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NUMINOUS EXPERIENCE AND RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

The purpose of this article is to evaluate Rudolf Otto's account of the relationship between numinous experience and religious language in *The Idea of the Holy*, and this will inevitably also involve some more general discussion of the relationship between all religious experience and discursive reason. In *The Idea of the Holy* Otto makes a number of controversial claims about the nature of numinous experience and the problems which it creates for anyone wishing to speak about it. Numinous experience, Otto asserts, is qualitatively quite unlike any other experience. It is a religious feeling providing a unique form of religious knowledge inaccessible to our ordinary rational understanding.¹ It is frequently spoken of as ineffable.² Moreover because it resists literal description, it must be approached, if at all, then indirectly through analogy.³ At the heart of this collection of claims about numinous experience is an epistemological assumption about the distance separating religious language and experience. Otto believes that the parameters of numinous experience extend beyond the parameters of religious language, and consequently that it is possible to compare religious experience with language about it in a straightforward way. Indeed, much of *The Idea of the Holy* is devoted to the struggle of religious experience to cast off what Otto sees as its imprisonment by inadequate religious language.

However, many philosophers and phenomenologists of religion have recently been very critical of the epistemological assumption outlined above about the relationship between experience and language, which can be found not only in the work of Otto, but also in the work of a host of 19th and 20th century students of religious experience. It is argued that a sharp distinction between religious language and experience is unintelligible, because it fails to acknowledge that when we examine the phenomenology of all our experience, we discover that experience and language are inseparable, each epistemologically contaminated by the other. Language always enters into – is a constituent of – experience. Moreover, it has also been argued that this distinction between religious language and experience is parasitic upon another, equally questionable assumption which Otto shares with so many students of mystical experience: that is that such experience is unmediated,

¹ R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Second English Edition – Oxford University Press (Galaxy Books, 1958)), p. 135.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 7, 10, 13, 30, 59, 63, 184–185.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 34, 35, 77, 107–108, 184.

that is completely free of all cultural conditioning, regardless of the tradition or context within which it occurs. Here it is assumed that religious experience always shapes religious tradition, never that it is shaped by it. This article will be largely concerned with an evaluation – and as will be seen a vindication – of Otto's account of the relationship between religious experience, language and tradition in the light of recent literature in the philosophy of mysticism. After offering a brief introductory account of the nature of numinous experience, as this is presented by Otto in *The Idea of the Holy*, I shall elucidate through a critical examination of three complementary accounts of mystical experience – those of Steven Katz,⁴ Paul van Buren⁵ and Renford Bambrough⁶ – what is, in spite of the shortcomings of Otto's work, still of value in his understanding of numinous experience. In particular, I will demonstrate that although Otto's claims about the unmediated nature of numinous experience and its ineffability suggest that he failed to understand the complexity of all experience (including numinous experience) and the epistemological processes which make such experience possible (including the contribution made to it by the epistemological tradition within which it occurs), these writers are not justified in assuming that because of this such criticism entails other considerably more radical claims: either that there can be no non-verbal experience or that religious experience is entirely constituted by its concrete, religious tradition. I shall argue that, contrary to these critics, there is nothing wrong with Otto's claims about numinous experience transcending on the one hand all language about it, and on the other the concrete religious tradition within which it occurs.

Finally, in the light of this discussion, I shall conclude this article by considering further the significance of Otto's continual use of analogy in order to draw his readers' attention to the unique qualitative features of numinous experience. I shall demonstrate that his use of analogy has a function hitherto hardly acknowledged by Otto's interpreters, namely to extend our language about – and therefore our understanding of – religious experiences which are otherwise ineffable. Otto's discussion of analogy in *The Idea of the Holy* should be of interest to students of religious experience and particularly mystical experience, because it provides an explanation as to why those who assert that their religious experiences are inexpressible nevertheless continue to struggle to find language to refer, however inadequately, to such experiences.

I begin by offering an introductory account of the nature of numinous experience, as this is presented by Otto in *The Idea of the Holy*. Otto makes a number of controversial, but nevertheless, very interesting claims about numinous experience. He asserts that it is totally unlike other types of

⁴ S. T. Katz, 'Language, Epistemology and Mysticism', *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London, 1978), ed. S. T. Katz.

⁵ P. van Buren, *The Edges of Language* (London, 1972).

