THE PHILOSOPHICAL LOADINGS OF RUDOLF OTTO'S IDEA OF THE SACRED

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INTRODUCTION

The list of philosophers, religionists and theologians whose conceptualizations of the essence, end or study of religion were produced under the influence of Rudolf Otto might be easily turned into a litany in praise of the Sacred as a priori. At one time or another in their careers Nelson, Heiler, Wach, Van der Leeuw, Nygren and Eliade, not to mention the first generation of the Eranos circle, all fell under the influence of his characterization of religious experience and its relation to the Sacred (Sharpe 1975, 210-211). Nevertheless, the extent of Otto's influence should not automatically be taken as a measure of its inherent rigor or its originality. Indeed, the enduring value of Otto's work lies in the synthesis it effected: it brought together a phenomenological description of the Sacred—based chiefly upon his reading of the Judaeo-Christian and Hindu phenomena—together with an epistemology based upon the Kantian aesthetic and the neo-Kantian religious philosophy of Fries. But, paradoxically, this most enduring feature is also most problematic. Though most scholars have found the notion of the mysterium tremendum a serviceable device for describing religious intentionalities—particularly for those who have had no personal experience of them—Otto's notion of the Sacred as a priori usually gets short shrift because his reasons for asserting it are not perfectly transparent in his most well-known work, The Idea of the Holy.

In this paper, I intend to put Otto's arguments for the a priori nature of the Sacred under a bright light in order to discover whether he has made a case which can be sustained, first, on Kantian grounds and, second, on grounds which would be acceptable under the current

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epistemological regime. This intent will be accomplished in four steps. First, I will examine what Kant intended by the notion of the *a priori* and the notion of a *category* and how these functioned in the first and third critiques. Second, I will examine how Otto transformed these Kantian notions *à la* Fries.\(^1\) Third, I will ask whether the modifications of Kant can be sustained; that is, whether they meet real, or only perceived, shortcomings in the Kantian system. Fourth, I will ask whether the quest for a Sacred *a priori* like Otto's is really credible according to the canons of contemporary epistemology. The textual field I have mined in order to critique Otto consists of the following works: *Naturalism and Religion*, *Religious Essays*, *The Philosophy of Religion*, *The Idea of the Holy* and *Mysticism East and West*, since it is chiefly in these works that his epistemological concerns are clearly expressed.\(^2\)

For Rudolf Otto, the non-phenomenological portion of his work is concerned with demonstrating what the notion of the Sacred is as: (1) an *a priori* category; (2) an idea; and (3) a reality. All three of these concerns are bound up with a theory of the constitutive function of the Sacred which is detachable from the phenomenological treatment provided in his description of the Sacred as *mysterium tremendum*.\(^3\) But before we can understand what Otto means by calling the Sacred an *a priori* category we must clarify what Kant means by *a priori* and by

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\(^1\) In fact, Otto adopted many of the insights of Fries, wholesale, something which Otto's book *The Philosophy of Religion: Based on Kant and Fries* clearly demonstrates.

\(^2\) The following abbreviations are employed in this paper: Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, IOH and *The Philosophy of Religion*, POR; Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason* COPR and *The Critique of Judgment* COJ.

\(^3\) I wrote the first draft of this paper without having seen Lorne Dawson's excellent paper "Otto and Freud on the Uncanny and Beyond," but after Dawson heard my paper presented at the 1990 meeting of the AAR in New Orleans, he called his work to my attention. Aside from being a philosophical critique of Otto and Kant, my paper differs from Dawson's in my understanding of what drives Otto's modification of Kant. We would both agree, I think, that Otto is no Kantian in the strict sense. Dawson, however, argues that Otto's phenomenological portion of *The Idea of the Holy* is tainted by his Kantian assumptions and is, thus, not easily detachable from what comes later. I, intending to emphasize what is different in Kant and Otto, see the phenomenological portion as very different from anything Kant would have attempted, for the reasons described above. In a sense, I think we are both right. The relation between Otto's Kantian assumptions and his phenomenological description is one of synthesis. It would be odd if each portion did not reflect the influence of the other. I simply maintain that some of Otto's description stands on its own without Kantian assumptions. In summary, where Dawson and I would agree is: (1) that Otto is certainly *influenced* by Kant in his whole project but (2) he does not adopt the Kantian project wholesale.