

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF MYSTERY IN RUDOLF OTTO'S METAPHYSICS

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Abstract: *The interrogation of the sacred proposed by Rudolf Otto's metaphysical theology is not so much an answerless question as it is a conceptual open invitation to becoming aware of the phenomenon of meeting sacrality. It is also desired to become aware of the limits of reason in the process of analyzing the phenomenology of the sacred. Thus, the irrational is assumed to have the sense of mystery and knowledge becomes, then, an assumption of that which cannot be known about mystery. Regarded analytically, in the Kantian sense, the mystery and the numinous state it induces, that of *mysterium tremendum*, is revealed to be situated beyond the formalisms of reason, but also of the conventional ethics, metaphysically undefinable, above the relations of causality or dependency. Its reality, confirmed, at the level of the impact on human conscience, and by the philosophies of empirical pragmatism, could better be postulated by appealing to similar perspectives of the negative theology. For Rudolf Otto, these ascertainments and the appeal to the terminological genesis and evolution of the concept of divine mystery's typology constitute landmarks which confirm the dimension of the human being's spiritual life, a dimension which remains, for now, undefinable for the potential of our reason and argumentative logic.*

Keywords: *mystery, irrational, Sacred, *mysterium tremendum*, noumen.*

Introductory references and correlations. Rudolf Otto and the interrogation of the Sacred as an open theme

The problem of the *Sacred*, a central theme in Rudolf Otto's theological metaphysics, represents one of the most open conceptual operating levels which determines new and consistent interrogations. The fact that this subject continues to be at the intersection between philosophy and theology, as it was postulated in the dawn of occidental thinking, represents evidence in favor of the relevance of the writings that have addressed it. Among them, the analysis of Rudolf Otto occupies a place of maximum importance. And maybe the most important validation of the relevance of this subject and of the texts that have addressed it, mostly the ones of Rudolf Otto, comes from the attention given to such a theme by another great thinker whose relevance cannot be doubted, namely Martin Heidegger. Not only the problem of the Being and its relation to the beings, not only the reformulation of the question referring to the destiny of the occidental metaphysics, but also the enigmatic and, because of that, extremely provocative, thematic of the Sacred, remains a challenge and an occasion for constant conceptual reevaluation and repositioning. A "twilight zone", the Sacred could be defined, in Paulinian terms, as

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madness for reason, just as reason could be characterized as madness for faith. Yet, the Sacred regarded by Rudolf Otto as the Irrational or as a theme subject to new interrogations due to its multiple ambiguities, from Heidegger's perspective, resists critics precisely through the permanence of its presence in human life. The relation with the Sacred manifests itself even in the most empirical forms of man's implication in the spatial-temporal dimension. The noumenon, as Otto defined it, the transcendental mystery from beyond which breaks into the immanent, expresses itself through its elements of mediation, through the middle terms. In Otto's metaphysical theology, they are identified at the level of the rational terms within myths, theogonies and theologies. For the ontological metaphysics proposed by Heidegger, the mediation terms operated by the occurrence of the Sacred, are concentrated on poetic utterance, in the great works and symbols of the poets. The parallel with Heidegger, who stated that the Irrational mustn't excessively extend its dominance over the rational, although it exists as an ontic and gnoseological evidence³, and the fact that the Sacred was a common preoccupation for Rudolf Otto as well as for Heidegger sustain the idea that, for theological sensibility, but also for metaphysical lucidity, through all time, therefore also in the present, the Irrational remains a reference point faced with which the human investigation can never exhaust its capacity of living and contemplating. And for this reason, among others, Rudolf Otto's work remains in the plain of writings which invite the modern man to self-reflect⁴. Rationally approaching the Irrational may seem, in this context, the big challenge undertaken by Rudolf Otto's analytics, as well as the correlations created between this endeavor and other levels of metaphysical operation which have taken other ways of access towards the same theme, tempting as well as hardly surmountable.

The Irrational as mystery, and knowledge of what it [the Irrational] is not

In Rudolf Otto's opinion, the theist perspective, especially the Christian one, offers the possibility of structuring the image of the concept of Divinity. Therefore, traits seen in the human ontic paradigm are projected and maximized onto this concept, resulting in an imagistic complex which seems to allow the faithful man the act of indirectly addressing, inter-relating with the presence of the god. The distinct, contoured symbol of Divinity, a personified symbol which includes qualities such as reason, will, self-conscience, full authority and perfect knowledge, is actually created. All these attributes are active factors met in the spiritual life of the human being but now they are brought to the level of perfection, are made absolute. If we are capable of recognizing and delimiting these elements through rational analysis,

³ Martin Heidegger. (2004). *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*. Translated by Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, Indiana University Press, p.251.

