

RELIGIOUS MYSTICISM OF RUDOLF OTTO : A CRITICAL EVALUATION

I

Both the terms of the compound phrase, 'Religious Mysticism' are rather vague and liable to different interpretations. Definitions of religion differ from the traditional definition as 'the recognition on the part of man of some unseen higher power etc.', to the psycho-analyst's view of religion as man's projection of his own consciousness into objectivity. The meaning of mysticism is still vaguer. Rudolf Otto himself wavers between two different interpretations of mysticism. At one place he admits that the characteristic common to all types of mysticisms is 'the identification in different degrees of completeness of the personal self with the universal self'¹. But usually he seems to mean by religious mysticism 'an approach which emphasises the non-rational element not only in man's religious experience, but also in man's conception of the objective reality of that experience.'²

According to Rudolf Otto the Divine or the 'Numinous' is above all an object of great fear, terror or awe (tremor). He goes on to explain the developed 'numinous awe' on the analogy of more primitive types of feeling, such as terror or dread of ghosts, the feeling of something 'uncanny' or 'weird'.³

The corresponding quality to the 'numinous awe' in the subject is the 'wrath of God', which expresses for Otto the absolute unapproachability, the supreme majesty and the absolute over-poweringness of the Numen.⁴

The Numen is further experienced as a great mystery. But again in order to explain the mysteriousness of the 'Numen', Rudolf Otto takes recourse to seemingly baser and more primitive forms of emotion, such as stupor, blank wonder or dumb astonishment, which are experienced whenever we are in the presence of 'wholly other'⁵. The numinous object is experienced in contrast to the whole world order, as super-natural and supra-mundane.⁶

The absolute otherness of the Numen is expressed both in its awefulness (Tremendum) and mysteriousness (Mysterium). In higher religions the numinous or the non-rational element is

synthesised with the rational concepts and the category of the Holy emerges as category of absolute objective value.⁷ But even this Holy is experienced as 'Wholly Other'. There is a corresponding self depreciation on the part of the subject. He calls the religious emotion the 'creature feeling', which he explains as the emotion of a creature submerged and over-whelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme and above all creatures.⁸

Critical Evaluation :

1. Almost every religion represents a synthesis of two opposing trends which emphasise the transcendent and awe inspiring and the immanent and fascinating aspects of the Divine. Though Otto admits both elements in the Numen, he emphasises the first almost exclusively.

Rudolf Otto's conception of the object of religious emotion as 'Wholly other' explains well the first trend in Judaic religions. In Judaism and Islam, God's transcendence and omnipotence and in contrast man's insignificance are generally emphasised. In so far as the spirit and attitude of Old Testament have survived in Christianity, it also conceives God as the 'Father in Heaven' and man as completely sinful and depraved. Man can be saved not through his efforts, but only through God's grace, which seems to be quite arbitrary and unquestionable in its favour.⁹ The need of atonement of man's sins by Christ and of the mediation of Christ for the winning of God's grace,¹⁰ similarly suggest a vast gulf between man and God.

When we come to Hinduism we find that Otto's concept of the Numinous explains very well certain trends within it. The image of Kali and the description of the *Vīrāt-rūpa* of Krishna in *Gīta* bring forth the terror and awe inspiring character of the Deity.¹¹

Otto claims that the numinous element is equally predominant in mysticism, including Advaita Vedānta. And to a certain extent he is right. Advaita Vedānta boldly opposes the Self from the not-Self and the not-Self includes not only the outer world, but also what one would normally call one's own self, as ego, mind and intellect.¹³

Eckhart similarly contrasts the Godhead from the world, which he calls 'creature'. God or 'Esse' is not only above the world, but even above being.

Granting that there is a core of truth in Otto's affirmation about the numinous element in religious experience we would still say that it leaves a major part of religious experience unexplained. To that we shall return lateron.

Otto's conception of the Holy as a category of value is essentially correct. God would not be God unless He were realised as supreme value, the end of man's religious endeavours. In Vedānta Mokṣa is recognised as the supreme value and Mokṣa is the same as Brahman.¹⁴

Similarly, his emphasis on the non-rational elements in the idea of the Holy is also correct, in as much as he means by the non-rational as that which cannot be exhaustively described by purely rational concepts. But here-with end all our agreements.

It is our contention that Rudolf Otto's concept of the highest Reality as the 'Numen' or the 'Wholly other' does not explain the higher religious phenomena, including mysticism. First of all it cannot explain the central or the more fundamental beliefs of the Christianity itself, i.e. the Fatherhood of God, man's being created in the image of God and the Kingdom of God being within ourselves. The modern Christian thinkers disown the semi-Deistic middle age conception of a super-natural God, revealed through miracles. Instead they uphold the concept of an immanent God who is revealed in the laws of nature.¹⁵ They reaffirm Christ's vision of God who loves man as a father loves his children, and who cares and even sacrifices himself in Christ's body for the sake of mankind.¹⁶

Otto's conception of the numinous emotion as consisting of awe and fear cannot explain man's love for God. He himself affirms that the 'Numen' is an object of fascination also, this fact being revealed in the joy and peace felt in the mystic's experience of union with God.¹⁷ But an object of terror cannot be at the same time an object of love. On the other hand, the loving Father of Christ can hardly be conceived as an object of awe and terror.