⁶ R. Bambrough, 'Intuition and the Inexpressible', *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. S. T. Katz.

experience, and that we cannot offer any literal description of it but – if we are to understand it at all – must approach it through analogy. Moreover, only by drawing the reader's attention to experiences which are similar to numinous feelings, can he be led, through the peculiar operation of what Otto calls the law of association of analogous feelings⁷ to discover for himself what the qualitative features of numinous experience really are. Thus, for instance, the element of numinous awfulness in the *tremendum* moment of numinous experience can be elucidated by drawing the reader's attention to other awful situations, providing the reader does not forget that there is a numinous overplus in numinous awe which is only discovered in religious feeling (through the operation of the law of association of analogous feelings), a quality in the experience of numinous awe which is not reproduced in any non-religious examples of feelings of awe. Similarly, there is a numinous overplus to be found in the other moments of numinous experience, the *mysterium* and the *fascinans*.⁸

Otto seeks to support his claim concerning what he sees as the evocative character of religious language in *The Idea of the Holy*⁹ by referring to many analogies to religious feelings. He cannot point directly to numinous experience, but must rather speak around it hesitantly. He suggests that numinous experience is like this more familiar experience and unlike that one; it is similar to this experience in one respect, but dissimilar to it in others; it is similar to different experiences in different respects, but has something extra as well. Then he asks his readers: now can you recognise what are the distinctive qualities of numinous feeling?

Clearly, behind these observations there are a number of significant epistemological assumptions. Otto assumes that religious experience is primarily a feeling, and insists – reflecting the decisive influence of the Romanticism of Friedrich Schleiermacher – that whatever may be the rational dimension of such experience, it is parasitic upon its non-rational dimension. Indeed, Otto accepts Schleiermacher's profoundly influential distinction between immediate 'raw' religious experience and mediated theological discourse which depends upon such experience.¹⁰ Numinous experience is identifiable apart

⁷ What Otto means by the law of the association of analogous feelings is that analogous feelings may excite or stimulate one another. If a non-religious feeling sufficiently resembles a numinous experience, it may arouse it in the mind. The law of reproduction of similar feelings is such that there is an imperceptibly gradual substitution of the non-religious feeling by its like, the numinous or religious feeling, the former dying away as the latter intensifies in corresponding degree.

⁸ R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, chapters IV, V, VI.

⁹ By the evocative character of religious language in *The Idea of the Holy* I mean that the process of speaking of analogies for numinous experience can arouse concrete numinous feelings through what Otto calls the law of association of analogous feelings. (See note 7 above). This is one of the most important functions of Otto's analogical language about numinous experience in *The Idea of the Holy*. For further extensive discussion of this claim, see my unpublished Ph.D thesis, *Rudolf Otto's Theory of Religious Experience in The Idea of the Holy: A Study in the Phenomenology and Philosophy of Religion* at the University of Kent at Canterbury.

¹⁰ See Schleiermacher's *On Religion, Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (New York, 1958), trans. J. Oman.

from the religious tradition in which it is located (although it takes many forms in different religious traditions), and all religious discourse (theology, art, music etc.) is ultimately justifiable only in terms of such experience.

Moreover, he argues that this feeling offers a distinctively religious form of knowledge, which eludes all attempts to express it conceptually and is actually opposed to our ordinary rational understanding. He says:

Revelation does not mean a mere passing over into the intelligible and comprehensible. Something may be profoundly and intricately known in feeling for the bliss it brings or the agitation it produces and yet the understanding may find no concept for it. To know and to understand conceptually are two different things, are often even mutually exclusive and contrasted. The mysterious obscurity of the numen is by no means tantamount to unknowableness.¹¹

Obviously, this claim about two types of knowledge, mediated discursive knowledge and immediate experience is familiar enough to philosophers and phenomenologists of religion. We find it, for example, particularly well illustrated in William James's distinction between 'knowledge by acquaintance' and 'knowledge about',¹² Henri Bergson's antagonism between 'intuition' and 'intelligence'¹³ and Martin Buber's distinction between 'I-You' and 'I-It' relationships.¹⁴ However, the source of Otto's claim lies in the epistemology of the relatively unknown early 19th century idealist philosopher Jakob Fries, whose influence on *The Idea of the Holy* can be readily discerned.¹⁵ He distinguishes between what he calls *Wissen* and *Ahndung*. Whereas *Wissen* is the discursive, conceptual knowledge of the natural sciences, the positive but limited knowledge arising out of the interaction between our rational understanding and ordinary perception. *Ahndung*, by contrast, is a pure, immediate, absolutely valuable, true and unlimited feeling, in part aesthetic, in part religious, which defies all attempts to express its essential form in concepts. This feeling typically gives rise to what later scholars usually designate as natural or extravertive mystical experiences,¹⁶ in which our various experiences of the phenomenal world are united in a higher order and by a mysterious higher purpose and value.¹⁷ It is this

¹¹ R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 135. Incidentally, the original terms translated as 'to know' and 'to understand conceptually' are 'kennen' and 'begriffliches verstehen'. See *Das Heilige* (Munich, 1963), p. 163.

¹² W. James, *Principles of Psychology* vol. 1 (New York, 1950).

¹³ H. Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, (New York, 1963) trans. R. A. Andra & C. Brereton.

¹⁴ M. Buber, *I and Thou* (Edinburgh, 1937), trans. K. G. Smith.