⁴ Annalisa Caputo. (2002). *La Filosofia e Il Sacro, Martin Heidegger lettore di Rudolf Otto*. Bari: Stilo Editrice, pp. 9-15.

then, they can also be subjected to cognitive expertise in the case that they are amplified towards the absolute. As such, by having these maximized qualities, Divinity could be compared to rational speaking and approach, and faith in itself would obtain the characteristic of rationality. Referring to Christianity, Rudolf Otto considers that the endeavor of the conceptual crystallization has determined, within this religion, the undertaking of reason as a key element in the dynamic of its relation to the dialectic between the immanent and the transcendent. In Christianity, therefore, reason is not excluded, but on the contrary, constantly solicited for the clear understanding and delimitation of concepts of faith. The act of Christian faith needs reason in order to have a picture of organized references and information through which the affective flux can open itself⁵. Conviction / faith appeal, thus, to a conceptual axiomatic in which the notional borders are clearly and distinctly postulated. It is desired that the religious sentiment be correlated to the specific theological-conceptual ensemble so that there is no prioritization of affectivity to the detriment of rational discourse. The mystery is an assumed *mystery*, but it falls within the parameters of conceptualization so that it is recognized and treated as a transcendental reality, but also as a self-sufficient notion which can be operationalized. Therefore, one can work with the notion, with the term *mystery* which does not exclude its experience but, on the contrary, confirms its presence and manifestation force at the level of the affective experience of the faithful. Recalling Faust's affirmation, while dedicating a eulogy to the sentiment, that a *name* can only be *sound and smoke*⁶, Otto considers that, on the contrary, in the theological frame of the faithful, if the *name* means, in fact, the concept, then it is proved to be extremely important in the entire Christian religious complex. Reconstructing Faust's affirmation, Otto affirms that the endeavor of conceptualization makes the stabilization and organization of faith on stable criteria possible, which allows the advancement of knowledge within the register of faith and within Christian revelation. The presence of the conceptual theological system represents, in Otto's opinion, the sign of a net superiority of any religion⁷. The appeal to reason becomes a clue of the undertaking, by the respective religion, of the human nature in itself, nature which has, as a primordial component, the capacity to think and conceptualize, abstracting, theorizing and arguing. In the case of Christianity, one cannot talk, then, about an exclusion of the conceptualizing endeavor, but this act is constantly related to the foundation of the faith in the Christian revelation. The thesis of the subordination of the rationality of the transcendental evidence of faith is constantly assumed

⁵ Rudolf Otto. (1992). *Sacrul. Despre elementul irațional din ideea divinului și despre relația lui cu raționalul*. Cluj: Editura Dacia, pp. 10-11.

⁶ Goethe. (1995). *Faust*. Trad. Lucian Blaga, Pref. Tudor Vianu, București: Editura de Stat pentru literatură și artă, p.182.

⁷ Rudolf Otto. (1992). *Sacrul. Despre elementul irațional din ideea divinului și despre relația lui cu raționalul*. Cluj: Editura Dacia, p.11.

and put into practice, in the likes of a binder meant to tie and balance the sphere of reason in relation to that of religious experience. Otto insisted on the necessity of becoming aware of the fact that, no matter what range of characteristics we conceptualize and expose as traits of the divine presence, it will not exhaust or cover the totality of Divinity's characteristics. The mystery, its indescribable secret constantly remains the characteristic that will separate it from the limited gnoseological capability of the human being. The trait of being mysterious, enigmatic in itself represents, however, a concept, a formula for rationalizing and naming of the divine secret. It is not open and deciphered, but through conceptualization, it is identified and recognized by the human rationality, it is integrated in the overall image of the Divinity, as much as it can be constituted in the frame of knowledge of a created and limited being such as man. *The divine mystery* remains, thus, indescribable at the level of human beings' logical-argumentative analysis but is identified and recognized as *mystery*. Otto states that language plays a decisive role in this millenary attempt at postulating the characteristics of the divine, including that of being constantly enveloped in the aura of mystery. Basically, the necessities of language have imposed the search for a concept-word inclusive for that which we *cannot* know about Divinity. Therefore, the mystery has been named and postulated, while integrally keeping its status as a linguistic, metaphysical and theological unity, incomparable to rational definitions. Otto highlights the fact that all traits recognized as characteristics of Divinity which can be understood and assumed through the logic of argumentation exist due to the irrational and mysterious component of the divine presence. The finite rational manifests itself, in this context, on the basis of *the infinite irrational* and being in constant relation to it. Actually, when Otto talks about the irrational, we believe he approaches the meaning of *super-rational*, of that which goes beyond, envelopes, carries and guarantees the existence and dynamic of the rational.

