THE SENSE OF THE HOLY

By JUSTIN J. KELLY

THE SENSE of the holy first emerges in contrast to the human, the ordinary, the this-worldly: the holy is simply the Other-exalted, august, more-than-human. This fact impressed me especially once a few years ago when I visited the ruins of an ancient pagan sanctuary in the north of England. The narrow lane that led to it wound off into the hills, far from the main road; even in the late twentieth century a.d., the place seemed utterly remote from human habitation. There in a small field stood a circle of monumental stones, less huge than those of Stonehenge, but still impressive, almost man-dwarfing. The field was slightly elevated, and ringed round it were hills: small mountains whose heads vanished into the mists of low-lying clouds. Standing there, one knew instinctively why the men of the second millennium before Christ had chosen this spot for their altar, and taken such trouble to drag enormous blocks of stone vast distances to the site. The silent remoteness of the scene conveyed a sense of unearthly majesty. The divine seemed almost tangible in the atmosphere of the place; one had the feeling of being where earth and heaven met.

Yet although awareness of the holy may and often does arise in the presence of natural grandeur, it is by no means confined to it. The sacred is not manifest only in the majesty of mountains and the vastness of the universe; it is most tellingly encountered in man. Sometimes in meeting a person we sense a mysterious power of charism, something that fills us with awe: we seem aware of a dignity, a wisdom, or a love that goes beyond the normal, or even the human. The reverence certain people arouse in us is part of the religious sense; in fact, it may even be said that the sense of the sacred has not found its proper object until the 'wholly other' has become the 'holy other'.

The following pages will be concerned with these dialectically related aspects of religious awareness: the holy as the more-than-human other, and the holy as the other *in* the human. In both cases, it is the element of *difference* or otherness which is the defining quality of the holy. 'That which strikes man in the presence of the divine', says John L. McKenzie, 'is the difference between the

divine and the created'.[1] And Mircea Eliade, in his most comprehensive study of the history of religions, quotes with approval Roger Callois's statement: 'At bottom, the only helpful thing one can say of the sacred in general is contained in the very definition of the term: that it is the opposite of the profane'.[2]

In *Perelandra*, the second volume of C.S. Lewis's science-fiction trilogy, an incident occurs which conveys in a peculiarly expressive way this sensation of otherness. The narrator finds himself alone in a dark room with a faint rod or pillar of light. He senses its uncanny luminosity as the manifestation of a presence – something inorganic and yet intelligent, a power superior to man:

> It was not at right angles to the floor. But as soon as I have said this, I hasten to add that this way of putting it is a later reconstruction. What one actually felt at the moment was that the column of light was vertical, but that the floor was not horizontal – the whole room seemed to have heeled over as if it were on board ship. The impression, however produced, was that this creature had reference to some horizontal, to some whole system of directions, based outside the earth, and that its mere presence imposed that alien system on me and abolished the terrestrial horizontal.

His sensations as he confronted this homogeneous cylinder of light were, he says, very unpleasant. It was not that he feared this powerful, unearthly presence as something evil: on the contrary, 'I felt sure that the creature was what we call good, but I wasn't sure whether I liked "goodness" so much as I had supposed'.[3]

Lewis's fictional description communicates imaginatively, in a non-religious context, some central aspects of the human encounter with the more-than-human. As Rudolf Otto shows in his classic *The Idea of the Holy*, this mingling of attraction and dread, fear and admiration, is an essential and recurring feature of primitive religious experience. The divine mystery is simultaneously *tremendum* – an object of dread, causing the beholder to shake with fear – and *fascinosum*, enrapturing, fascinating, beatific.[4] The word 'awful' in its root sense (meaning awesome, majestic, and at the same time dreadful, terrifying) aptly conveys the two inseparable aspects of

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[1] McKenzie, John L.: *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee, 1965), p 365.

[2] Eliade, Mircea: *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York, 1958), p 12. (Cf Callois, Roger: *L'Homme et le sacré.*)

[3] Lewis, C. S.: *Perelandra* (New York, 1965), pp 18–19.