¹⁵ The influence of Fries on Otto is most obvious in Otto's earlier work of 1909 devoted to the philosophy of Fries and his disciple Theodore De Wette, *The Philosophy of Religion* (London, 1931) trans. E. B. Dicker. However it is still apparent in *The Idea of the Holy* (1917) and even in later works such as *Mysticism, East and West* (1926) trans. B. L. Bracey & R. C. Payne (New York, 1932).

¹⁶ Which Otto in *Mysticism, East and West* (Appendix III) explicitly identifies with *Ahndung*. For further discussion of extravertive mysticism (what Otto called in the above mentioned study 'the mysticism of unifying vision'), see in particular W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London, 1960) and W. J. Wainwright, *Mysticism* (Brighton, 1981).

¹⁷ For further information about *Ahndung* and *Wissen* (as well as other aspects of his complex epistemology which I cannot discuss here) see, apart from Otto's own *The Philosophy of Religion*, R. F. Davidson, *Rudolf Otto's Interpretation of Religion* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1947) and P. C. Almond *Rudolf Otto, An Introduction to His Philosophical Theology* (Chapel Hill & London, 1984).

account of the feeling of *Ahndung* – supplied by Fries – which provides Otto with the epistemological foundation upon which he can formulate his own ideas about the inaccessibility of numinous experience to rational understanding.

The first philosophical criticisms of this account of the relationship between religious experience, language and tradition that I want to introduce come from Steven Katz. His manifesto for a contextual study of mystical experience, ‘Language Epistemology and Mysticism’,¹⁸ – based as it is on a critique of Walter Stace’s *Mysticism and Philosophy*¹⁹ – has been very influential on recent scholarship on mysticism and he now has many admirers²⁰ and a growing number of critics²¹ as well. Although Katz in this article does not refer to *The Idea of the Holy*, it is clear that he shares with Otto a desire to bring together an interest in the issue of mediation of mystical experience by tradition and culture with observations about the function of religious language and the problem of the ineffability claims which so often attach themselves to religious experience. This is why an examination of Katz’s argument and conclusions – which are diametrically opposed to Otto’s – is so useful here for an evaluation of Otto’s position on these issues.

Katz’s single epistemological assumption which has determined the direction of all of his enquiry into the nature of mystical experience is the following:–

There are no pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. That is to say, all experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological

¹⁸ *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. S. T. Katz (London, 1978). Katz has elaborated on many of the themes of this article in a later essay, ‘The Conservative Character of Mystical Experience’, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. S. T. Katz (Oxford, 1983).

¹⁹ W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London, 1960).

²⁰ See, for example, R. M. Gimello, ‘Mysticism and Meditation’, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. S. T. Katz; R. M. Gimello ‘Mysticism in its Contexts’, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. S. T. Katz; C. A. Keller, ‘Mystical Literature’, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. S. T. Katz; P. G. Moore, ‘Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique’, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. S. T. Katz; H. Penner, ‘The Mystical Illusion’, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. S. T. Katz; W. Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (London, 1979); J. Gill, ‘Mysticism and Mediation’, *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984); P. Donovan, *Interpreting Religious Experience* (London, 1979); C. Overall, ‘The Nature of Mystical Experience’ *Religious Studies*, vol. 18 (1982), pp. 47–54. See also B. Garside, ‘Language and the Interpretation of Mystical Experience’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 3 (1972) and J. Hick, ‘Mystical Experience as Cognition’, *Mystics and Scholars* (Calgary, 1977), ed. H. G. Coward and T. Penelhum for earlier accounts of an epistemological approach to mysticism similar to the one advocated by Katz.

²¹ See, for example, W. J. Wainwright, *Mysticism* (Brighton, 1981); S. B. King, ‘Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, LV1/2 (Summer 1988); R. K. C. Forman, ‘Mysticism, Constructivism and Forgetting’, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* (New York, 1990), ed. R. K. C. Forman; D. Rothberg, ‘Contemporary Epistemology and the Study of Mysticism’, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, ed. R. K. C. Forman; A. Perovich, ‘Mysticism and the Philosophy of Science’, *Journal of Religion* 65 (1985); J. R. Horne, ‘Pure Mysticism and Twofold Typologies, The Typology of Mysticism – James to Katz’, *The Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. III, No. 1 (Spring 1982).

ways. The notion of unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty.²²

He continues:—

... the (mystical) experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to... his experience. ... the Hindu mystic does not have an experience of x which he then describes in the, to him, familiar language and symbols of Hinduism, but rather he has a Hindu experience, i.e. his experience is not an unmediated experience of x but is itself the, at least partially, pre-formed anticipated Hindu experience of Brahman.²³

Now it is useful to set beside these comments a passage in *The Idea of the Holy* which illustrates the kind of epistemological approach to mystical experience that Katz is objecting to. Otto is defending a quasi-perceptual model of numinous experience and claims that

