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Rudolf Otto and the Concept of the Numinous

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Summary and Keywords

The contemporary academic study of religion has its roots in conceptual and theoretical structures developed in the early to mid-20th century. A particularly important example of such a structure is the concept of the “numinous” developed by the theologian and comparativist Rudolf Otto (1869–1397) in his work, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (1923). Building on the work of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1772–1834), and Jakob Fries (1773–1843), Otto developed the concept of the numinous—a “category of value” and a “state of mind”—as a way to express what he viewed as the “non-rational” aspects of the holy or sacred that are foundational to religious experience in particular and the lived religious life in general. For Otto, the numinous can be understood to be the experience of a mysterious terror and awe (*Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*) and majesty (*Majestas*) in the presence of that which is “entirely other” (*das ganz Andere*) and thus incapable of being expressed directly through human language and other media. Otto conceives of the concept of the numinous as a derivative of the Latin *numen*, meaning “spirit,” etymologically derived from the concept of divine will and represented by a “nodding” of the head. Otto argues that understanding the numinous in a satisfactory way requires a scholar to draw upon their own experience of religious sentiments, given its non-discursive and direct nature; this becomes a point of contention among later secular scholars of religion. In later works, such as *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (1932), Otto gives numerous examples of the ways in which the concept of the numinous can be applied cross-culturally to traditions beyond Christianity, such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

Otto’s theories regarding the numinous have been extremely influential in the development of the academic study of religion in the 20th and 21st centuries, as evidenced by the impact they had upon scholars such as Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Ninian Smart, whose works were instrumental in the formation of religious studies as a discipline. Jung cites the concept of the numinous extensively with regard to his theories

on the breakthrough of unconscious material into conscious awareness. Eliade's work *The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959) takes Otto's concept of the numinous as a starting point in the development of its own theory; Eliade's use of the category of the "sacred" might be considered derivative of Otto's larger conception of the "holy" (*das Heilige*). Eliade's work, like Otto's, has been extensively criticized for postulating a *sui generis* nature of both the numinous and the sacred, which are viewed by Eliade as irreducible to other phenomena (historical, political, psychological, and so forth). Smart's influential "dimensional analysis" theory and his scholarship on the topic of world religions is highly informed by his utilization of Otto's theory of the numinous within the contexts of his cross-cultural reflections on religion and the development of his "two-pole" theory of religious experience. The concept of the numinous continues to be theorized about and applied in contemporary academic research in religious studies and utilized as part of a framework for understanding religion in university courses on world religions and other topics in the academic study of religion. In part through the work of Eliade, Smart, and other scholars—Otto included—who have found a popular readership, the term has been disseminated to such a degree as to find common usage in the English language and popular discourse.

Keywords: numinous, sacred, mysticism, spirituality, Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, Ninian Smart, religious experience, theory, and method

Development of the Concept of the Numinous

The numinous is a concept utilized in the contemporary academic study of religion with reference to the phenomenology of religious experience, especially with regard to the emotional and non-discursive psychological aspects of religious life. Though the term appears in literary contexts as early as the 17th century, it was introduced in early 20th century as a theoretical concept in the study of religion by the theologian and comparativist Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). Otto developed his ideas regarding the numinous as a central aspect of religious life in his highly influential work *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (1917), which was translated into English as *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (1923).¹ It was translated into numerous other languages in the decades following its publication in Germany. Though this work presented a larger overarching argument concerning what Otto referred to as the "holy" (*das Heilige*) in its non-rational expressions, his distinct conception of the non-rational or numinous aspect of religion that lies beyond conceptual description and is only accessible through experience, has proven to be particularly

influential and has had great longevity in the academic study of religion. This influence has been the case particularly with Otto's presentation of first-person religious experience as a legitimate, if not central, object of investigation in the study of religion. In the *Idea of the Holy*, Otto notes the derivation of the term "numinous" (*numinös*) from the Latin *numen*, comparing its coinage to that of the derivation of the term "ominous" (*ominös*) from the Latin *omen*.² *Numen*, which is typically translated as "spirit," refers to the idea of a divine "nodding," being rooted in the idea of a divine will that is expressed symbolically as a nod of approval, used historically to signify both the concept of a deity in general and the will of such a deity in particular.³ The concept of the numinous as used by Otto, and in the larger academic study of religion, follows the more generic definition as it relates to the characteristics of a divine or spiritual presence. Otto refers, in the *Idea of the Holy*, to the numinous as a "category of value" and a "state of mind" that is *sui generis*, literally "of its own kind," irreducible to other states of mind or other phenomena, a type of "primary and elementary datum" of religion which "cannot be strictly defined."⁴ Otto argues that, to explain this concept, the numinous has to be alluded to by familiar and similar examples and contrasted with dissimilar examples, as opposed to being directly approached conceptually. Such comparisons and contrasts, according to Otto, allow for a sense of the numinous "to stir" in the individual that is studying it, lending toward a tangible and experiential awareness as well as a discursive understanding.⁵ In a passage that has drawn considerable controversy to his theory, being frequently cited as a hallmark of the self-imposed limitation of his approach, he states that having some personal experience of "intrinsically religious feelings" is necessary to facilitate a satisfactory understanding of the numinous, and he thus admonishes readers who have not had such an experience to "read no farther."⁶ The seeming exclusivity of this approach, however, is offset by the fact that Otto attests to the virtual universality of such experiences among humanity, intimating that, for example, simply having "shuddered" upon hearing a ghost story illustrates a numinous sentiment.⁷