[4] Otto, Rudolf: *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, 2nd edition (Oxford, 1958), pp 12 ff., 31 ff.

this experience. The same ambivalence, prior to conceptual thought, is suggested by Rilke's 'Beauty is the beginning of the terrible'.[5]

The initial terror of man before the divine is clearly visible in the plea of the israelites to Moses: 'You speak to us and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die'.[6] There is no suggestion here that Yahweh is evil or bent on destruction; but his power is so overwhelming that fleshly, profane man cannot live in the presence of it, any more than he could stand before the open door of a blast-furnace. In Lewis's novel, the narrator's sensation that the creature he saw was good, 'but I wasn't sure whether I liked "goodness" so much as I had supposed', conveys something of this paradoxical sense of attraction-repulsion.

The encounter with the holy is like the experience of love in being unique and trans-rational. Also, like love, it radically reorients the one who undergoes it, challenging his profane system of values and judgments – even as the mere presence of the column of light in Lewis's story has the effect of abolishing the normal horizontal, making it seem as if the room and not the column were tilted. What before seemed self-evident becomes profoundly questionable, and vice-versa – the 'holy' itself, which before may have appeared to the 'profane' man as dubious, problematic, even unreal, is now revealed as reality itself.[7]

This experience of 'the shaking of the foundations' occurs frequently in the Old Testament, most dramatically at the climax of the book of Job, in God's reply to Job out of the whirlwind: 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?'[8] The procession of natural wonders with which the Lord confronts Job – 'Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion?'[9] – is not, Otto notes, so much an attempt to convince Job of some fallacy in his thinking, as it is a simple manifestation of 'sheer absolute wondrousness that transcends thought'. The sheer purposelessness (in human terms) of such creatures as the wild ox, the ostrich, the vulture, becomes in the context of this hierophany, he says, 'a thing of baffling significance'[10]. Job is literally overwhelmed: 'I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know'.[11]

Before the revelation of transcendent power, wisdom, and beauty,

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[5] Rilke, Rainer Maria: *Duino Elegies*, trans. C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley, 1961), *First Elegy*, p 3.

[6] Exod 20, 19.

[7] Cf Eliade, p 459: 'Sacredness is, above all, real'.

[8] Job 38, 4.

[9] Job 38, 31.

[10] Otto, p 79.

[11] Job 42, 3.

Job and all that Job is are 'dust and ashes'. This remains true even though he has every natural reason to think himself just (as he has amply proved through the thirty-five chapters of his argument with his would-be comforters). Job's transformation consists in passing from a condition of hearsay to one of vision; from the state of unenlightened or 'natural' man to that of one who knows, and is totally changed by his knowledge. His response is almost a paradigm of the attitude of ancient man before the revealed *numen:* 'I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefor I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes'.[12] In a remotely analogous way, the experience of falling in love sometimes generates a sense of unworthiness in the lover, even if before he thought highly of himself. It is the measure which has been measured, the standard of judgment which has itself been changed.

It must not be thought that the primary aspect of the encounter with the holy is the humbling of the beholder, or that its principal aim is to instil in man a consciousness of his own wretchedness. On the contrary, such self-awareness as Job's, 'Therefore I despise myself', is a kind of incidental by-product: the principal focus is entirely on the divine mystery which manifests itself. This is why the experience is not shattering or disheartening but rather wonderful, beatifying. Job at the end is *happy*; he is not simply abashed, bowled over by the incomprehensible. The latter, says Otto, though it might strike Job dumb, would not convince him inwardly.[13] It is the consciousness of the value, the grandeur, the trans-human beauty of the revealed 'holy' which causes him to rejoice.

Precisely this sense of rapture before the divine supremacy gives birth to the exclamation of Jesus:

> It was then that, filled with joy by the holy Spirit, he said, 'I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children. Be it so, Father, for this is what it pleased you to do'.[14]

God's otherness, his inversion of normal human processes and standards of value, his incomprehensible ways, are not for Jesus a stumbling block, but a cause for joy and praise. It is so only for the person who, like Jesus, has *seen* – has experienced God's very mysteriousness as a value, and indeed *the* value. It is in the same spirit that Paul utters his great cry in his letter to the Romans:

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[12] Job 42, 5–6. [13] Otto, *op. cit.*, p 80. [14] Lk 10, 21.