The Kantian synthetic-analytic duality and the gnoseological uncertainties of mystery

Recalling the Kantian delimitation of the *synthetic* and *analytic* formulas, Otto considers that the rational characteristics through which the human mind attempts to characterize a small part of the divine presence are synthetic. In this case, the attributes of a subject which cannot be fully known through its abyssal depths, these attributes express characteristics formulated within the limits of human language and reason, they offer information on certain components, are the expression of certain data which needs the presence of a subject, unknown, and a clear predicate, distinct but limited in its meanings. On the other hand, we could argue that the analytic, if we were to follow the Kantian logic taken by Otto, is typical for the mystery of divinity, for its transcendental mystery. The analytic is represented by the assimilation of the predicate by the subject, basically, in its case, no new information is offered, but the predicate only repeats or details that which the subject

already announces. For this reason, in Kantian gnoseology, analytical phrases are also named *explicative*, while the synthetic ones also bear the name of *extensive judgements*⁸. In relation to the divine being, *the concept of the irrational* does not announce, does not express any new information about the divine mystery, but only confronts it as mystery, as a secret which, postulated as a subject, does not have any predicate other than that which confirms it as secret, indescribable and unquantifiable element through the human capacities of cognitive processing.

This positioning of the irrational as an indefinable and indeterminable factor at the level of logical definitions has generated the effort of a supposed correction or adaptation to the imperatives of reason. Thus, the approach of a paradoxical rationalization of the irrational has emerged, against the backdrop of the duality between the two metaphysical and theological poles, on the basis of the opposition between rationalism and religion. The thesis of rationalism that rejected the possibility of a miracle was in contradiction with that of its unconditional recognition, present in revealed religions. This contradiction was intended to be overcome, especially through the a priori construction by rationalists of the possibility of the existence of a miracle, through the acceptance of its occurrence within the framework of a world explainable with the help of physical laws. Miracle became only a special component in the universal architecture generated and maintained by divine will. Thus, an integration of the irrational into rationality was attempted, in the logical analysis of the universe and the possibility of the existence of an absolute Creator. The example of the preordained harmony system proposed by Leibniz can be conclusive here for this integrative vision of miracle and irrationality. From Leibniz's perspective, the miracle does not exist to point out the epiphanic structures of the physical world, does not arise from transcendence and erupts in the immanent sphere. It is integrated in the perfect order of a world which proves itself as *the best of all possible worlds*⁹. For Otto, the process of rationalizing the irrational is a forced endeavor, it does not take into account the evidence of the differentiation between rational and irrational, a differentiation that is qualitative and based on the intensity and nature of belief in divinity. Thus, Otto argues, the concept of God converges the concepts of rational and irrational, but either the rational overwhelms, or even cancels the presence of the irrational or, on the contrary, the irrational is the one that eclipses or excludes the rational. According to Otto's analysis, the rational, or more precisely the effort of rationalizing the irrational, has imposed itself in theology but also in the general study of religions. Practically, no means have been found by which the transcendent, irrational factor can be maintained as an active element that is inexplicable, mysterious, to be experienced, assumed through faith and affective experience, felt as a mystery and enigmatic-shattering evidence. Thus, the very idea of God, the image of divinity, has been

⁸ Immanuel Kant. (1998). *Critica Rațiunii Pure*. București: Editura IRI, pp. 26-27.

⁹ G.W. Leibniz. (1997). *Eseuri de teodicee*. Editura Polirom, p.40.

rationalized and restricted to the level of a concept that, although central, is subject to logical-deductive arguments, the existence of God being evidence capable of being supported and proven rationally. Thus, the understanding of God as the Pure Being, as Master Eckhart expressed it¹⁰ is replaced with the approach of God as an advanced idea. The history and hermeneutics of religions, the research of the premises of primitive beliefs not only those recognized as superior, have been strongly influenced, in Otto's opinion, by this extensive effort to rationalize the religious irrational, to conceptualize and dogmatize the mystery. Therefore, in the approach to humanity's religious experiences, the system of superior rational concepts has been set as the starting point of the analytical endeavor, meant to logically underpin any subsequent described mystical experience, more precisely, to ensure its rational explanation and dogmatic framing. Thus, the feeling and state of mind of a gnoseological *certainty* regarding the experience of the sacred and the mystical mystery has been cultivated. Rationality seemed to be the factor that controls any explanation and definition of this type of experience, the endeavor that holds definitions and frames for the entire typology of the human being's encounter with the religious irrational. In Otto's opinion, this action of subordinating the analysis of religions to the principle of rationality came as a concession made to the opposite direction of research, which considered that any recognition of the possibility of existence for mystery and revelation is a mere meaningless assumption, a superstition that must be denied in the name of scientific objectivity. But it was precisely the forced effort of rationalizing the idea of God that inevitably led to an amplification of misunderstanding related to the possibilities of the human conscience's relation to the thesis of divine existence. By positing the divine instance as a concept open to rationalization, the *psychological* reality of faith experience, of affective intuition, has been neglected, reducing the overwhelming importance of feeling in the dynamics of the religious phenomenon to insignificance. Otto emphasized, in this context, that the undeniable value of rationality must be recognized only in accordance with the assumption of the extension of the religious phenomenon far beyond the evidence of logical-argumentative analysis. Thus, where reason ends, religious experience does not end, on the contrary, it continues in multiple forms and contents, with feeling, emotional experience becoming its central axis, not the integrating calculation of reason¹¹.