Character and Structure of the Numinous in Otto's *Idea of the Holy* (*Das Heilige*)

Otto's *Idea of the Holy* sets out his theories of the character and structure of the numinous, with numerous examples of its expression from the Old Testament, New Testament, and in Luther's writings, with passing references to Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. The latter part of the work focuses on his theories regarding the a priori nature of the holy and the larger implications of his theory in understanding the history of religions. Otto's ideas are steeped in the philosophical and theological reflections of

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1772–1834) and Jakob Fries (1773–1843), which together provide the larger intellectual context in which Otto's theories of religion arise.⁸ At the foundation of his theory of the numinous is the notion of "creature feeling," understood as a feeling of overwhelming nothingness in the face of the character of the power of that which is supreme.⁹ This conception of creature feeling is, according to Otto, analogous to, but distinct from, Schleiermacher's influential and well-publicized notion of religion as a "feeling of dependence," which places the roots of religion within the sphere of personal piety and experience. Otto's critique of Schleiermacher's view is that such dependence is theorized as being absolute versus relative, thus a difference of degree and not kind, and that dependence as such requires the inference of an external agent from individual experience as opposed to knowledge based upon direct experience.¹⁰ In contrast, the numinous, according to Otto, is unique in kind (*sui generis*) and is the direct and tangible cause of "creature feeling." The numinous is a reflection of the presence of a *numen*, being experienced directly and non-conceptually rather than being inferred conceptually and secondarily from another, more primary, experience.¹¹ A similar critique is applied by Otto to the work of William James, whom Otto views as correctly recognizing the relationship between consciousness of the numinous (and the consequent perception of its objectivity) but mistakenly attributing the noetic (truth-making) capacity to human perception and not to the numinous object that generates the experience.¹² According to Otto, the emotions associated with the numinous are uniquely evoked by the experience of an objective reality, rather than the opposite set of conditions, in which religious emotions give rise to the perception or inference of an externally existing object.

The numinous is further described by Otto as characterized by its mysterious or "mystery" (*mysterium*) quality, which in turn is characterized by its tremendous or fear-inspiring (*tremendum*) and fascinating or awe-inspiring (*fascinans*) aspects, the whole of which is referred to as the *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. According to Otto, though the concept of the mysterious (*Mysterium*) refers to that which is hidden from view or knowledge, it should not be understood as a negative state, but as referring to what is qualitatively of greatest value. Otto's concept for understanding the "otherness" of the numinous is conveyed by his term "wholly other" (*das ganz Andere*), a sort of blank wonder or even stupor (to be contrasted with the tremor of *tremendum*), and is understood as unintelligible in naturalistic terms. The numinous as *Mysterium* is uncanny (*ungeheuer*, literally, "the monstrous"), incapable of being grasped in its fullness, and resonating with a range of feeling-tones. With respect to the tremendous (*tremendum*) aspect of the numinous, Otto discusses three aspects, specifically the numinous as the tremendous per se (*Tremendum*) or "awefulness" (*das Schauervolle*), as the majestic (*Majestas*) or overpowering (*das Übermächtige*), and as the energetic (*das Energische*). The tremendous or "awe-ful" aspect of the numinous is that which engenders fear, dread,

and feelings of the eerie, uncanny, weird, or horrific. Otto relates the tremendous aspect of the numinous to the experience of trembling and shuddering, especially with respect to its physical effects upon the human organism. The *Tremendum* is evident, according to Otto, in the earliest vestiges of human religiosity, and carries over into popular ghost stories and tales of the daemonic or demonic, as well as into what Otto theorizes as religions with more complete development or evolution, such as Christianity or later Hindu traditions, in which divine love and wrath complement each other as attributes. The *Tremendum*, as such, carries great significance for Otto in understanding the nature of the numinous and the holy, a point upon which he differentiates his view of Christianity from those of the influential theologians Schleiermacher and Ritschl (1822–1889).¹³ The majestic (*Majestas*) element of the *Mysterium tremendum* refers to the overpowering aspect, a concept referred to by the phrase *tremenda Majestas*, the “awe of majesty,” which encapsulates the idea in which the subject’s sense of self is seen as infinitesimally small in the face of the overwhelming scale of the numinous, as experienced by the subject. This is further connected by Otto to the notion of creature feeling, setting apart his view of the experience of the numinous from that of Schleiermacher’s feeling of dependence, on the basis that Otto’s view pertains to the feeling of being a creature, as opposed to Schleiermacher’s view of the experience as one of having being created.¹⁴ The final component of the numinous, or non-rational aspect of the holy, is that of the energetic (*das Energische*) component, which relates to the element of vitality, urgency, and activity in religious experience.¹⁵ This energetic dimension expresses the forceful and compelling nature of the numinous, motivating a person to action and revealing a deeper dimension of spiritual agency operating within the world, which is identified generally in religion with the divine and, particularly in the case of mysticism, with love.