> 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways . . . For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever, Amen'.[15]

Such a sense of the holy obviously goes far beyond any mere shuddering awe at the remote otherness of God. It implies a God who has shown himself as sheer goodness and love, who has come close to man without ceasing to be other.

This element of mystery or transcendence – what Otto calls 'the supra-personal in the numinous'[16] – is essential to any profound religious awareness. Without it, religion becomes 'human, all too human': that is, it ceases to express the very otherness which is the defining quality of God. This fact was dramatized for me by an incident which happened a few years ago during a retreat at a convent school in London. There a girl – an intelligent and well-balanced young woman of irish-catholic background, came to me with a problem. She described how, on a visit to Westminster Cathedral, she was at first depressed, then overwhelmed, by the spectacle of hundreds of devout people kneeling at prayer. The contrast between the worshippers, with their all-too-human words and rituals, and the empty, unresponsive darkness overhead, was for her almost too much to bear. It seemed the more terrible in that no one else appeared to be in the least aware of it. People came and went – comfortably, devoutly, a trifle mechanically – as they had on countless other afternoons, and doubtless would again. 'What were they all doing?' she asked me. 'Who, what, were they praying to?' Was there something wrong with her, that her faith could be so shaken by something of which nobody else seemed even conscious?

I assured her that her experience was not shocking or abnormal, though it had occurred at a place and in a form which would affect only an unusually sensitive person. For other people, and no doubt for the girl herself at another time, the same spectacle might be a testimonial to faith, a positive encouragement; for her at that moment it was a stumbling block. I do not now recall exactly what I said to her, and very likely it was not important. What mattered was that I listened and seemed to understand her difficulty. She was not about to abandon her faith; the mere fact of her bringing the problem to me, a priest, was proof of that. Yet that faith was

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[15] Rom 11, 33–36.

[16] Otto, *op. cit.*, pp 197 ff.

undergoing a crisis – a crisis brought on by her sudden awareness of a gap between the human words and forms of faith, and God himself: the hidden, silent object of prayer and worship. It was a crisis of growth, requiring her faith to become more than it was in order to be truly itself.

This new awareness of what might be called the 'godness' of God was an important moment in her religious and personal growth. Moreover, despite its outward appearance, her sense of the trans-human otherness of God was biblical and authentically christian. The infinite exaltation of Yahweh above man is a continually recurring theme of the Old Testament; and the God whom Jesus calls 'Father' is none-the-less God, the wholly other who 'dwells in light unapproachable'. In becoming conscious of the difference (not necessarily contradiction) between the human reality of religion and God's remote transcendence, the girl was simply appropriating and making her own one aspect of the good news which is the heart of christianity. It is the paradox that in Christ, God has come close to us without ceasing to be himself, the holy One; that the Father can be 'ours' and still be 'thou who art in heaven'. Thus what appeared to be almost a breakdown of faith was in reality an expansion of her religious consciousness – a deeper apprehension of the christian sense of God.

The sayings of Jesus, particularly in the sermon on the mount, continually stress the difference between the divine and the human – even, or especially, the religious human. 'Why do you call me good? There is only one who is good, God'.[17] 'But I say to you, do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by earth, for it is his footstool'.[18] He constantly exposes accepted 'religious' behaviour to the searching light of his own sense of the holy. 'My Father's house is a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves'.[19] By driving the money-changers from the temple and denouncing pharisaic evasions, Jesus attempts to purify the institutional forms of hebrew religion. It is thus his own awareness of the gulf between those forms and the demands of the holy God which leads to his fatal conflict with the pharisees.

The history of religions, says Eliade, is largely a history of the loss and recovery of the sense of the holy: that is, of the revaluation and devaluation of various expressions of the sacred. Concretely, he observes, almost anything can be (and historically has been) a

[17] Mk 10, 18. [18] Mt 5, 34. [19] Lk 19, 46.

vehicle for communicating the sense of the divine: toys, children's games, skills, means of transportation, eating, language, sex.[20] It is not, therefore, that some things are intrinsically 'sacred' while others are profane in essence. It is the way they are regarded and treated within a particular cultural framework that partially determines whether or not they will be manifestations of the divine. 'A thing becomes sacred in so far as it embodies (that is, reveals) something other than itself'.[21]