An artificial problem: the rationality and morality of the sacred. The ethical and metaphysical indefinability of *mysterium tremendum*

Rudolf Otto developed an analysis of the category of *the sacred*, beginning with the observation of how this term is used in different domains of human presence and

¹⁰ Rudolf Otto. (1932). *Mysticism East and West*. London: Macmillan and Co., p. 207.

¹¹ Rudolf Otto. (1992). *Sacral. Despre elementul irațional din ideea divinului și despre relația lui cu raționalul*. Cluj: Editura Dacia, p.15.

action in the world. Thus, the notion of the sacred is also found in the sphere of ethics. Otto mentions Kant's thinking that posits the sacred will as the one that is unconditionally subordinated, out of a sense of total duty, to the pure moral law that commands a priori, absolutely, that is, without any reference to the empirical dimension.¹² Good must be achieved in the name of duty towards the categorical imperative and the driving force that determines us to fulfill this goal, without deviating or stopping, is the sacred will, that is, the full moral will. However, when speaking about the sacred character of the will to respect moral duty, what is actually being referred to is the formalism of this categorical imperative¹³, and a direct way of confirming the universal validity of moral law and its capacity to be a practical obligation immediately applicable in human interrelationships. The connection made between the concept of the sacred and that of morality or, in Kantian terms, practical reason, is necessary but not sufficient, according to Rudolf Otto. The idea of morality or ethical value is only included in the concept of the sacred, it cannot be its equivalent, it cannot be equated or recognized as identical to it. The experience of the sacred is much broader and it includes, among other things, the component of the axiomatics of ethics in its immeasurable dimension. Therefore, what is moral, good cannot be equal to the sacred, they can only be subordinated to it. In the opinion of Rudolf Otto, in order to understand the concept of the sacred and especially recognize it as an indisputable spiritual reality that has accompanied human existence from the beginnings of the crystallization of self-awareness, we must exclude from the analysis of the sacred *the two minuses*, as Otto calls them, namely the *rational* and *moral* aspects. It is also necessary to access the foundations and the evolutionary-terminological dynamics of the term "sacred." Thus, for over two thousand years, Western tradition has been influenced by a process of conceptual overlap between the term *sacrality* and *morality*. The word *sacer* or *sanctus* would have at its base the evolution of the word *hagios* corresponding to the biblical term *qadosh*. All these terms were closely correlated with the idea of good and its fulfillment through the constant adoption of moral conduct. According to Rudolf Otto, we are witnessing a process of stratification built on the original theme of these words, on their morphological root, a process that has reached a form of linguistic and semantic saturation. The excessive use of the concept of the sacred in the sense of good, morality has led to the concealment of its authentic meaning and has led to a form of permutation of its metaphysical and theological values. In the act of translating the word *qadosh* through the term *good*, Otto considers that a rationalist intervention has occurred, in which an attempt has been made to remove the term from the incidence of the phenomenon of mystery. The word was intended to be clear and well-defined in its meanings and refer-

¹² Immanuel Kant. (1998). *Critica rațiunii pure*. București: Editura IRI, p.329.

¹³ Rudolf Otto. (1931). *The philosophy of religion. Based on Kant and Fries*. New York: Richard R. Smith Inc. Publishers, p. 177.

ences. Thus, it was translated as the concept of *good*, ensuring its rational-terminological security and eliminating any interpretive ambiguities. In fact, the word *qadosh* denotes a state, an experience that cannot be restricted only to the moral experience of good, but it is precisely this state that is difficult to quantify and name. It is the irrational in the sense of the super-rational, it is the mystery that terrifies and overwhelms. Starting from the semantic root *numen*, Rudolf Otto proposes the concept of *numinous* as the correspondent of the Hebrew *qadosh*. It is a terminological extension operation similar to the transition from the word *light* to *luminous*.¹⁴ Thus, from the idea of *mystery*, the projection is made to the idea of *mysterious*, everything that is touched by numen becomes numinous, charged with secrecy, enveloped in the mystery that overwhelms, terrifies. This is what Otto calls the *mysterium tremendum*.¹⁵

The critique of the immanent causal dependence proposed by Schleiermacher and reconstruction of the Kierkegaardian thesis of the disproportionality between the Creator and his creation

A *numinous* state cannot be properly explained, it does not lend itself to rational, precise, and undeniable definitions. It is a personal experience that belongs to an individual possessor, a conscious entity with its own references and frameworks of consciousness. Such an experience can only be stimulated, provoked, without damaging its unique familiarity, the consubstantial intimacy with the soul, the consciousness to which it belongs. This consciousness can be guided, directed in its process of becoming aware and assuming its own noumenal experience, but the experience it experiences cannot be defined. The explanatory and rational discourse stops at the edge of such an overwhelming spiritual experience that manifests a different type of logic and organization at the level of intensity of the data provided.¹⁶