The counterpart to the aspect of *tremendum*, “tremendousness” or “awefulness” in Otto’s thought, is the concept of *fascinans*, the “attractive” or “fascinating” aspect of the *Mysterium*. The numinous as such is understood as a “harmony of contrasts,” an underlying dynamic dualism between the simultaneous experiences of fear and attraction that it inspires. The numinous is said to inspire a paradoxical reaction of being both repelled and attracted simultaneously. Neither *tremendum* nor *fascinans* exhaust the experience of the numinous, but rather they are viewed as complementary aspects that together make up the larger whole of religious experience. In contrast to the experiences of fear, horror, wrath, and so forth, which are characteristic of the *tremendum*, the aspect of the *fascinans* correlates to the experience of love, bliss, mercy, grace, and so forth. Otto suggests that these two aspects of religious experience correlate with the historical development of religious consciousness from earlier stages, which put great emphasis on the *tremendum*, and later stages, in which the *fascinans* takes center stage. He further argues that modes of religious practice correlate with these respective orientations, the

earlier stages being associated with rituals of sacrifice and exorcism, intended to please or pacify wrathful forces, and the later stages being associated with worship, devotion, and, ultimately, mysticism.¹⁶ Otto also suggests an evolutionary process in religion that shifts over time, from a focus on obtaining worldly goods through magical rites and rituals and the notion of the numinous as its own end, to be pursued for its own sake and manifest in mysticism and in conversion experiences. These experiences are, following this, represented in Buddhist and Hindu as well as in Christian contexts, including those of awakening (*bodhi*), the attainment of spiritual gnosis (*jñāna*), and in divine grace (*īśvara-prasāda*).¹⁷

Otto describes his conceptions concerning the expression of the numinous through language and performance in *The Idea of the Holy* (*Das Heilige*) in a manner that further elucidates his underlying epistemology of religious experience. In particular, he discusses at length (in chapter 8 of *The Idea of the Holy*, chapter 12 of *Das Heilige*) the manner in which the communication of numinous sentiments is a matter of evocation or incitement, as much a function of the means or medium of communication as it is of the content itself, pointing to the rhetorical function of religious language and ritual to communicate emotive states. He also returns to the concept of the ideogram (ideogramme), developed earlier in the text, which is the idea of a linguistic and cultural framework of words and actions that directs awareness to a numinous reality, though it is unable to fully capture its nature, being ultimately reliant upon a person's own ability to connect to the feeling behind it through the evocation of a common experiential basis. As such, it relies upon a "spirit in the heart," a sort of inborn religious faculty, to move from words to a deeper and non-rational religious consciousness. Direct means of the expression of the numinous, in which performative ideograms evoke direct experience of the numinous, are contrasted by Otto with indirect means, which appeal to naturalistic experiences that mimic or mirror aspects of numinous experience. With respect to the latter, Otto argues that both the *tremendum* aspect of the numinous and its *Mysterium* aspect can be correlated to the experiences of terror and of curiosity with respect to the natural world and human culture. As such, the *tremendum* aspect is indicated in wrathful forms of divinity, and the *Mysterium* aspect in the miraculous, both of which he views as partial and incomplete, but nevertheless important, examples of the naturalization of the numinous. This is expressed, in turn, in various forms of human art (including visual art, literature, music, and other media) that encapsulate the sublime, wondrous, and even magical sentiments associated with the numinous in its varied expressions. Otto's understanding throughout *The Idea of the Holy* is that ideograms or symbols serve as instruments in evoking numinous sentiments, though they are ultimately inadequate representations of a deeper, more profound, and ineffable reality. Otto's particular sympathy for mysticism as a major, if not ideal, expression of the religious life is consistent with his view that representational forms are merely devices intended to evoke

an experience of that which is, ultimately, incapable of being represented in any concrete form or through language. As will be discussed below, this emphasis on mysticism and the experiential dimension of religious life in Otto's work was highly influential in the formation of the academic study of religion in the 20th century and inspired the systems of many of its key theorists, such as Mircea Eliade and Ninian Smart.