There have been saints in every religion whose passionate and exalted love of God can hardly be explained by the theory of God as 'Mysterium Tremendum'. In Muslim religion we have Abu Yazid, Al Hallaj and other Sufi saints; in Christianity we have not only the mystics like Dionysius and Eckhart, but also saints like St. Paul and St. Teresa, recognised even by Christian orthodoxy; in India, the Bhakta saints of middle ages such as Mira, Chaitanya, Tukaram, Namadeva, Eknath etc. All these loved God with an intense passionate longing, suffered when they felt themselves separated from their Beloved, because of their earthly existence and rejoiced when they felt themselves united with their Love in the mystical vision. We cannot love a God who is an 'Wholly Other' to ourselves.

Rudolf Otto's contentions that, 'Mysticism is not first of all an act of union, but predominantly the knowledge of the wholly other God and 'that mysticism implies a mystical God,'¹⁸ cannot be agreed to by many.

His insistence that for Śaṅkara Brahman is essentially a mystery, though suggestive, can hardly sum up the essential spirit of Śaṅkara's philosophy. In order to support his thesis Rudolf Otto has quoted those passages from Śaṅkara where the latter has contrasted the Self to the world.

But, for one thing, Ātman is not a mystery for Śaṅkara in Otto's sense. It is self-evident, being the pre-supposition of all experience, our very Self.¹⁹ Secondly, for Śaṅkara as for Eckhart and all the other mystics of the world the vision of unity is the most fundamental of all experiences. Otto arbitrarily distinguishes several stages of mystical, vision, regarding the negation of the reality of the creature as the highest.²⁰ In Indian Mysticism the denial of the mundane world, instead of being the culmination of mystical experience, is a mere stepping stone to the realization of ultimate Unity.²¹

It is true that the highest vision is often described in the Upaniṣads as an experience in which all diversity is annihilated. But it only suggests the complete merger of the subject's individual consciousness into the Object, and not the perception of the Object as the 'Wholly Other'.

Otto himself quotes passages from Eckhart suggesting the primacy of the vision of Unity.

“ All creatures are one being.”

“ All this then is to see the essence in the one and in Unity, it is to see in God and to see God.”

“ In this embrace all is dissolved in all, for all embraces all.”²² Examples from Upanisads can be multiplied. “ Sarvaṁ Khalīdāṁ Brahma ”.²³

“ Idam sarvaṁ yadayamātmā ”²⁴

When the Upaniṣadic ṛṣi declares ‘ Ayamātmā Brahma,’²⁵ or ‘ Aham Brahmāsmi ’²⁵ he is negating this very otherness of Brahman by declaring an absolute identity of the two—Brahman and Ātman. Even though all the mystics may not be non-dualists of the above type, it cannot be denied that, “ Mystical experience basically involves a powerful urge towards the reconciliation, unification and harmony of all with all ”²⁷. Therefore, the declaration of the Divine or the Absolute as ‘ Wholly Other ’ goes directly against the spirit of mysticism. Not only the Non-dualistic, which is often mistakenly called the Pantheistic mysticism, but even the Theistic mysticism of St. Teresa, Mira or Chaitanya cannot be explained by the theory of the Divine as the ‘ Numinous ’. God even for these latter type of mystics is nearer to the heart than one’s own self, and no external deity.

Lastly, the Mysticism of the type of Mahāyāna Buddhism is left completely unexplained by the theory of Numinous. Though having no specific reference to the Divine, Mahāyāna Mysticism, because of its essential vision of unity, is akin to all other types of mysticism described above and a theory which completely fails to explain it, shows its inherent weakness only.

Rudolf Otto’s description of the ‘ Holy ’ or the ‘ Numen ’ as the ‘ *Mysterium Tremendum* ’, is also one sided. He explains the ‘ mysteriousness ’ ‘ awfulness ’ of the Numen on the analogy of primitive types of feeling, such as awe, terror and a sense of ‘ uncanny ’ or ‘ eerie ’. He regards, fear as the most elemental or fundamental religious emotion. The terror or the sense of ‘ creeping flesh ’ one feels when faced with some unfamiliar experience, as that of ghosts, seems to be the paradigm of

the highest religious emotion to him.²³ It is so because all these experiences suggest the super-naturalness of their object, and God or Numen is essentially super-natural for him. That is why he even seeks justification of his theory in the old dogma of miracles.

But terror or the sense of uncanny are primitive types of emotions. They describe the feelings of the primitive man whose lack of knowledge of the laws of nature makes him afraid of natural forces. But if there is a God for the modern man, he must be revealed in the order of nature and not in the experience of 'uncanny' etc.