Thus the hebrew prophets' attack on idol-worship, for example, was an attack on something which at least originally was an authentic form of religious experience. (Hezekiah, in 2 Kings 18,4, is credited with smashing the bronze serpent whose veneration had the authority of Moses, on the grounds that its worship had become idolatrous.) In relation to the prophets' own experience of a free, personal, and transcendent God who summoned man to holiness, the worship of idols was a regression, an obstacle to genuine encounter with the divine. The prophets, says Eliade, were justified both by their own religious experience and by the point in history at which that experience occurred.[22] So likewise in the gospels, the readiness of Jesus to violate the sabbath rest in order to do works of healing is a devaluation of one aspect of the sacred and a revaluation of another. The same process is continued in the pauline and early christian rejection of circumcision and the worship of the temple: the whole jewish law is now felt to be inadequate in relation to God's new and definitive self-manifestation in Jesus.

Thus the authentic religious sense, the sense of the holy, exists in a dialectical relationship with the forms of religion – as do values like wisdom with formal education and institutions of learning, or love with the institution of marriage and the family. Forms support, extend, deepen and fulfil spontaneous experience: but they can also impede it, choke it off, prevent it from taking place. Only if there is a personal encounter with God at the root of religious practice – some point at which the holy is discovered as a reality in one's actual experience – will that religious practice have any vitality and hope for growth. Apart from such personal experience, there is only a certain social ritual or a pharisaic religion of law – dead forms which tend to resist any transforming encounter with the holy.

The change from a 'sacral' to a 'secular' style in the post-Vatican Church is perhaps best understood as part of an ongoing effort to

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[20] Eliade, *op. cit.*, p 11. [21] *Ibid.*, p. 13. [22] Ibid., p 25.

recover and present the sense of the holy – that is, to express the essence of the christian awareness of God as it must be realized today, detached from obsolete historical forms. Karl Rahner remarked, long before the Council, that it was simply a miracle if anyone ever managed to recognize the Church of the twentieth century as the house of God, 'all cluttered up as she is with pseudo-gothic décor and other kinds of reactionary petty-bourgeois stuff'.[23] The particular signs of 'sacred otherness' by which the Church of the preconciliar era set such store – such as the latin liturgy, special dress for priests and religious, a multitude of laws and customs affecting the daily life of the ordinary catholic – had ceased to express to contemporary man the sense of the holy. Many of them now seem simply quaint, the fossil remains of an earlier religious culture: quite human, if sometimes a trifle bizarre.

It is a fact that many people today, particularly the young, experience the Church and all institutional religion as so much 'sacred clutter'. 'In our day', remarked Avery Dulles a few years ago, 'the sacred and the secular have drifted so far apart that the sacred has lost its function': which function, he added, was to interpret the secular, to give the secular that understanding of itself which the secular as such does not possess.[24] A living experience of the holy not only devalues the profane world, showing it up as limited, non-ultimate, and thus freeing man from the temptation to make it his all, but at the same time confers a lasting value upon it, by revealing it as rooted in the absolute. This world, human reality, can and must be respected, cherished, loved; because it is not 'only' human, having been caught up into the mystery of God.

This is why it is so imperative to help the man and woman of today to see beyond the 'sacred clutter', to bring them into the presence of the holy itself. An awareness of the mystery, as the depth-dimension of existence, is necessary for a genuine love of the world. Without such an awareness at the core of secular experience, the world will tend to be simultaneously absolutized and trivialized. It will be absolutized, because, without an 'Other', the world is literally all there is. It will be trivialized, because the world is self-evidently not God, not enough to satisfy man, with his infinite hungers and his longing for the absolute.

Thus the real antithesis to the sense of the holy is not the feeling

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[23] Rahner, Karl: *The Christian Commitment*, trans. Cecily Hastings, vol 1 (New York, 1963), p 30.