Mysticism and the Numinous in Otto's Mysticism East and West (West-östliche Mystik)

Otto's focused interests in mysticism and in the comparative study of religion are extensively explored in his second-most influential work entitled *West-östliche Mystik: Vergleich und Unterscheidung zur Wesensdeutung* (1926), translated into English as *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (1932).¹⁸ This work was based on the Haskell Lectures that he presented on the comparison of "Western" vs. "Eastern" mysticism at Oberlin College in the winter of 1923–1924. In these lectures, Otto focused on the topic of mysticism as represented in the works of Eckhart and Śaṅkara, acknowledging deep connections between the Christian and Hindu traditions, respectively, and identifying important distinctions between their respective ideas and practices. In *Mysticism East and West*, Otto outlines five types of mysticism, which include "the inward way," "the way of unity," "illuminist mysticism," "emotional experimentalist," and "nature mysticism." Otto's key focus in the work is on the first two types, which are characterized, in turn, by an introversive impulse that turns away from the manifest nature of the world and by an intuitive impulse that sees an underlying unity beyond the multiplicity of manifest reality. Otto views the mysticism of both Eckhart and Śaṅkara as being a hybridization of these two forms. These two forms are contrasted by Otto with the latter three, which represent visionary experiences that are characterized respectively by the attainment of spiritual power, mystical states comprised of deep and intense emotions, and the inspiration of mystical states through the beauty and grandeur of nature. The first part of the work, "Part A," discusses Otto's theories regarding the ways in which the mystical views of Eckhart and Śaṅkara are in conformity with one another, and the second part, "Part B," discusses what Otto views as important points of difference between the two. The first and second parts of the work are divided by a section in which Otto attempts to systematize a typology of mystical experiences, utilizing examples from the Indic traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism. The second part largely focuses on the manner in which Śaṅkara's views differ from Eckhart's with respect to the framework of meaning and the basic problems that mysticism seeks to resolve, drawing

upon a largely Christian vocabulary of sin, redemption, justification, and so forth, in contrast to Indian ideas of bondage to *saṃsāra* (rebirth) and the need for spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*). In one definitive passage in this regard, Otto states “Christ is not at bottom, the same as Krishna” and that “[j]ust as little is mysticism ‘the same’ in the East and in the West; Christian mysticism is not Indian mysticism, but maintains its distinctive character, clearly explicable by the ground from which it rises.”¹⁹

Otto utilizes his concept of the numinous throughout *Mysticism East and West*, providing insight into its application within the comparative study of religion and the comparative study of mysticism. First, he argues that both Eckhart and Śaṅkara postulate an idea of a pure being that they acknowledge is a rational schema for the radically transcendent, or numinous, reality that they are referencing, or pointing towards, through such concepts.²⁰ Otto describes this higher state as the “sphere of wonder,” being numinous and thus non-rational, beyond what is signified intellectually by the notion of an absolute state of “Being.”²¹ Otto’s most direct discussions of the numinous come under the rubric of his section on the “differentiation of mystical experience,” where he discusses the philosophical system of Yoga (i.e. Pātañjala Yoga) in its relationship to (Indian) Buddhism. Otto states that “salvation sought in Nirvāṇa, like that sought in Yoga, is magical and numinous,” ultimately “suprarational, and of which “only silence can speak.”²² Likewise, the system of Yoga is referred to as being oriented not towards a mysticism of union, but a mysticism of soul, in which the sense of soul, or innermost self, opens the door to the numinous “wholly other.”²³ On a similar note, Otto argues that Eckhart’s thought contains “powerful numinous feelings of the self” that “shatter” Schleiermacher’s definition of religion as having to do with feelings of absolute dependence.²⁴ Ultimately, in arguing his thesis regarding the intersection of the “Way of Introspection” with the “Way of Unifying Vision,” Otto states that “... the numinous depth of the eternal One in and behind all things (including the perceiver) calls to the numinous depth of the soul in its innermost being ...”²⁵ In doing so, Otto postulates that both Eckhart and Śaṅkara appeal to a radically transcendent, wholly other (*ganz andere*) reality beyond internal and external reality, that cannot be reduced to conceptual, intellectual knowledge.

The Numinous in the Systems of Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Ninian Smart

The pervasive influence of Otto’s thought extends through the work of a number of important figures in the development of the academic study of religion. The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) utilized the concept of the numinous to discuss

the manifestation of unconscious materials in the form of emotional and affective experience, ultimately to relate the idea of the forceful irruptions of the unconscious mind into ordinary awareness.²⁶ Jung and Otto articulated a common concern in striving towards a balance between rationalism and the non-rational aspects of psychological and religious experience, respectively.²⁷ As such, they shared a common interest and valuation of the concept of the numinous as a signifier for the validity of suppressed or neglected aspects of human experience that they viewed as critical to an integral vision of human psychological and spiritual life. In his *Answer to Job*, Jung comments upon the fact that most people do not “reflect on numinous objects,” on how religious ideas are based on “numinous archetypes” that are “unassailable by reason,” and that “numinous factors” challenge feeling as much as intellect. He refers to Christ as a “numinous figure,” among other direct appeals to Otto’s language.²⁸ Likewise, Jung appeals to a “divine numinosity” of spiritual knowledge and the “extraordinary numinosity” of conceptions of the divine that provoke a feeling that they are pointing to a deeper reality as indicators of the import of the numinous in the life of the mind.²⁹ Though Jung’s project was ultimately centered upon the therapeutic project of individuation, rather than the comparative-historical study of religion, it nevertheless had great impact on the emerging discipline of the academic study of religion, and gave further validation to Otto’s concepts. Jung’s resonance with Otto’s thought speaks to the impact of the concept of the numinous in psychoanalysis and is a root of its pervasive influence within the psychology of religion as a sub-discipline in the study of religion.³⁰

