

Leaven

Volume 1 Issue 1 *Worship*

Article 13

1-1-1990

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Recommended Citation

Brown, Doug (1990) "In Search of His Hand: Christian Classics and Devotions," *Leaven*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 13.

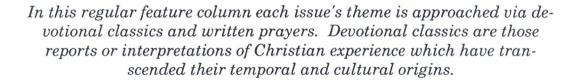
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In Search of His Hand

Christian Classics and Devotions

By Doug Brown, Editor



Students of philosophy of religion recognize Rudolf Otto's **The Idea of the Holy** (1917) to be a classic in the field. Fewer would think to pull the volume when studying worship. Such oversight would be unfortunate, if not costly. For Rudolf Otto was a churchman, vitally interested in the liturgical needs of his religious constituency.

Educated at Erlangen and Gottingen,
Otto held faculty positions in systematic theology
at Gottingen (1898-1914), Breslau (1914-17), and
Marburg (1917-29). Standing in a Theological
lineage which passed from Luther to Ritschl, he
especially found direction in Schleiermacher's
"rediscovery of the sensus numinous" (cf.
Schleiermacher's On Religion). While fully
endorsing a scientific "this-worldliness," Otto
fought the Darwinian and naturalist pressure to
strip from "human" any necessary religious
capacity or experience.

Concurrent with has scholarly apology

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for the authenticity of testimony about encountering the Infinite, Otto sought ways to more deeply center Protestant services of worship in this God-consciousness. He encouraged the writing of new hymns and prayers. He proposed a "sacrament of silence" as the climactic moment at the close of the service when the congregation would wait alertly and humbly for the intimate sense of God's presence.

As the subtitle -- An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational -suggested. The Idea of the Holy conveyed Otto's urgent challenge to a scientifically educated, rationalistic reader's hesitancy to see Truth stretching far beyond finite comprehension. Instead of confining religion (as did Kantians) to "the bounds of reason alone," Otto proposed that "the Holy" imposes an inexpressible "overplus of meaning" which we can but feel. Against the habit of equating holiness with righteousness, he concentrated on the mysterium tremendum (a reality rationally illusive and experientially unsettling) that results from being before "the holy." Dread, majesty, urgency, fascination—these reactions are the substance of worship.

Otto's cathedral simile capsuled his concern:

"A man enters a lofty cathedral. If he be technically proficient he can establish a 'theoretic relationship' with the cathedral; he can calculate its length and breadth; he can ascertain the principles according to which it has been constructed and its special characteristics of style; he may compute its cubic content. And if he has a practical eve. faults in it will not escape him and he will consider how it could be restored, made serviceable to practical purposes, altered and adapted; he may, indeed, himself set about the work. Thus he would establish a 'practical relationship.' But there is a third possibility; he may disregard any theoretical or practical relationship, and, sitting quietly in a corner, 'experience' the cathedral in receptive contemplation. IT may be half ruin, or it may be an unfinished building, but he will be seized of its essential idea, which in the execution may even be concealed rather than expressed; to his spirit it will be revealed in its entirely and unity. in its mystery and sublimity, in its profound symbolism - - all those unspeakable impressions which escape the man of pure theory and practice, and in which alone the real inner meaning and nature of the building is manifest. If our

visitor to the cathedral be innocent of this third 'relationship,' though he be a great man in the relationships of theory and of practice, he is fundamentally wanting." (Otto, **Religious Essays**, pp. 75-76)

Sympathetic with the line of great "feelers" from Augustine to Pascal to Schleiermacher to Kierkegaard to Merton, I believe Otto stirs some ultimate questions for our worship in Churches of Christ. We have devoted ourselves to blueprint and restoration relationships to the worship offered "the holy" by the faithful in Scripture's story. Are we familiar with the "third relationship"? Are we found "sitting in a corner" in receptive contemplation"? If not, I fear our worship is "fundamentally wanting."

Suggestions For Further Reading;

Dearest Friend among all my friends, thank you for understanding when I rush from one situation to the next without seeming to realize that you too are busy by my side. Thank you, because I usually feel hurt when one of my friends does not talk to me when I am in the same room with them. I must confess that sometimes your presence has slipped from my consciousness when I do not speak for minutes or hours. Grant me greater ability simultaneously to see the tangible and the intangible, the temporal and the eternal. Ah, but I must also rejoice for those other times when the stretches of silence are deep experiences of communion with you, somewhat like the intimacy my wife and I share when we walk a beach silently at evening. Grant me an abundance of such tastes of the silent oneness I anticipate heaven to necessitate, when words will be inadequate and unnecessary. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.