The numinous... issues from the deepest foundation of cognitive apprehension that the soul possesses, and, though it of course comes into being in and amid sensory data and empirical material of the natural world and cannot anticipate or dispense with those, yet it does not arise out of them, but only by their means. They are the incitement, the stimulus, and the 'occasion' for the numinous experience to become astir (through the operation of the law of association of analogous feelings), and, in so doing, to begin at first with a naive immediacy or reaction – to be interfused and interwoven with the present world of sensuous experience, until, becoming gradually purer, it disengages itself from this and takes its stand in absolute contrast to it.²⁴

Clearly this passage suggests that numinous (or religious) experience can be separated from the visible, religious/cultural tradition in which it occurs – indeed that it is essentially untouched by that tradition. In contrast to this claim that numinous experience transcends 'the present world of sensuous experience', Katz argues that all religious experience, even mystical experience, is conditioned by pre-experiential belief patterns. That is to say:

The forms of consciousness which the mystic brings to experience set structured and limiting parameters on what the experience will be, i.e. on what will be experienced, and rule out in advance what is 'inexperienceable' in the particular given, concrete, context.²⁵

Moreover, he claims that

....the given (immediate religious experience) is (always) appropriated through acts which shape it into forms which we can make intelligible to ourselves given our conceptual constitution, and which structure it in order to respond to the specific contextual needs and mechanisms of consciousness of the receiver.²⁶

Accordingly, he can conclude that contrary to the reports of many mystics, the claim that through mystical training one can achieve liberation of the self from all cultural conditioning is self-defeating. He argues rather that mystics

²² S. T. Katz, 'Language, Epistemology and Mysticism', *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. S. T. Katz, p. 26. ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 26. ²⁴ R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 113.

²⁵ S. T. Katz 'Language Epistemology and Mysticism', *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. S. T. Katz, pp. 26–27. ²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.

of different traditions seek different, culturally specific goals through different specific ways or paths. Thus properly understood, altered states of consciousness attained during meditation exercises are not examples of

an *unconditioning* or *deconditioning* of consciousness, but rather... a *reconditioning* of consciousness... albeit a new, unusual, and perhaps altogether more interesting form of conditioned, contextual consciousness.²⁷

Since mystical life is filled with concrete, purposeful activities which generate expectations of what will be experienced, there is obviously, Katz concludes, 'a self-fulfilling prophetic aspect' attached to all mystical experience,²⁸ and this leads him to further conclude that all mystical activity is intentional. In Katz's own words:

in almost all cases, if not in all, mystical experience knows, as we have shown, what end it seeks from the inception of its traversal along the 'mystic's way'. Thus the Sufi *tariq*, the Taoist *tao*, the Buddhist *dharma* and the Christian *via mystica* are all 'intentional', i.e. intend some final state of being or non-being, some goal or union or communion, some sense of release, exaltation, blessedness, or joy. And the *tariq*, the *tao* and the *via mystica* seek different goals because their initial, generative, problems are different... The mind can be seen to contribute both the problem and the means of its overcoming: it defines the origin, the way, and the goal, shaping experience, accordingly.²⁹

Moreover, this pluralistic approach to mystical traditions and experiences and the epistemological claims on which it depends is clearly related to another strand of argument in Katz's essay which is concerned with the nature of religious language. Katz makes two significant claims about the use of language within mystical traditions. The first is that scholars such as Stace – who argue on the basis of similar descriptions of mystical experiences across religious traditions that an underlying 'core' mystical experience free from all cultural conditioning can be identified – are 'misled by the surface grammar of the mystical reports they study.'

That is to say, what appear to be similar-sounding descriptions are not similar descriptions and do not indicate the same experience. They do not because language is itself contextual and words 'mean' only in contexts. The same words – beautiful, sublime, ultimate reality, ineffable, paradoxical, joyful, transcending all empirical content, etc. – can apply and have been applied to more than one object. Their mere presence alone does not guarantee anything; neither the nature of the experience nor the nature of the referent nor the comparability of various claims is assured by this seemingly common verbal presence alone.³⁰

Accordingly, he can claim:

What emerges clearly from this argument is the awareness that choosing descriptions of mystic experience out of their total context does not provide grounds for their comparability but rather severs all ground of their intelligibility, for it empties the chosen phrases, terms, and descriptions of definite meaning.³¹

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 46–47.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

The second claim is that the ineffability language so often found in mystical literature needs to be approached with a considerable amount of scepticism, and certainly cannot provide the basis for any cross-cultural comparison of mystical experiences. This is because on the one hand, the ineffability language of different religious traditions serves only to prevent mystical experiences – be they of God, Allah, Brahman or Nirvana – from being properly investigated. Logically, therefore, it is impossible to establish whether one ineffable mystical experience is like another.³² On the other hand, it is possible to conceive of contrasting experiences which can each with justice be said to be ineffable. Katz cites as an example a comparison of the theist's ineffable experience of God with the atheist's ineffable 'sense of dread at the absurdity of the cosmos'.³³

However, behind these specific points about the ineffability of experience lies a more general impatience with such claims and the kind of analogical language which is so often associated with them. Katz argues that the mystic who abandons literal language pays the ultimate price for this: whatever language he uses becomes unintelligible.