The figure most responsible for bringing Otto’s work to a large and popular non-specialist audience and for consolidating Otto’s impact in the academic study of religion in the 20th century is the Romanian-born scholar of religion Mircea Eliade (1907–1986). Eliade is often viewed as having adapted Jung’s theory of the archetypes as part of his larger project in the comparative study of religion, though he appears to have viewed his theory as distinct from that of Jung’s.³¹ Eliade, whose academic home for the latter part of his life was in the Divinity School at the University of Chicago in the United States, played a critical role in the development of the academic study of religion by acting within academe, as a key force in developing History of Religions and Religious Studies as separate and independent disciplinary areas of study, and by acting without, as a vocal public intellectual concerned with matters of religious import. The extent to which Eliade owes a debt to Otto’s theory, and particularly to Otto’s concepts of the holy and the numinous, is evident in his landmark work in the study of religion, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959), which was translated from the German *Das Heilige und das Profane: vom Wesen des Religiösen* (1957), which in turn, was translated from an original French manuscript.³² The translation of *heilige* as “sacred” in the English-language edition obscures the fact that Eliade’s title points to a direct

relationship with *Das Heilige* as a statement of a core theory of the nature of religion. The work begins with Eliade's acknowledgement of a deep debt to and appreciation of Otto's *Das Heilige*, noting the fact that the "extraordinary interest aroused" by Otto's work still persisted in the decades after its publication, and that its success was due to the fact that Otto offered a unique and original theory of religion.³³ Eliade highlights that Otto's unique contribution to the study of religion was his analysis of the modalities of "the religious experience," which he accomplishes with "great psychological subtlety."³⁴ Otto, according to Eliade, understood that religion was about more than just morality, being also about power as manifest in religious consciousness in terror-inspiring and non-rational experience.³⁵ Having summarized the components of Otto's conception of the numinous, including the *Mysterium tremendum*, *Majestas*, *Mysterium fascinans*, and the concept of the "wholly other" (*das ganz Andere*), Eliade highlights the notion that the sacred manifests as a different order than "natural" realities, viewing this insight as being central to both his and Otto's conceptions of religion. Having noted the continuing value of Otto's theories and the continuing profitability of *The Idea of the Holy* for readers, Eliade argues that his approach extends beyond Otto's fixation on the irrational aspect of religion and toward "the sacred in its entirety."³⁶ This is the starting point for Eliade's larger discussion—and the subject of *The Sacred and the Profane*—exploring the relationship between the sacred and profane as a paradigm for understanding the parameters of religion. Though Eliade argues for a divergence of his methodological approach from Otto's, he nevertheless accepts the core theory of the numinous as a starting point for investigating religion as being rooted in a transcendent experience of that which is radically other and in opposition to the ordinary, mundane, and explicable reality of everyday life.

Eliade reflected later in his career in *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (1969), about the ways in which Otto's terminology had become part of the language of the discipline of religious studies, and about how Otto contributed to the field as a "philosopher of religion, working first-hand with documents of the history of religions and mysticism," and as a "mediator" between Eastern and Western types of mysticism.³⁷ Clearly, Eliade played an important role in consolidating Otto's concept of the numinous with related terminology as part of the core set of disciplinary concepts of religious studies in the latter half of the 20th century, driving the conversation about the centrality and irreducibility of the datum of religious experience in understanding religious phenomena on their own terms. His highly influential theories regarding the nature of the sacred, the "irruption" of the sacred in historical time, and the emphasis on religious experience continue to resonate in contemporary religious studies, though they are not without critics.³⁸

A third major 20th-century scholar, who was critically important in the further consolidation and adaptation of Otto's theories and the concept of the numinous in particular, was the Scottish philosopher and historian of religions Ninian Smart (1927–2001). Smart, like Eliade, was a formative figure in the development of the academic study of religion and the religious studies disciplinary model that emerged in the late 20th century in the United States. As a professor at the University of Lancaster in the United Kingdom and at the University of California at Santa Barbara in the United States, Smart was a pioneer in what he referred to as the comparative-historical model of the study of religion, and he was instrumental in building popular and scholarly interest in theory and method in the study of religion and in the study and teaching of “world religions” as a unique area of focus within religious studies. Smart is particularly well-known for his development of a “dimensional analysis” of religion, a “salient features” approach that examines religion as a many-sided phenomenon with common features across cultures.³⁹ Smart's works outline and consolidate first six, and then seven aspects or primary features of religious life, which ultimately came to include the practical or ritual dimension, the experiential and emotional dimension, the narrative or mythic dimension, the doctrinal or philosophical dimension, the ethical and legal dimension, the social and institutional dimension, and the material dimension.⁴⁰ This dimensional analysis of religion served not only as an introductory paradigm in Smart's presentations on world religions, such as *The World's Religions* (1998), but also, importantly, as the framework for his theoretical reflections on the cross-cultural linkages between religions, which are highlighted in his works such as *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (1983) and *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (1996).⁴¹ In these works, discussions of Otto's concept of the numinous serves as a foundation upon which Smart analyzes the dimension of religious experience, both in theory and with respect to the data of the world's religions. Smart valorizes the concept of the numinous as it brings attention to the importance of solemnity, awe, and mystery, pointing to the cross-cultural validity of associating religion with the emotion-inspiring encounter with an “other.”⁴² In validating religious experience as a critical feature of religious life, he points to the centrality of the import of the experiences in figures as diverse as Isaiah, Paul, Arjuna, Muhammad, and the Buddha as evidence of need for rich theories such as Otto's.⁴³