It will be almost impossible, according to Rudolf Otto, to discuss the problems of ultimate experiences offered by the encounter with the *numinous* and what can be called *the religious a priori*,¹⁷ by people who will rather retain extreme states of suffering that they have experienced as a result of illnesses or childhood psychological traumas. It may never be possible for them to pay attention to the experience of this type of encounter, namely self-analysis of numinous feelings. If the aesthetic is seen only as a form of sensory pleasure and the religious as a mechanism for protecting society, then such an approach will clearly resist any attempts

¹⁴ Rudolf Otto. (1992). *Sacrul. Despre elementul irațional din ideea divinului și despre relația lui cu raționalul*. Cluj: Editura Dacia, p.17.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

¹⁷ Philip Almond. (1994). *Rudolf Otto. An Introduction to His Philosophical Theology*. The University of North Carolina Press, p.108.

to delve deeply or ask analytical questions about the numinous or aesthetic experience. Rudolf Otto argues that in the case of experiences related to the mystery of transcendence, we should not analyze what they have in common with other intense experiences, such as those related to childhood memories or the experience of love, the death of loved ones, devout submission, etc. On the contrary, what is important here is the element that is not common, the aspect that distinguishes these types of experiences from the experience of the numinous. The majesty, elevation, and solemnity experienced intensely in the context of the numinous experience have a unique and unmistakable specificity, a unique identity that cannot be replaced. Evoking F. Schleiermacher's contribution to the hermeneutics and phenomenology of religious experience, Rudolf Otto believes that this author deserves credit for proposing the concept of complete dependence as the defining element for the entire experience of the numinous.¹⁸ However, he will criticize Schleiermacher for two severe conceptual issues.¹⁹ Firstly, there is the error of proposing a classic and well-known dependency relationship, which is found in most subordinate relationships. However, in the case of relating to the transcendent mystery, the feeling of dependency is of a different order because the subject in relation to which the religious person feels dependent is one of a different quality and metaphysical rank. Therefore, simply making an analogy between dependence on the numinous factor and common dependencies that arise especially in the cause-and-effect or superior-inferior relationship seems to be an erroneous approach that misses the true essence of the experience of dependence in the face of the transcendent mystery. Rudolf Otto reminds us, for the edification of the criticism he proposes of Schleiermacher's vision, the Old Testament passage from Genesis 18:27. Here is presented the meeting between Abraham and God, dramatic in the way it tests faith beyond any teleological understanding²⁰, a meeting during which the confession appears that man, regardless of the superior spiritual evolution and stage he holds, is nothing but *dust* and *ashes*. Only with this confession does the appeal, addressing the supreme Creator, come forth on the background of the full feeling of dependence. But this dependence, experienced in the context of revelation and prostration before the divine presence, differs totally from the typology of other dependencies. These are active in the immanent plane, while the dependence experienced by Abraham during the experience evoked in the Old Testament text is *transcendent*. The second error that Rudolf Otto detects in Schleiermacher's approach is related to the priority given to the feeling of dependency over the religious feeling in itself. Thus, for Schleiermacher, religious experience is based on

¹⁸ Friedrich Schleiermacher. (2016). *The Christian Faith*. NY, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, p. 148.

¹⁹ Rudolf Otto. (1992). *Sacrul. Despre elementul irațional din ideea divinului și despre relația lui cu raționalul*. Cluj: Editura Dacia, p. 21.

²⁰ Søren Kierkegaard. (2002). *Frică și cutremurare*. București: Editura Humanitas, pp. 9-11.

the creation's relationship of dependency on the Creator. Through such a formulation, the terrifying mystery that characterizes the divine presence is neglected, more emphasis is placed on the relationship to God than on the overwhelming majesty of his revelation. In Rudolf Otto's opinion, the terms of the problem are reversed. Therefore, the feeling of independence from the Creator must be based on the soil of the numinous experience, the divine mystery that occurs and paralyzes the consciousness of the worshiper. The consciousness of being a created entity, an effect of the supreme demiurgic act through which the whole universe was generated, becomes secondary in relation to the feeling of fear in the face of the Creator. The realization of one's own existence as an effect of the supreme act of cosmic generation is revealed to be inferior to the realization of the fact that you are in the presence of God, a position that determines the complete shaking of the personality of the believer. Unlike Schleiermacher, for Rudolf Otto, the feeling of *mysterium tremendum* is superior to the understanding and acceptance of one's status as an ephemeral creature, instead it is the foundation and source of the other components of the religious act.²¹

Correlations to William James' philosophical pragmatism and the negative theology of Dionysius the Areopagite