... if the mystic does not mean what he says and his words have no literal meaning whatsoever, then not only is it impossible to establish my pluralistic view, but it is also logically impossible to establish any view whatsoever. If none of the mystics' utterances carry any literal meaning then they cannot serve as the data for any position.³⁴

Katz's alarm that the mystic's language all too often appears to be unintelligible – and these observations are clearly equally applicable to Otto's claims about religious language – leads us to a consideration of Paul van Buren's work on religious language. His essay, *The Edges of Language*, is devoted to defending the thesis that the parameters of experience extend as far as the parameters of language and no further. In fact, it is one of the most uncompromising of recent attempts to demonstrate that all claims that experience transcends language are unintelligible. He insists that just as experiences of deep love do not extend beyond language, so religious experiences likewise do not extend beyond our ability to speak about them. About such profound experiences we may indeed speak hesitantly, but, nevertheless, words (when correctly used) do precisely what they are supposed to do: they mediate experiences. Such profound experiences are never quite speechless – otherwise language could say nothing about them and we would know nothing about them.³⁵

In fact, van Buren argues that when we grapple with words in order to speak about religious experiences or experiences of love, we need to understand what we are actually doing. We are turning away from the use of

³² Ibid., pp. 54–55.

³³ Ibid., p. 48.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 40

³⁵ P. van Buren, *The Edges of Language*, pp. 66–67 & 104.

ordinary descriptive language to speaking at the 'edges of language'. However, he is careful to make clear that this defence of metaphorical language should not be construed as a vindication of any theory of non-verbal experience; for he insists that when we go out to the edges of language,³⁶ this means only that there are edges beyond which we cannot go without 'falling off' into meaninglessness.³⁷ Here van Buren, like Katz, is indebted to Wittgenstein's theory of meaning, which emphasises the public, rule-governed nature of all language which we necessarily share,³⁸ but, he argues, this is no reason why language should be interpreted as a cage which restricts our ability to obtain experience. To see language in this way, he insists, is to misunderstand its role in our lives, since it assumes that we can conceive of an inside and an outside of this cage, perhaps even that we stand apart from the cage and see it holding humanity captive. Van Buren suggests we cannot step out of the linguistic world to see ourselves captive within it;³⁹ and so he proposes that, to counteract the picture of the cage, we should conceive of language as a kind of platform that we build out while standing on it. This is what is meant by the 'extension of language' or by 'speaking at the edges of language'. He argues that this extension of language is a social act as language itself is, and that when we fall off the platform into a misuse of words, that is in to nonsensical speech, this is the void where the public, socially agreed rules are ignored.⁴⁰

Moreover, beside van Buren's criticisms of the proposal that there can be non-verbal experience can be placed Renford Bambrough's complementary observations about claims concerning the ineffability of experience in his essay, 'Intuition and the Inexpressible',⁴¹ which addresses itself to what he sees as the problems raised, for example, by Otto's agonising over the inexpressible nature of numinous experience. Bambrough is critical of all claims that there are limits to language beyond which we cannot go, and he focuses his attention particularly on Otto's ineffability language and on what T. S. Eliot has called the 'raid on the inarticulate' as examples of the kind of language which he wishes to call into question. The proposition of Otto, Eliot and others that words cannot capture feelings with any precision – and particularly religious feelings for which the best expressions are silence and darkness – Bambrough challenges. This is not only because, like van Buren, he believes that all feelings must be expressible in some form or we could know absolutely nothing about them, but also because the idea that there are limits to language suggests that there are absolute limits to human reason as well beyond which we cannot go.

However, Bambrough takes issue with this idea that there are limits to reason, on the grounds that contingent and temporary limitations of reason

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 62–63.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 83–85 & 110–113.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 56.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 81–82.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 82–83.

⁴¹ R. Bambrough, 'Intuition and the Inexpressible', *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* ed. S. T. Katz.

are treated as if they were *a priori*. Accordingly, we fail to recognise that there are always opportunities to transcend the particular limits of reason by which we are temporarily bound. In fact, when we slip into accepting that there are *a priori* limits to reason, we are discouraged from just the effort that is needed if we are to extend our understanding.⁴² There are, in fact, no limits to our understanding and no limits to our reason. Beyond what is now understood there is not a blank but only something further to be understood.⁴³ There need be no limit to the extent to which our understanding may be increased and no limit to our powers of expression; for a temporary intellectual problem or limit to our powers of expression already indicates the direction in which we should look for a means of solving the problem or transcending the particular limit. 'A failure to express is a failure, and there is no failure where no success is thinkable'.⁴⁴