It should be noted that, significantly, Smart adapts Otto's theory to fit what he presents as his own “two-pole theory” of religious experience, subsuming Otto's conception of the numinous within his own paradigm.⁴⁴ Smart's “two-pole” theory postulates that religious experience exists on a scale characterized on one end by a high-intensity, awe-inspiring encounter with a radically other agent (numinous experience) and on the other by a serene and inward experience of an innermost self or nature (mystical experience). The mystical provides “a double initial contrast with the numinous: the latter experience is of

an outside Other, the mystical of an inner non-other.”⁴⁵ This adaptation of Otto’s numinous is clearly inconsistent with aspects of Otto’s own theory, such as that represented by the notion of the synthesis of the “inner way” and the “way of unity” found in his *Mysticism East and West*. However, Smart’s postulation of a spectrum of religious experience extending from outer, numinous types to inward, mystical types, resonates with other late-20th century theories that sought to differentiate types of religious experience with reference to worldly or non-worldly orientation and content.⁴⁶ Smart further postulates that the numinous and mystical has a five-fold set of possibilities in combination: one exclusively, the other exclusively, the one dominant, the other dominant, both equally.⁴⁷ In Smart’s view, this provides a more flexible paradigm for understanding a range of types of religious experience, in the process retaining a number of Otto’s central assertions while subordinating the numinous to the larger “two-pole” framework. Smart’s reworking of Otto’s concept of the numinous has led to its pervasive influence in religious studies and to a transformation of its meaning, purpose, and application in the academic field and in popular discourse on religion.

Review of the Literature

Contemporary English-based textbooks on world religions, by such authors as Mary Pat Fisher (2014), Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis (2015), and Oxtoby and Segal (2012), demonstrate the ongoing influence of Otto’s conception of the numinous in the framing of the discipline of religious studies in the context of undergraduate education in the United States.⁴⁸ In all of these aforementioned texts and in many others within the genre, Otto’s concept of the numinous and the closely related category of the “sacred” developed by Eliade serve as part of introductory essays in world religions textbooks that seek to establish a basic framework of theoretical concepts to be utilized in approaching the comparative study of religion. As such, Otto’s concept of the numinous serves as part of the foundational vocabulary of religious studies as it is presented to an undergraduate, collegiate audience, particularly with respect to the degree to which it elucidates the personal and experiential dimension of religious life. Similarly, introductory and advanced courses in the theory and method of religious studies, at the graduate and undergraduate level, often dwell on Otto’s theory of the numinous in reference to the development of Eliade’s thought, both in terms of his emphasis on religious experience and with respect to his development of the category of the sacred.⁴⁹ Otto’s thinking has also played an important part in discussions of “perennialist” versus “constructivist” theories of mysticism, and related debates regarding religious experience and its interpretation, which have shaped the field.⁵⁰ In these respects, Otto’s concept of the numinous plays a critical role in the applied pedagogy of Religious Studies with regards

to the instruction of courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and Otto's place among seminal thinkers and theories in the academic study of religion leads to his inclusion in discussions of contemporary as well as classical theory, with the concept of the numinous at the center of such discussions.

A major aspect of the study of the numinous in contemporary scholarship has centered around historical and philosophical reconstruction and analysis of Otto's thought, in which the concept is viewed in rich contextual detail. These have included the numerous works of Gregory Alles, including his *Rudolph Otto: Social and Autobiographical Essays* (1996) and *Rudolf Otto on Religion* (2014); Philip Almond's *Rudolf Otto: An Introduction to His Philosophical Theology* (1984); and Todd Gooch's *The Numinous and Modernity: An Interpretation of Rudolf Otto's Philosophy of Religion* (2000).⁵¹ These studies have sought to place Otto's work in general, and the concept of the numinous specifically, within their historical, philosophical, and theological contexts in order to understand the dynamics between Otto's ideas and his life and intellectual milieu. Melissa Raphael's *Rudolf Otto and the Concept of Holiness* (1997) examines Otto's thought with respect to its resources for contemporary theology; she also forwards, in another essay, an evaluative feminist appraisal of Otto's conceptions of the numinous, mysticism, and religious experience.⁵² In particular, Raphael highlights the linkage between repressive ideologies and the appeal to transcendent, transhistorical realities such as that referred to by Otto's conception of the numinous. The ongoing import of Otto's theories in the study of religion has been reflected in the development of international conferences focused on his ongoing legacy within the academic study of religion, such as the *Rudolf Otto Congress*, held at Otto's former academic home of the Philipp University of Marburg. The study of Otto's theories remains a highly viable, if not vibrant, part of conversations on theory and method in the study of religion, particularly with respect to discussions of religious experience and the conception of religion as a *sui generis*, or unique and non-reducible, phenomenon, which was taken up by other theorists such as Eliade and his intellectual heirs.