The reality of the radical experience of the encounter with the numinous cannot be contested by even the most analytical and pragmatic spirits. Thus, Rudolf Otto invoked William James, who in his writings, from the positions of his philosophical pragmatism and empiricism, speaks about the incontestable reality of the religious phenomenon and the right to believe, without pronouncing on the veracity or possibility of existence of the Divine.²² We cannot access the truth of transcendent reality, but we are certain of the reality of religious activities that have accompanied the history of humanity from its beginnings. And within these activities, the feeling of dependency in relation to an external creative force that remains an active causality for human beings has always been experienced, revealed in this context as a created being, as an effect of a supreme cause that cannot itself ever be the effect of another cause. From the perspective of *philosophical pragmatism*, William James believes that this feeling of dependence and awe of the creature in front of the Creator constitutes a depreciation of the human subject, an act by which the human being is subclassed, retreated, and postponed in front of an idea, a presumption.²³ However, as Rudolf Otto points out, what matters in this context is the recognition, even by a thinker belonging to analytic empiricism, of the phenome-

²¹ Rudolf Otto. (1992). *Sacral. Despre elementul irațional din ideea divinului și despre relația lui cu raționalul*. Cluj: Editura Dacia, pp. 22-23.

²² William James. (2001). *Introducere în filozofie*. Cluj: Editura Dacia, p. 136.

²³ Rudolf Otto. (1992). *op. cit.*, p. 23.

non of experiencing the numinous, on the basis of which the feeling of dependency and the status of being a creature persist.

According to Rudolf Otto, the feeling of *mysterium tremendum* represents an experience characterized by an intensity of reality that exceeds the evidence perceived and confirmed by reason. Essentially, this feeling is extremely vivid and overwhelming, representing an actual state that cannot be doubted in terms of its truth. It strikes the consciousness and sensitivity of the believer in the temple or during moments of prayer, the performance of liturgical rituals, but it can also surprise by appearing in the most banal or common places and moments. In fact, Rudolf Otto believes that these observations about the terrifying mystery experience do not tell us anything about the mystery itself and do not possess such a capacity. The approach of such border experiences rather involves the use of negative theology, consecrated by *Dionysius the Areopagite* who evokes *what cannot be said* about the mystery of Divinity. From the perspective of this early Christian theologian, human wisdom can have access to the structures and contents of creation, can access the laws of substance and form that constitute the reality generated by divine providence. Through the medium of syllogistic, metaphysical, and mathematical speculation, man can advance on this path of exploration of the created cosmos. But the human mind stops in front of the mystery of divinity, being seized by what Dionysius calls the not-knowing of God. This state of not-knowing of God does not equate to profound ignorance or a renunciation of the relation of consciousness to divinity, but rather means the assumption of a state of devotion, of affective and intellectual piety through which one reflects on the existence of the unfathomable mystery of the Creator. Thus, the limits of human thought are conscious, which means it is unable to investigate what or who the Creator is but can focus on creation. Of course, Dionysius emphasizes, we can assume some general points of reference about the existence of divinity, namely the fact that it has created us, that it is hidden and leaves free will to everyone, that it supports the entire existence of the universe from behind, from a super-temporal perspective. But we do not have analytical, logical-rational access to the substance of divinity, to its eternal being, we can know what it is. Therefore, we are left to assume information and evidence about what divinity cannot be, for example, the fact that it cannot be a body subject to dissolution, etc. Dionysius believes that we cannot actually speak about the being of God because He has a super-being, he is above any being and possibility of being. He is self-existent, uncaused, and not an effect for any cause, being the supreme, mysterious, and indescribable cause that generated the cosmos without being generated.²⁴

Similarly, the conceptualization, analysis applied to the feeling of encountering the *mysterium tremendum* can only be a flawed approach, in the sense of bring-

²⁴ Dionisie Areopagitul. (1996). *Scoliile Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul. Despre numirile Dumnezeiești*. Opere complete. București: Editura Paideia, p.177.

ing up what we cannot know strictly rationally from the characteristics of this experience. It is a phenomenon that cannot be placed in the realm of the illogical, but rather far surpasses the possibility of explanation and definition of the argumentative logic type. In order to pass into the positive-conceptual description dimension, we must abandon the attempt to answer the question of what the mystery that frightens religious consciousness is and move on to analyzing how this mystery is and manifests itself. The question of *what* the mystery is becomes the question of *how* the mystery is, how it arises, affects, and is perceived by the spirit of the one who experiences the thrill.²⁵