Thus Bambrough argues that we can resolve the paradox presented by Otto, Eliot and others, who need many words, sometimes whole volumes, to agonise over, or assert, the inexpressible dimension of experience. Such 'raids on the inarticulate' are not, as Otto and Eliot seem to think, indications that we have reached the limits of language, but rather very fine examples of just how effective language can be – that is demonstrations of penetration to a new understanding of what is difficult to understand. When words 'strain, crack, sometimes break under the burden' of capturing experience, or when they 'decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, will not stay still', this is not an example of the limitations of language but of its proper use. Thus Bambrough concludes that in the face of what is at present difficult to understand, silence, empty space or darkness are never adequate responses, because if they are accompanied by nothing else, they are vehicles of communication for absolutely nothing!⁴⁵

I turn now to an evaluation of these writers' observations about religious experience, language and tradition, which clearly provide a vigorous challenge to the epistemology implicit in *The Idea of the Holy*. I shall begin by offering some criticisms of the complementary work of van Buren and Bambrough, since an understanding of the limitations of their work will enable us to focus our attention more sharply on those aspects of Katz's argument for pluralism which are particularly significant for our consideration of Otto's account of numinous experience and religious language.

Van Buren's claim that the parameters of experience extend as far as the parameters of language and no further can be criticised for several reasons. Firstly, as the philosopher, John Kellenberger, has recently argued, one meaning of the many ineffability claims made by mystics about their experience is that although such experience can be referred to by propositional language, it has a

⁴² Ibid., p. 206.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 208.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 212.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 210–211.

cognitive import that extends beyond such strict propositional expression... It is as though mystical propositions had a cognitive shadow, beyond language and beyond the strict import or propositions spoken or unspoken, in which lay their greater significance.⁴⁶

Kellenberger is here distinguishing between merely knowing that a proposition about a mystical experience is true and understanding the full significance of what is known about it, a distinction which relies upon a 'perception' of the distance between experience and language about that experience.

Secondly, it is precisely van Buren's emphasis on the rule-governed, public nature of language which so many mystics from different traditions insist is inadequate in the context of any discussion of mystical experience. The rules governing language about mystical experience simply cannot be similar to those governing language about ordinary experience, since mystical experience is so dissimilar to ordinary experience. In fact, mystics often regard rule-governed, public language as illusory and imprisoning, and as the target for deconstruction. In the west we can find such deconstruction in the forgetting or leaving behind of all thought and emotion in *via negativa* literature: for example, much of Eckhart's writing and *The Cloud of Unknowing*.⁴⁷ In India there is even more evidence of religious literature from a variety of philosophical schools, Hindu and Buddhist, which challenges the kind of account of religious language presented by van Buren. For example, the Mahayana Buddhist *Madhyamika* position is that conventional (public) language is diseased, a creation of man's ego tainted bondage, incapable of reaching ultimate reality – *sunya* or emptiness. It actually conceals from man the nature of reality by creating the illusion of permanence. In other words, it first transforms the world into something it is not, and then produces attachment to this false construction which leads to *dukkha* (suffering).⁴⁸ How can such an account of experience and language – which is so completely at odds with van Buren's – be accused of being nonsensical? It may turn out to be false, but it can surely not be accused of the misuse of words.⁴⁹ Moreover, it should not be forgotten in the context of this argument over the intelligibility of Otto's account of numinous experience and religious language that in *The Idea of the Holy* he displays a vivid awareness of the many points of convergence between his own philosophy of language and that which is implicit in the literature of the *Upanishads*.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ J. Kellenberger, 'The Ineffabilities of Mysticism', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 4 (October, 1979), p. 312.

⁴⁷ See, for example, R. K. C. Forman, 'Mysticism, Constructivism and Forgetting', *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, ed. R. K. C. Forman, pp. 30–43.

⁴⁸ See, for example, M. Sprung, 'Non-cognitive Language in *Madhyamika* Buddhism', *Language in Indian Philosophy and Religion* (Waterloo, Ontario, 1978), ed. H. G. Coward, pp. 43–54.

⁴⁹ We shall return to this issue when considering Katz's discussion of mystical language.

⁵⁰ See p. 191, as well as 'The "Wholly Other" in Religious History and Theology', *Religious Essays, A Supplement to 'The Idea of the Holy'* (London, 1931), trans. B. Lunn, pp. 78–94.

Thirdly, although van Buren speaks about extending the uses of language and of 'speaking at the edges of language', the effect of concluding that language encompasses all experience is to inhibit the extension of language. This is in sharp contrast to Otto, who frequently uses analogical language in his attempts to attain greater understanding of numinous experience. The 'perception' of the distance between numinous experience and religious language drives Otto to seek to extend our language about numinous experience as far as he can.

In fact, van Buren offers a revealing example of his insensitivity to the possibility of extending our language about experience in his insistence that the aroma of coffee is not an example of a non-verbal experience which cannot be described. He argues that we cannot describe the aroma of coffee, because we have no need to. We have noses with which to smell the aroma of coffee and distinguish it from other smells, so that the phrase 'aroma of coffee' is all the description we need. Although we have no further descriptions of certain experiences than our references to them, these references are sufficient for an adequate understanding of our experience.⁵¹ However, in arguing in this way, van Buren overlooks the possibility of extending our language about our experience of the aroma of coffee beyond what it is at present capable of conveying. There is always more that can be said about such experiences which are to some degree non-verbal, and we praise our poets for seeking more to say about them. It is precisely such a restless rejection of literal language that we shall discover in Otto's attempts to extend our language about, and consequently the boundaries of our understanding of, much religious experience.

