. I hope that it sees a revival in its readership, for it deserves to be studied and discussed with each new generation of readers.

Few theological books have made the impact on the fields of theology and philosophy that this one has. Its impact and importance are for good reason. "The Idea of the Holy" is not a terribly long book, but it is certainly not a casual or quick read. It is not aimed at a popular audience, and for many people it will require a dictionary close at hand. In this book Otto embarks on the paradoxical task of describing the incomprehensible qualities of God. It is not written as a Systematic Theology categorizing doctrines that can be deduced from Scripture. Rather, it describes philosophically what it means for God to be "wholly other", or transcendent. Often the technical language is difficult to process and the ideas are not simple ones to grasp, but still it is worth wrestling with. As Otto describes the *Mysterium Tremendum*, he examines the emotional response of humans as we encounter God in his Holiness. The reader is reminded of the Awe-Inspiring God who we claim to believe in and serve. This is perhaps the most memorable and humbling aspect of the book. Take a copy of this book on a long trip and spend some time with it. Expect it to be difficult and when you're tempted to quit... keep reading!

This book, first published in 1917, is rightly regarded as a classic of religious philosophy. Otto's great contribution to Christianity was to assert the importance of a non-rational approach to the divine. Christianity, which is the most dogmatic and moralistic of the major world religions, needed the corrective. Otto created the word "numinous" to stand for the sense of a divine presence that operates beyond rational understanding. He also coined the term "*mysterium tremendum*" to connote the inchoate sense of awe and dread that humans feel in the presence of the divine. To him, both of these ideas were essential to a full expression of the religious spirit. One reaction to this book over the years goes something like this: either you've been knocked off your horse like St

Paul, in which case you already have a direct experience of the numinous, or you haven't. Why bother to analyze something that by its very nature can't be put into words? Here Otto makes a subtle but crucial distinction. He's not talking about a numinous feeling, but about a feeling of the numinous. In other words, the numinous exists out there, not inside us, so we can approach it as an object to be observed and, at least by analogy to the sensations it excites with us, described. Otto didn't reject the rational, though. Without rationality, he says, we can't have belief, only feelings. In his view of religion, the rational and non-rational interpenetrate each other like the warp and woof of a fabric, which can't be separated without destroying the very garment it makes. He points out several times that fully understanding the non-rational conception of god deepens our rational religious ideas. Otto was a Christian, and believed deeply in the superiority of Christianity as the highest synthesis of the rational and moral with a primal sense of awe. (Buddhists might differ.) Fortunately for his reputation as a religious philosopher he was much more than a Christian apologist: he was a close observer of human behavior and of religious practices around the world. If Otto had been born seventy five years later, he might have been Joseph Campbell. He traveled widely, and had a deep knowledge and appreciation of Asian, Arabic and Greek religious thought. He anticipated Campbell by demonstrating that a sense of spiritual awe and mystery is universal to all religions. In his observations of how mankind divines the presence of the holy, Otto realized the importance of predispositions - a person must be both receptive to divine presence and capable of recognizing when it appears. In this he anticipates neural Darwinism, which also talks about our predisposition toward certain aspects of reality. For instance, we have evolved an ability to recognize sound patterns. This isn't music, but it allows us to hear a song and store it as such in our brain. Similarly, we are capable of conceiving of an overarching force that exists beyond our selves, and are capable of recognizing manifestations of it. This isn't religion, but it's the precursor to any truly religious feeling. This book strikes sparks in almost every chapter, even the ones settling obscure doctrinal scores. It deserves the high regard in which it's held because Rudolf Otto is a remarkably good guide to the ineffable.

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