

## Topic Page: [Otto, Rudolf \(1869 – 1937\)](#)

Summary Article: **Otto, Rudolf (1869-1937)**

From *Encyclopedia of Global Religions*

Rudolf Otto was a German Protestant theologian and philosopher of religion active in the first third of the 20th century. He is best known for his book *Das Heilige* (1917), translated into English as *The Idea of the Holy*. He also compared Indian religions with Christianity, translated religious texts from Sanskrit to German, founded a museum of the world's religions, and was active in both state and ecclesiastical politics. Although a systematic theologian by profession, he had his greatest impact on scholars of the comparative study of religions.

Intellectually, Otto was indebted to the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher and the Kantian philosopher Jakob Friedrich Fries. Like Fries, he stressed the cognitive role of “feeling,” an intuitive awareness of truth. According to him, the distinctive mark of religion was “the holy,” a complex category involving human conceptualization but also transcending it. Insofar as the holy transcended human powers of thought, it was nonrational and accessible only to intuition. For this aspect of the holy, Otto coined the term *numinous*, and interest in his thought has centered largely on it.

As a category of understanding, the numinous has three characteristics: *mysterium*, *tremendum*, and *fascinans*. It is intuited—corporeally as well as emotively—as “wholly Other,” terrifying or awe inspiring yet nonetheless attractive. Each of these characteristics has a rational counterpart: the absoluteness of divine attributes, the holy wrath of God, and divine grace. As a category of value, the numinous is intuited as possessing absolute worth, in contrast to the utter unworthiness of human beings.

According to Otto, both the numinous and the rational aspects of the holy as well as their conjunction are given a priori. That is, awareness of the holy is a universal mental capacity or predisposition merely awakened by sensory experiences. It is impossible to explain where this capacity comes from; it is only possible to clarify the category, so that on encountering it, people immediately recognize its truth. The history of religion consists of the progressive rationalization and moralization of the numinous, leading to its supreme embodiment, Jesus, and the supreme religion, Christianity.

In Otto's day, Protestant theologians actually preferred Karl Barth's emphasis not on universal mental structures but on a wholly other God who addressed human beings through His word. Otto's successors in the comparative study of religion largely rejected his Kantian framework and adopted his thought as a variety of phenomenology: It provided a highly insightful description of religious experience. In this form, Otto's thought remained highly influential through the 1960s. It is occasionally still encountered today.

At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, cognitive scientists worked in the opposite direction. They rejected Otto's account of the numinous as a necessary component of religion but returned to the topic of the universal mental structures from which religion arises, seeking to explain how these structures produce religion.

### **See also**

Eliade, Mircea, Liberal Protestantism, Schleiermacher, Friedrich, World Religions

### **Further Reading**

- Otto, R. (1958). *The idea of the holy: An inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*. New York: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1917).

Alles, Gregory D.

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Alles, G. D., & Alles. (2011). Otto, Rudolf (1869-1937). In W. Roof, & M. Juergensmeyer, *Encyclopedia of global religions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/otto\\_rudolf\\_1869\\_1937](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/otto_rudolf_1869_1937)

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## Chicago

Alles, Gregory D., and Alles. "Otto, Rudolf (1869-1937)." In *Encyclopedia of Global Religions*, by Wade Roof, and Mark Juergensmeyer. Sage Publications, 2011. [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/otto\\_rudolf\\_1869\\_1937](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/otto_rudolf_1869_1937)

## Harvard

Alles, G.D. and Alles. (2011). Otto, Rudolf (1869-1937). In W. Roof & M. Juergensmeyer, *Encyclopedia of global religions*. [Online]. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. Available from: [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/otto\\_rudolf\\_1869\\_1937](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/otto_rudolf_1869_1937) [Accessed 23 October 2019].

## MLA

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