When we turn to consider Bambrough's criticism of Otto's agonising over the inexpressible nature of numinous experience, we will find a preoccupation with the issue of the intelligibility of ineffability claims that we also find at the heart of van Buren's argument about language and experience – and indeed, as we shall see, in Katz's writing as well. Bambrough is not only arguing that Otto constructed artificial and unnecessary limits to our reason and language with regard to numinous experience, but also that such limits suggest that Otto's ineffability language is unqualified and therefore unintelligible. Bambrough's argument is of course understandable in the light of some of Otto's uncompromising comments about the *mysterium* moment of numinous experience. The *mysterium* is claimed by Otto to be 'wholly other',

that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment.⁵²

The 'wholly other' is also said to be

⁵¹ P. van Buren, *The Edges of Language*, pp. 65–66.

⁵² R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 26.

beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but (also) because... before (it) we... recoil in a wonder which strikes us chill and numb.⁵³

However, what is wrong with Bambrough's criticism of Otto's account of numinous experience is that while it is to some degree justified with regard to the *mysterium* moment of numinous experience,⁵⁴ it cannot be applied to all aspects of numinous experience. In particular, it certainly cannot be applied to the *tremendum* and *fascinans* moments of numinous experience, since, as we have shown, Otto was constantly striving to extend the boundaries of our understanding of these aspects of numinous experience as far as he could through his use of analogical language. The *tremendum* and *fascinans* moments of numinous experience are clearly approachable through some limited rational analysis, which Otto regards as inappropriate to the *mysterium* moment of numinous experience.

We can, accordingly, conclude that although Bambrough has identified a claim about the limits of reason in Otto's work, it is clear that he was mistaken about the meaning of that claim. He has assumed that Otto was making a general, absolute claim about the ineffability of feelings, whereas, in fact, he was making both a much qualified ineffability claim about the *tremendum* and *fascinans* moments of numinous experience and a considerably more uncompromising ineffability claim about the *mysterium* moment of numinous experience.

We can now turn to consider Katz's 'contextual' study of mystical traditions and through this his criticism of the kind of account of religious language and experience which we find in *The Idea of the Holy*. Katz's 'pluralistic' approach to the study of mysticism clearly depends on two related epistemological assumptions: The first is that all mystical experiences are mediated (shaped) by their cultural religious contexts and therefore possess specific (unique) characteristics which defeat any claims made for their cross-cultural similarity. The second is that language about mystical experience only possesses definite meaning (is intelligible) within specific cultural religious contexts, leading the critical scholar of mysticism to conclude that there is little value in attempting to compare the descriptions of experiences of one mystical tradition with those of another.

However, while these epistemological assumptions may appear to provide a methodologically convenient and impartial way of studying mystical experiences in all their variety and of avoiding the intractable issue of con-

⁵³ Ibid., p. 28.

⁵⁴ Although even here some qualification is necessary, since, contrary to Bambrough, these statements about the *mysterium* moment of numinous experience are not unqualified ineffability claims. This is because in spite of their undeniably predominantly negative tone, Otto still speaks positively of the *mysterium* as 'unusual', 'filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment' and as causing us to 'recoil in a wonder which strikes us chill and numb'. Clearly, although very little is said about the nature of the *mysterium* moment of numinous experience, Otto's statements about it are not unintelligible.

flicting truth claims, in fact they lead the scholar to dismiss what in the eyes of mystics themselves often distinguishes mystical from non-mystical experiences: their relative lack of mediation by language and tradition. As several of Katz's critics have pointed out,⁵⁵ he has not actually demonstrated-provided concrete evidence for the view – that mystical experience is intentional, that is largely, if not wholly constituted by its religious tradition. He had simply assumed that this is the case, largely on the basis of an equally questionable assumption that religious doctrines provide reliable records of the distinctive features of mystical experiences of different traditions.

Similarly, his assumption that the intelligibility of religious language is wholly determined by its specific context – and therefore that the same words used by different traditions to refer to mystical experience or the deity do not indicate any cross-cultural sharing of meanings – is also unexplained and unsupported. In fact, what provides the basis for this assumption about language, as well as his rejection of the possibility of raw or pure experience, is the Wittgensteinian argument that he, like van Buren, accepts that there can be no private language or purely private experience. All language and experience is public and rule governed; that is to say it acquires meaning – indeed is only made possible – through the sharing of knowledge and experience which occurs within concrete societies. Accordingly, it is concluded, there can be little meaningful communication between one mystical tradition and another.