A constructive-philosophical application of the concept of the numinous, with reference to the Asian religious and philosophical context, can be found in Stuart Sarbacker's *The Numinous and Cessative in Indo-Tibetan Yoga* (2005).⁵³ In this work, Sarbacker utilizes a schema based upon Ninian Smart's "two-pole" theory to examine the dynamic between the attainment of (numinous) power of divine agency on one hand, and world-surmounting or (cessative) liberation on the other, as found in Indian yoga and meditation traditions. Unlike Otto and Smart, however, Sarbacker links the attainment of numinous power to the drive towards establishing worldly authority through extraordinary acts and narratives thereof. In another essay, he further develops this concept with regard to modern traditions of yoga, in which the wonder and awe-inspiring power of bodily mastery confers authority upon the practitioner of yoga through the

evocation of experiences of awe and wonder in observers.⁵⁴ The concept of yoga as a vehicle to achieve numinous accomplishments is taken up briefly by David White in his *Sinister Yogis* (2009), in which he argues that *yogī* narratives in the Indic tradition point to an emphasis on the morally ambiguous attainment and use of numinous yogic powers (*siddhi*) over that of achieving moral elevation and spiritual liberation.⁵⁵ Sarbacker argues for an examination of the numinous as an anthropological and phenomenological, as opposed to an ontological or theological, category.⁵⁶ As such, he argues that the process of yogic development can be viewed as a progressive series of movements that transfigures the human into a numinous entity; that is, the *yogī* or *yoginī* is seen as becoming an “other” through achieving the qualities of a numinous being, and as inspiring the sentiments of awe, terror, and so forth, in observers.⁵⁷ These experiences formulate the basis for the authority of a yoga practitioner and become a sort of “glue” that holds a community of practitioners together by linking them psychologically and emotionally to the body or representative physical presence of the *guru*, teacher, or preceptor.

Otto’s conceptions of the numinous also frame discussions of the relationship between religion and extraordinary experiences as discussed in a range of scholarly spheres. Jeffrey Kripal, in his various works from *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom* (2001), to *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (2007), and *Authors of the Impossible* (2010), links together these wide range of concerns in a theory of religion that continues to validate Otto’s appeal to numinous experience as a foundational element of what it means to be religious, if not simply human.⁵⁸ Ann Taves, in *Religious Experience Reconsidered* (2009), while acknowledging the import of Otto’s concept of the numinous, rejects it, along with other more formally determinate technical terms, like “sacred,” and instead embraces concepts of “specialness” and the “set apart,” which nonetheless carry at least a distant genealogical relationship to the concepts of the numinous and the “wholly other,” even if they admit a wider range of data in the field.⁵⁹ This view resonates with the appeal to “special” phenomena as constitutive of religion as found in James McClenon’s *Wondrous Events: Foundations of Religious Belief* (1994), wherein he postulates particular types of anomalous or “wondrous” human experiences as driving the formation of religious ideologies.⁶⁰ Alondra Oubré, in *Instinct and Revelation: Reflections on the Origins of Numinous Perception* (1997), presents a theory postulating that experiences of transcendence were the building blocks of human culture, arguing for “numinous perception” as an important factor in human evolution.⁶¹ Both McClenon and Oubré suggest that experiences of the numinous, wondrous, and transcendent may be linked in important ways to processes of healing and human self-maintenance that are vital to human society and its welfare. The recent work of Andrew Newberg and other contemporary neuroscientists, such as that found in Newberg’s

Principles of Neurotheology (2010), has been highly informed by conceptions of the numinous, developed by Smart and others, which form a basic typology for understanding religious experience utilized in their research on the neurobiological states correlating to states of prayer, meditation, and so forth.⁶² Other contexts in which the concept of the numinous has been employed in contemporary scholarship include the study of images of horror in literature and film and in examinations of the experiences of transcendence found in composing, performing, and listening to music.⁶³

Primary Sources

As mentioned above, the *locus classicus* for the development of the concept of the numinous is to be found in Otto's *Idea of the Holy* (1923), with its explication as a category with cross-cultural relevance being found in his *Mysticism East and West* (1932). These serve as the principal primary sources in the English language, with the original German language versions being of particular import to understand the more subtle nuances of his theories. Otto's wide range of other German and English-language publications shed further light on his theory of the numinous. Early attempts to systematize and evaluate Otto's thought on the numinous can be found in Joachim Wach's *Types of Religious Experience: Christian and Non-Christian* (1951) and in Robert Davidson's *Rudolf Otto's Interpretation of Religion* (1947). Philip Almond's *Rudolf Otto: An Introduction to His Philosophical Theology* (1984) provides a clear and coherent introduction to the various facets of Otto's theory, with particularly useful focus on the concept of the numinous. Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959) and Ninian Smart's *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (1996) also serve as key primary texts in understanding the integration of Otto's theory of the numinous into the mainstream of religious studies in the 20th century. Biographical, contextual, and interpretive reflections on Otto's works can be found in the various books and essays by Gregory Alles, one of the foremost contemporary scholars of Otto and his intellectual legacy. An excellent collection of essays, *The Sacred and Its Scholars: Comparative Methodologies for the Study of Primary Religious Data* (1996) provides a range of methodological reflections on the category of the sacred, with significant attention to the concept of the numinous, including two essays that discuss the viability of Otto's *Idea of the Holy* in general and the concept of the numinous in particular as resources for contemporary religious studies scholarship and pedagogy.

