

1-1-1990

In Search of His Hand: Christian Classics and Devotions

Doug Brown

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

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

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol1/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

In Search of His Hand

Christian Classics and Devotions



By Doug Brown, Editor

In this regular feature column each issue's theme is approached via devotional classics and written prayers. Devotional classics are those reports or interpretations of Christian experience which have transcended their temporal and cultural origins.

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 his scholarly apology

Doug Brown is Assistant Professor of Doctrine at Harding Graduate School of Religion. HE attended Freed Hardemann College and Harding Graduate School and obtained a Ph.D. from Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

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 eye, 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 entirety 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;

- Philip Almond, Rudolf Otto: An Introduction to His Philosophical Theology (1984)
 J.G. Davies, Every Day God: Encountering the Holy in World and Worship (1973)
 _____ (ed.), A Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship (1972).
 _____ (ed.), The Westminster Dictionary of Worship (1979).
 Bernard Meland, Modern Man's Worship (1934).

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.