

## Lecture 4 The Idea of the Holy

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## From Sacred to Holy

- Though these terms could be interchangeable, in our course we are making a small distinction: 'Sacred' is the generic perception of the Ultimate Other – that is set apart; 'Holy' is a specific quality inherent in the Sacred.
- Reference to 'holy' could just be another way of exploring the Sacred, but more related to GOD.
- We rely on Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (*Das Heilige*, 1917; in English in 1923).

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## Otto: The Holy

- Numinous
- Mysterium Tremendum
- et Fascinans



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## Otto: The Holy as the Numinous

- 'Numinous' = *numen* (latin) = something that is perceived by the mind beyond the senses (beyond appearances). Something that is known *a priori* (Kant).
- Hebrew: *qadosh*, Greek: *hagios*, Latin: *sanctus/sacer* = the absolute good – the wholly other!
- The experience of it is "ineffable – in the sense that it completely eludes apprehension in terms of concepts" (Otto, 1950 p.5). The experience is of its own kind (*sui generis*).

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## Characteristics of the Numinous

- *Creature-consciousness*: what Schleiermacher called, 'feeling of absolute dependence'. It not just a feeling but openly expressed, and experienced as the present, *a numen praesens*:
  - Abraham pleading with God (Gen 18:27): "Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes."
- "It is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures" (Otto, 1950 p.10).

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## Otto: The Holy as the Tremendum

1. Evokes an *element of awfulness*:
  - *tremor* = fear! Religious dread = awe!
  - In Hebrew: *Hiqdish* (hallow) is to keep a thing holy in the heart – with "fear of the Lord"
2. an *element of 'Overpoweringness' (Majestas)*:
  - *Tremenda majestas* = tremendous majesty
  - Related to the feeling of creatureliness!
3. an *element of 'Energy' or Urgency*:
  - The holy is clothed in vitality, passion, emotional temper, will, force, movement, excitement, activity, impetus = Living God!
  - Far from being a deist god – the god of the philosophers.

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## Analysis of the Mysterium

### 4. The 'Wholly Other':

- Evokes *stupor* = blank wonder! "an astonishment that strikes us dumb, amazement absolute"
- Mystery also means secret, alien to us, uncomprehended and unexplained ... incapable of exhaustively rendering, a real meaning.
- Therefore, one way of expressing the mysterium is by means of paradox: It is this (positive) and it is not this (negative). Ex. It is transcendent and immanent; It is omnipresent yet is here and now.
- Language of analogy: Fire by night and cloud by night!

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## Otto: The Holy as the Fascinans

- "The qualitative *content* of the numinous experience, to which 'the mysterious' stands as *form*, is in one of its aspects the element of daunting 'awfulness' and 'majesty'...; but it is clear that it has at the same time another aspect in which it shows itself as something uniquely attractive and fascinating" (Otto, 1950 p.31).
- The Holy has a dual characteristic: it is wrathful/daunting, and at the same time it is attractive and fascinating.

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## Coincidentia oppositorum

- The Sacred/Holy/God is also seen as the *coincidentia oppositorum* ("coincidence of opposites").
- The phrase is originally attributed to Nicholas of Cusa (15<sup>th</sup> Cent German).
- M. Eliade revisits this: "Yahweh is both kind and wrathful; the God of the Christian mystics and theologians is terrible and gentle at once."

Eliade, *Myths, Rites, Symbols*, p. 450

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## Tai-Chi: YIN-YANG

The Chinese (Taoist) concept of reality:

The idea of cyclic pattern in the motion of the Tao was given a definite structure by this concept of polar opposites. They are the two poles which set the limits of the cycles of change.



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## Yin-Yang

- The yang having reached its climax retreats in favour of the yin; the yin having reached its climax retreats in favour of the yang. The original meaning of the words yin and yang was that of the shady and sunny sides of a mountain, a meaning which gives a good idea of the relativity of the two concepts: "That which lets now the dark, now the light appear is Tao."
- The diagram of Tai-chi (yin & yang) is a symmetric arrangement of the dark yin and the bright yang, but the symmetry is not static. It is a rotational symmetry suggesting a continuous cyclic movement. The two dots in the diagram symbolizes the idea that each time one of the two forces reaches its extreme, it contains in itself already the seed of its opposite.

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## The Paradox!



The symbol of medicine



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