Terminological genesis and typologies of mythological perception

The typology of this special feeling can only be identified to the extent that it is compared to other feelings and experiences from the same area of religious dynamics. Belief in salvation, love for loved ones and for the Creator, affective participation in religious ritual, all of these psychological and theological realities are similar but distinct states compared to the experience of the *mysterium tremendum*. In order to understand the mode, the *how* of such a radical experience, we must analyze the terms that are used, their etymological basis and conceptual references that they contain. Thus, the word *tremor* would simply denote the sensation of fear, of shaking and spiritual paralysis in the face of a violent and unavoidable danger. Rudolph Otto considers that we must accept this sense of the term if we take it out of the context of the expression *mysterium tremendum*. But within this formulation, it takes on a different meaning, that evoked by the Hebrew *hiq'dish* and also *emat lahveh*.²⁶ The first word expresses the feeling of sanctification through shuddering, through the clarity of understanding the power and capability of the element, being, presence of which you are afraid. The meaning of this expression would be that this instance that frightens you occupies a special, noble, sacred place in your consciousness. The second word refers to the fear that the Divine can induce, can project into the consciousness of the believer who strays by departing from the divine commandments. It is a question, comments Rudolf Otto, of the shuddering that the Divine can induce by transmitting a demonic state, a darkening of consciousness identified by the ancient Jews as a form of encounter with personified evil, an evil which is allowed to take possession of the sinful consciousness. Rudolf Otto reminds us that the ancient Greeks also experienced this type of experience, which they identified with the term *deimapanikón*, a term formed from the roots *deima* and *panikon*. *Deima* means *test* in Greek and *panikon* signifies *a state of panic*. Therefore, through the notion of *deimapanikon*, the Greeks wanted to identify a state of panic given as a test, trial, or even purifying punishment from the Divine. In this sense, Rudolf Otto recalled the Old Testament verse *Exodus 23:27*, in which it is

²⁵ Rudolf Otto. (1992). *op. cit.*, pp. 24-26.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

said that the Divine will send terror upon those who oppose and persecute Israel, but also the verses *Job 9:34; 13:21*, where reference is made to a shattering fear that has no equivalent in human interrelationship states, a fear that comes from another ontological paradigm, from another existential register. Rudolf Otto commented that this special, unusual fear has a strong *phantasmatic* trait.²⁷

The problem of terminology that could name this type of super-rational experiences is one of the most difficult issues in the hermeneutics of the phenomenon of sacredness and the relation to the mystery of divinity. Rudolf Otto attempted an analysis of the way in which certain terms are capable of expressing components, aspects, and traits of the experience of encountering the *mysterium tremendum*. Thus, he evoked the Greek word *sebastös*, a term used by the first Christians to indicate the defining trait of divine presence, a characteristic that cannot be possessed by any spiritual or physical entity but belongs only to the supreme Creator. Attributing this term to creation, even to people with full authority, such as the king or the emperor, represented for the first Christians an act of idolatry and blasphemy. In German, this term would be translated by the word *der Verehrungswürdige*, a word that refers to the idea of *venerability*. In this sense, Rudolf Otto also reminded of the English word *awe* which signifies the idea of veneration but also of the phrase *he stood against*, which means to stand against something, but in this context, the sense offered is rather *to stand in front as a mystery*, as an unpassable and unresearched mystery through the autonomous forces of reason. To denote the idea of sanctity, Rudolf Otto imposes the term *heiligen* and delimits two stages of the feeling of *mysterium tremendum* designated by the formulae *sich grausen* and *erschauern*. The first formula denotes a strong *fear in itself*, a fear that captures and paralyzes the inner dynamics of consciousness. The second formula expresses a more advanced state, which can occur in the extension of the first. It is about the experience of a *thrill*, according to Rudolf Otto, of a *shuddering, shaking* that raises the affective mobility of consciousness, ennobles it, and transfigures it. This *sacred thrill* is defined by the expressions *Schauervoll* and *Schauer*, indicates Rudolf Otto.

The encounter with *the irrational*, in the sense evoked by Rudolf Otto, would actually be a complex state, experienced by humanity as a whole in the evolution of the relation to transcendence and in the endeavors of assuming divine presence, in various forms, from the simplest and most rudimentary expressions and symbols to the most complex. *Religiöse Scheu*, as Otto calls it, that religious experience that constantly targets *the numinous*, the timeless and aspatial mystery that cannot be assimilated and subjected to rational-argumentative analysis, therefore has its beginnings in a primary affective experience, belonging to the forms of primitive religiosity, namely fear, terror in the face of the supposed existence of demons and gods. This *mythical perception*, as Otto calls it, seems to be the primary stage, the foundation of the subsequent religious experience of humanity as a whole. How-

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

ever, it is possible that we have an error in this type of interpretation, already detected by Luther when he argues that natural man does not know the fear of the irrational, it appears later, with the awareness of sin and the Creator-creation relationship. Indeed, Luther, as Jean Delumeau argues, was touched by the fear generated by the awareness of the degree of immorality of his time.²⁸ Adhering to this idea, Otto also believes that, in fact, the basis of the religious phenomenon cannot be constituted in the feeling of fear, of *mysterium tremendum*. On the contrary, the preparatory stages of human religious experience did not involve the affective outbursts of terror, the trembling in the face of divine mystery or transcendence, and the concept of divinity itself was often confused at this level of mythological consciousness. The phenomenon of terror in the face of divine mystery arises later, when man surpasses the primary religious innocence phase and begins to consciously realize the colossal, timeless and non-spatial dimensions involved in relating to the irrational. Later this relation becomes a ritual one, amplifying the intensity of the experience of trembling, the religious shiver. From the fear of the presence of demons, one reaches the *mysterium tremendum* in the face of the divine Creator, and from the archaic religions of primitives to the complexity of the great religions that have persisted for millennia. This evolution has not extinguished the presence of psychic reflexes with regard to the appearance of phantoms or demons. Modern man often shudders today upon hearing reports of these symbol-presences, even if the relation to the mystery of the divine Creator has become a constant that has significantly reduced the intensity of such experiences taken over and preserved from the ancestral mythological age. These experiences cannot be cataloged only from the research of the affective intensity they involve, they cannot be analyzed only through the psychological distinctions between stages of pleasure and displeasure caused, as Rudolf Otto states.