Further Reading

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(2.) Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 7.

(3.) Schilling, "Numen," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2d ed., vol. 10, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 6753–6754.

(4.) Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 5–7.

(5.) Ibid.

(6.) Ibid., 8.

(7.) Ibid., 16.

(8.) Philip C. Almond, *Rudolf Otto, an Introduction to His Philosophical Theology* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

(9.) Ibid., 10.

(10.) Ibid., 9–10.

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(12.) Ibid. The work of William James, particularly his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), is a critical part of the scholarly milieu of Otto's work and the emerging paradigm of the psychology of religion it fits within. A discussion of this larger framework of the psychology of religion can be found in David M. Wulff, "Psychology of Religion: An Overview," in *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain, Contemporary Dialogues, Future Prospects*, ed. Diane Jonte-Pace and William B. Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2001), 15–29.

(13.) Ibid., 18.

(14.) Ibid., 20–21.

(15.) Ibid., 23.

(16.) Ibid., 33.

(17.) Ibid., 38.

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(19.) Otto, *Mysticism East and West*, 183.

(20.) Ibid., 44.

(21.) Ibid., 45.

(22.) Ibid., 160.

(23.) Ibid., 161.

(24.) Ibid., 203.

(25.) Ibid., 275.

(26.) Lucy Huskinson, “Holy, Holy, Holy: The Misappropriation of the Numinous in Jung,” in *The Idea of the Numinous: Contemporary Jungian and Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, ed. Ann Casement and David Tacey (New York: Routledge, 2006), 200–212.

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(28.) C. G. Jung and Sonu Shamdasani, *Answer to Job* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), xv, xvii, 57, 89.

(29.) Ibid., xvi.

(30.) Discussions of the relevance of Freudian psychoanalytic thought to Otto’s concept of the numinous can be found in William B. Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

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- (31.) Mircea Eliade and Willard R. Trask, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Pantheon, 1954).
- (32.) Mircea Eliade and Willard R. Trask, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959); and Mircea Eliade, *Das Heilige und das Profane: vom Wesen des Religiösen* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1957).
- (33.) Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane*, 8.
- (34.) Ibid.
- (35.) Ibid., 9.
- (36.) Ibid., 10.
- (37.) Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 23.
- (38.) For a critique of the so-called *sui generis* position, as developed by Otto, see Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- (39.) A helpful introductory discussion of variations of the “salient feature” approach and typologies of religion can be found in George D. Chryssides and Ron Greaves, *The Study of Religion: An Introduction to Key Ideas and Methods* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007).
- (40.) Ninian Smart, *The World’s Religions* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- (41.) Ibid.; Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Scribner, 1983); and Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World’s Beliefs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
- (42.) Smart, *Worldviews*, 22; and Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred*, 56–57.
- (43.) Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred*, 166.
- (44.) Ibid., 167–176.
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(46.) A discussion of these dynamics can be found in Robert K. C. Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 4–6; as Forman notes, the issue of “introvertive” versus “extrovertive” mysticism is examined at length in W. T. Stace’s *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1960), 62–133.

(47.) Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred*, 174.

(48.) Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions* (Boston: Pearson, 2014); John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd Lewis, *World Religions Today*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Willard Gurdon Oxtoby and Alan F. Segal, *A Concise Introduction to World Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

(49.) See, for example, Daniel L. Pals, *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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(58.) Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); and *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

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(61.) Alondra Yvette Oubré, *Instinct and Revelation: Reflections on the Origins of Numinous Perception* (Melbourne, Australia: Gordon and Breach, 1997).

(62.) Andrew B. Newberg, *Principles of Neurotheology* (Surrey, U.K.: Ashgate, 2010); see also Eugene G. D'Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

(63.) S. L. Varnado, *Haunted Presence: The Numinous in Gothic Fiction* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987); Beth E. McDonald, *The Vampire as Numinous Experience: Spiritual Journeys with the Undead in British and American Literature* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004); Douglas E. Cowan, *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008); and Richard Elfyn Jones, *Music and the Numinous* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007). Otto's influence on the popular writer C. S. Lewis is documented in the introduction written by Lewis to his book *The Problem of Pain* (London: Centenary Press, 1940), in which he discusses the concept of the numinous at length.

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(66.) Thomas A. Idinopulos and Edward A. Yonan, *The Sacred and Its Scholars: Comparative Methodologies for the Study of Primary Religious Data* (Leiden, The Netherlands, and New York: Brill, 1996).

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