Comparing the primitive religions with the higher religions, John Caird rightly observes, "Far removed is this reverence from the mere dumb wonder of ignorance, or the gruesome awe of the super-natural.... Instead of ignorant wonder we have here intelligent admiration, instead of blind submission, trust and sympathy and love, instead of the paralysis of thought before a protentious insoluble enigma, the ennobling and ever renewed impulse to thought which arises from the assurance that God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all."²⁴

Without intending, Principal Caird's description of primitive religion fits Otto's conception of the numinous experience, and this speaks for itself.

All the modern thinkers insist that if religion has to have a meaningful place in modern man's life, it must be a positive, ennobling experience. Had William James read Rudolf Otto, he would surely have labelled his 'Numinous Experience' as the religion of the sick soul. For him religion of healthy mindedness necessarily has positive practical consequences in the form of purity of heart, strength of the soul, charity and love towards all, a new zest for life, an assurance of safety and a temper of peace and love.³⁰ We can recall here the description of a seer of Brahman in the Upaniṣads. Supreme Joy (ānanda) and complete fearlessness (abhaya), are the chief characteristics of a man who has realized Brahman as his own Self.³¹ That the mystical vision is an experience of joy, peace and self-expansion and not of fear and self depreciation would be agreed to by all the modern thinkers.

In contrast, Rudolf Otto, describes the religious experience as 'creature feeling', which is a feeling of complete depreciation, a sense of utter nothingness of the self. It is to be compared with the sense of sin and guilt so much emphasized in early Christian theology. Nietzsche was shocked at the 'unparalleled madness of human will' which feels satisfied in declaring its own sinfulness and which conceives the holy God before which man can feel himself totally unworthy and sinful.³²

Most philosophers of religion agree in declaring that 'not fear and submission, but love and assertion of one's own powers are the basis of mystical experience'³³.

The total depreciation of man, the almost morbid emphasis on man's sinfulness, the categorical denial of man's capacity to emancipate himself and the emphasis on the vast gulf between man and God must of necessity have harmful consequences for man's social and moral life. Though we may not agree with the Pragmatist in regarding practical consequences as the test of the validity of a belief, they cannot be totally neglected either. The faith in man's total depravity and utter dependence on God can hardly be an inspiration for any efforts for self emancipation of which man is declared to be utterly incapable.

Secondly, the conception of God as "Wholly Other" deprives the creature or the created world of any positive value or meaning. If God is completely transcendent to the world, you cannot realize him through a life in the world. The world and the life-negation, of which Indian Philosophy has been often accused, stares us here direct in the face.

It is strange that the so-called Pantheism of Advaita Vedānta and the super-naturalism of the Otto's theory of the Numinous, both seem to result in world and life-negation. Whether it is Śaṅkar's Brahman, or it is Otto's Numen, whenever the Divine is conceived in opposition to the world order, such a conception would result in the depreciation or even negation of the world order.

In the end we may recall Otto's own view about the essential differences in the nature of mysticism or religion as such. Rudolf Otto's conception explains well certain numinous trends in popular religions. But it leaves so much that is basic and of supreme

worth in all religious experience, mystical or otherwise, that is the love for God, or the desire to rise above one's limited ego into communion with the source of one's existence etc. unexplained.

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NOTES

1. The Idea of the Holy (Penguin Books, 1959), p. 36.
2. Mysticism East and West (Macmillan, New York, 1972), pp. 158-9.
3. The Idea, pp. 31, 71-80.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-35.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-44.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 66-7.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 34, 66.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 62-72.
10. See—John Caird. The Fundamental Ideas of Christianity, (1904), Vol. II, pp. 1960.
11. Mysticism, p. 77.
12. Adhyāsa bhāṣya, Upadeśa Sahaśri, II.1.17; II.11.7; II.12.11, etc.
13. See Mysticism, pp. 42, 110.
14. S. B. on Brahma Sūtras, I.1.4.
15. John Caird, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 6-7.
16. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 79ff.
17. The Idea, pp. 45ff.
18. Mysticism, p. 159.
19. S. B. on Brahma Sūtras, I.1.4 etc.
20. Mysticism, pp. 73ff.
21. S. B. on Brahma Sūtras, II.1.20.
S. B. on Brahāraṇyaka, Up. II.4.6.
22. Mysticism, pp. 80, 88.
23. Chāndogya Up. III.14.1.
24. Brahadāraṇyaka Up., II.4.6.
25. *Ibid.*, II.4.19.
26. *Ibid.*, I.4.10.
27. Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Vol. V, p. 432.
28. The Idea, pp. 29-31, 39-43.
29. John Caird, Philosophy of Religion, p. 28.
30. Varieties of Religious Experiences, pp. 268-9, 476.
31. Īśa Up., 6, 7, Mūṇḍaka Up., II.ii.8.
32. The Philosophy of Nietzsche, p. 712.
33. Eric Fromm, Psycho-analysis in Religion, pp. 52-53.