The current relevance of the theological-metaphysical themes proposed by Rudolf Otto from the failures of desacralization. Conclusions

Therefore, for the German theologian, the encounter with the irrational or the suprarational has, as a phenomenon that has accompanied the entire evolution of mankind, a gradation of its effect on the psyche and the affective dynamics of the human being. The experience of *mysterium tremendum* belongs to a higher stage of the evolution of the religious consciousness of mankind. It is the dimension of the conscious realization of that negative definition of the divine in which man tries to quantify what he does not know about his Creator, the mystery, the unknown, the secret, the enigma that terrifies, shakes. But this *religious shiver*, as Otto called it, should not have the effect of inaction, paralysis and resignation in the face of the divine colossus located beyond cosmic boundlessness. On the contrary, the

²⁸ Jean Delumeau. (1998). *Păcatul și frica, Culpabilizarea în Occident. Secolele XIII-XVIII.*, Vol. II. Iași: Editura Polirom, p.236.

effect should be concretely manifested through the assumption of the role of creature that must venerate the creator principle through moral conduct but also through the imitation of its creativity. Thus, the ritual and ethical axiomatics, as well as the construction of life and inter-relational world become decisive for the constitution of a pious response in the face of the Indefinable divine. By proposing the term *numinous*, Rudolf Otto therefore brings into discussion not only the reality of the terrifying divine experience, the terrifying presence that comes from another supra-temporal world, but also the theme of the correct way of relating to the veracity of this religious experience that has accompanied mankind even in its cultural phases of denying the existence of an absolute Creator, of combative atheism and desacralization, he being, ultimately, only a ultimate form of relating to the irrational by rejecting and replacing the divine with obscure entities such as the Superhuman. But, in essence, through this approach, the void left by the *death of God*, as Nietzsche expressed it²⁹, could only be overcome by relating again to the presence of God, an absent presence, a more hidden, more indeterminable, more unrevealed and, by implication, more terrifying existence, a *contingent* possibility of *being that is not what it is and that is what it is not, as self-consciousness and necessary foundation of itself?*³⁰

Authors such as Mircea Eliade, Erich Sharpe or Paul Tillich have emphasized the importance of Rudolf Otto's theological thinking not only for the cultural interval of the 20th century but also for the future. The mechanical theory of life is, in this context, a frequently evoked example by Rudolf Otto to emphasize the excess, exaggeration of the approach to insert the entirety of human experiences under the imperative of matter interactions. And although Darwin was not directly interested in explaining the process of life only from the perspective of a mechanical theory, nevertheless his contribution to this type of understanding of existence was a decisive one, obliging theology and metaphysics seeking the spirit beyond matter to elaborate a reply.³¹ The concept of the *sacred* represents a reality of religious life but also of psychological life, an experience that cannot be denied or neglected. From this perspective, the analytics developed by Rudolf Otto on the breadth and multiple connections and extensions that this concept entails comes as an exploratory approach that does not offer definitions and frameworks, but only openings towards a still unknown area to the analytic spirit. The experience of the numinous is a universally human experience and it remains, therefore, a complex theme for the next decades of metaphysical, theological, ethical and psychological deepening.

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche. (2018). *Așa grăit-a Zarathustra*. București: Editura Humanitas, p. 61.

³⁰ J.P. Sartre. (2004). *Ființa și neantul. Eseu de ontologie fenomenologică*. București: Editura Paralela 45, pp. 137, 149.

³¹ Rudolf Otto. (2009). *Naturalism and Religion*. Translated by J. Arthur Thomson and Margaret R. Thomson Williams & Norgate Ltd. 38 Great Ormond Street, London, W.C.1 1907, The Project Gutenberg EBook of Naturalism and Religion by Dr. Rudolf Otto, p. 148.

Christian theology, especially Protestant, the history of religions and philosophy are especially called upon to continue the research inaugurated by Rudolf Otto. The start of this approach was initiated by authors such as Troeltsch, Barth, Bultmann, Tillich,³² but also C.G. Jung, who approaches the noumenal experience from the positions of psychoanalysis and abyssal psychology. This complexity and vastness of the exegesis of the central theses of the theological-metaphysical thinking proposed by Rudolf Otto shows not only its current relevance, but also the impossibility of unidirectionally answering, from a single discipline, the interrogations that concern the spiritual life of mankind.

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³² Todd A. Gooch. (2000). *An interpretation of Rudolf Otto s Philosophy of Religion. The Numinous and Modernity*. New York, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, pp.1-2.

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