[24] In a seminar at Woodstock College, Woodstock, Maryland, Spring 1967.

that God is dead or absent – that very feeling can be an expression of the hunger for God which is one form of the 'sense of the holy' itself – but rather a feeling of pervasive triviality. It is the sense that everything finally comes to the same thing, and that nothing – and no one – matters very much. Though this has been given its classic expression in Macbeth's 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow' speech, culminating in a vision of life as 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing', it is a characteristically modern feeling. From Eliot's *J. Alfred Prufrock*, who 'measured out his life with coffee spoons', to the drama of Beckett and Pinter, modern literature is full of despair at the evacuation of meaning from a world without otherness. A wholly secular world is one in which nothing has any ultimate meaning or value: neither persons, who are simply the casual by-products of natural forces, nor these processes themselves, which are simply the result of 'chance and necessity'. The symptomatic expression of such a de-sacralized vision of things is perhaps the drug culture of some of our large cities, where (as one observer puts it) 'people use one another as casually as kleenex'. Sexuality detached from commitment, affection, or respect – without awe and consequently without love – is simply the apotheosis of this de-valued universe.

'Men need not regard the forest as sacred, or the tree, or the cow', a sociologist observed some years ago, 'but there is a limit to how much of his world he can de-sacralize and still find the kind of human satisfaction he needs'. Science, he went on to say, 'cannot discover a single worthwhile thing about man; if worthwhileness exists, it is religion's function to effect its epiphany'.[25] Perhaps the most significant way in which the holy can be manifested to contemporary man is in the form of loving reverence for the human other. To respect another human being as something of irreplaceable value and dignity is fundamentally a religious attitude. Though practised (sometimes heroically) by secular humanitarians, it seems to make sense only if man is what christianity affirms him to be: a finite nature endowed with the infinity of God. Rahner has suggested that 'love of neighbour' may be for man today *the* comprehensive 'word' which sums up the essence of christianity, like the word 'faith' for Paul, or 'conversion' in the synoptic gospels. 'A worldly world is being created by man, a world which is not

[25] Schallert, Eugene J.: 'The Individual and the Community', *Problems in Jesuit Asceticism*, Proceedings of the Jesuit Ascetical Institute, Sept 5–7, 1960 (Los Gatos, Cal., 1961), pp 89, 101.

meant to be sacralized, but to be experienced in its depths, which God has sanctified'. In such an era, he says, love of neighbour could be the really moving word through which the whole christian experience of God is awakened anew.[26]

From the beginning, the christian sense of the holy has been aroused by and directed towards the incarnate Lord. Not the absolutely Other only, but the Other in the human is the substance of the christian revelation. 'Whoever has seen me', says Jesus, 'has seen the Father'.[27] The synoptic accounts of the transfiguration of Jesus are a kind of paradigm of the christian encounter with the holy. St Mark's gospel describes how Peter and James and John are led up on to a high mountain by Jesus. There he is transfigured in their presence: his clothes become dazzlingly white, and he is seen conversing with Moses and Elijah. The disciples' response exactly fulfils Otto's description of man face to face with the transcendent: they are struck with fear, and at the same time fascinated, even enraptured. Peter wishes to remain: 'Lord, it is wonderful for us to be here. Let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'.[28] What makes the disciples' experience specifically christian is that the glory of the divine shines through the flesh of Jesus: it is no mere encounter with the naked 'Other'. They are enabled to recognize him, not as man only, but as the beloved of God: 'This is my Son, the beloved'.[29]

This awestruck awareness of the presence of the divine in the human is not solely applicable to Jesus. Such reverence and love is properly transferable to each human being, as someone fundamentally worthy to be, deserving of respect in his own right. In a sense, the holy is manifested in Jesus only that it might be recognized also in the neighbour: 'I tell you most solemnly, because you did it to the least of these, you did it to me'.[30]

'The whole law of human existence', says a character in Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*, 'consists merely of making it possible for every man to bow down before what is infinitely great'.[31] In the last analysis, it matters little whether reverence and love are first learned in the encounter with one's fellow men, or alone, before the face of God. Each implies the other, each lives from the other. In both cases, the wholly other is revealed as that which man needs in order to be wholly himself.

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[26] Rahner, Karl: *Theological Investigations*, vol. vi (Baltimore, 1969), p 249.
[27] Jn. 14, 9. [28] Mk 9, 5. [29] Mk 9, 7. [30] Mt 25, 40.
[31] Dostoyevsky, Fyodor: *The Devils (The Possessed)* (London, 1953), p 656.