RUDOLF OTTO, THE EAST AND RELIGIOUS INCLUSIVISM

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Abstract

Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) is most familiar to scholars of religion as the author of *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), a work which exercised an immense influence in the inter-war years. Less well-known are Otto’s later writings on Eastern traditions and his efforts, both theoretical and practical, to fashion a new religious inclusivism and a spirit of harmonious cooperation amongst the world’s faiths. This paper focuses on Otto’s encounters with Hinduism and Buddhism, and on his work in the field of comparative mysticism. It also draws attention to his efforts to form the *Religiöser Menschheitbund* (Interreligious League) which aimed to bring together representatives of all the world’s religions to work towards international peace, social justice and moral progress. Finally, the paper foregrounds Otto’s reconciliation of Christian theology and religious universalism. It is argued that Otto’s ideas have a new pertinence and urgency in a post-modernist world torn by all manner of inter-religious tensions and misunderstandings.

Introduction

It is now nearly three decades since I enrolled as a postgraduate student in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Sydney. The two dominant figures, at that time, were the late Eric J. Sharpe and Garry W. Trompf. The lectures and seminars over which they presided generated many provocations to the more searching and responsible study of religious phenomena. A theme which concerned both teachers was the modern collision of different cultures and religious traditions, and the part that scholars might play in the promotion of inter-religious understanding. This concern was particularly evident in Professor Trompf’s lively courses on methodological issues in the study of religions and on Melanesian cargo cults, the latter arena being one in which all manner of strange and initially bewildering phenomena were to be observed. One of the works frequently invoked in our discussions was Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy*. After completing my studies at Sydney, and in pursuit of interests which Professor Trompf had helped to crystallize, I retained an interest in Otto and in the role that his ideas might
continue to play in the troubled times in which we live. So, it is with ideals which were shared by Otto and Gary Trompf very much in mind that I dedicate this essay to my former teacher and mentor.

In 1958 the appearance of the second English edition of Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* prompted *The London Quarterly Review* to commend the work as 'an acknowledged classic' (*LQR* quoted on back cover). In the previous year Mircea Eliade had written of the 'extraordinary interest aroused all over the world' by *Das Heilige*, following its initial publication in 1917 (Eliade 1959, 8). In the inter-war years it was indeed widely read and for a while Otto's theological influence matched that of Karl Barth whose *Römerbrief* (*Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, 1923) had taken Europe by storm. But since these acclamations Otto's star has somewhat waned. Mark Twain observed that a 'classic' is a book which everyone praises and no one reads. This would now seem to be the fate of Rudolf Otto's best-known work; as Eric Sharpe wittily observed, *The Idea of the Holy* is a book that nearly every comparative religionist imagines s/he has read (Sharpe 1975, 161). Less familiar are Otto's later writings on Eastern traditions and his efforts, both theoretical and practical, to fashion a new religious inclusivism and a spirit of harmonious cooperation amongst the world's faiths. After a brief survey of Otto's life and works and some remarks about *The Idea of the Holy*, this article focuses on Otto's encounters with Eastern religious traditions. It also draws attention to his efforts to form the *Religiöser Menschheitbund* (Interreligious League) which aimed to bring together representatives of all the world's religions to work towards international peace, social justice and moral progress, and foregrounds Otto's reconciliation of Christian theology and religious universalism.

**Rudolf Otto's Life and Work**

Otto did not write about his life in detail but did compose an autobiographical sketch in 1891, recently translated and published as 'My Life' (in Otto 1996). He was born in 1869 in Northern Germany, into a strict Lutheran family, the twelfth of thirteen children. He describes the family milieu as 'strictly burgherly and small town' and his school education as 'not so pleasant and delightful as it otherwise usually is', due perhaps to his lack of friends and his 'indifference' to the activities of his school mates. At quite a young age he determined to become a pastor and took a keen interest 'in everything ecclesiastical and theological that managed to appear within my narrow horizons' (Otto 1996, 51–52). Otto studied