Moreover, to support this methodological position, Katz argues that there are actually records of conflicts between mystical traditions over doctrines and experiences (e.g. the conflict between Advaita Vedanta and the Madhyamika and Yogacara schools of Mahayana Buddhism). However, not only is it clear that he chooses to ignore religious materials which suggest more cooperative contact between mystical traditions based on some significant sharing of experience (e.g. Kabbalah and Sufism or Advaita Vedanta and Sufism), but also it cannot be established with any certainty that conflicts between traditions are always the result of differences between experiences and not simply of different interpretations of similar experiences. In the case cited by Katz of the conflict between Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism, it is clear from the available Hindu and Buddhist literature about meditation that both traditions understand themselves to be pursuing through meditative techniques a pure, unmediated, absolutely contentless – and therefore identical – mystical experience, although their definitions of wisdom and salvation differ considerably.

Katz acknowledges in a recent exchange of views with Sallie King⁵⁶ that his methodological position 'calls into question' what Asian and other

⁵⁵ W. J. Wainwright, *Mysticism*; S. B. King, 'Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, LV1/2 (Summer 1988); R. K. C. Forman, 'Mysticism, Constructivism and Forgetting', *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, ed. R. K. C. Forman.

⁵⁶ *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, LV1/4 (Winter 1988).

mystics say about themselves, but argues that ‘this is what scholarship, as compared to confessionalism or theological pronouncements from within a tradition, is about. This reflectiveness about doctrinal and confessional claims is what comprises academic self-consciousness....’ However, if such ‘academic self-consciousness’ removes itself too far from what mystics say about themselves, then the question arises whether it is really capable of understanding the distinctive features of mystical experience.

One of the finest illustrations of Katz’s failure to comprehend the epistemological challenge of mystical experience – and therefore of Otto’s numinous experience as well – is to be found in his impatience with the poetic and transformative language of mystics, as well as their frequent ineffability claims, which he regards as too often slipping into meaninglessness. Katz’s attitude to all language, even mystical language, is Aristotelian. The literal, referential function of language is primary and superior to any poetic and transformative function which is parasitic upon it. This position, however, is in sharp contrast to what mystics (as well as Otto) often proclaim about their language themselves. As I have already pointed out during the course of my evaluation of van Buren’s work, mystics frequently use ineffability language to draw attention to the fact that they regard what is unspoken about experience as of greater significance than what is spoken about it. It is not that referential language has no place in mystical life, but that what may be concealed by it may possess much greater value. Thus when Katz dismisses the difficulties that many mystics have in expressing their experiences in intelligible language, he is failing to acknowledge what is unknown by the scholar – and perhaps unknowable – beyond the textual study of mysticism. It is also significant that we find here a reason why mystics often regard public, rule-governed, literal, religious language with suspicion. Clearly, such a position, contrary to Katz, is not unintelligible. Finally, in the context of this discussion of religious language, it is essential to recognise, as Katz does not, that mystics’ ineffability claims are typically qualified by whatever is known about the deity or religious experience, and are therefore intelligible. It is on the basis of what is known – however insubstantial this may be – that mystics attempt to communicate with each other within and across religious traditions about ineffability claims. Moreover, it is for the same reason that Otto’s radical ineffability claims about the *mysterium* moment of numinous experience cannot be judged to be unintelligible.⁵⁷

However, what is just as damaging for Katz’s methodological approach to mystical traditions as his views about religious language is his claim about the intentionality of mystical experience. Katz believes that his position provides the scholar with a secure basis on which he can develop a critical understanding of mystical traditions in all their complexity. Just the opposite is the case, since the intentionality which Katz, following Brentano, correctly

⁵⁷ For further consideration of this issue, see note 54.

identifies as the key to understanding cultural traditions is precisely that which is so often called into question by mystical traditions. Katz's failure to acknowledge profound differences between mystical and non-mystical experiences leads him to misunderstand much which takes place in the mystical setting. Not only may the avowed intentions of mystics offer the scholar little significant information about the distinctive features of mystical experience, but also exclusive attention on them may actually obscure for the scholar what in the minds of those mystics themselves is the real cause of their experiences. It is clear from many mystical reports that although there is evidence for intentional religious activity in mystical life (the result of the contribution made by the religious tradition to the mystical experience), such activity does not always contribute the most important constituent of mystical experience, and that, in fact, in spite of all preparation and training for that experience, if it occurs, it is frequently interpreted as being of essentially supernatural origin. We can, I believe, conclude in opposition to Katz that for the mystic it is often not the mystical technique of his religious tradition which creates his experience, but that which is unconditioned by his tradition. The problem for Katz's claim for the intentionality of all mystical experience is that it appears to allow for no contingent, unprepared for, supernatural intervention which is capable of distorting, obscuring or transforming the results of any intentional mystical behaviour (for, contrary to Katz, the mystic at the beginning or during the traversal of the mystic way does not always know or fully understand the goal he seeks).

I cited earlier an exchange of views between Katz and Sallie King. Curiously, in this exchange Katz appears for the first time to call into question his own position concerning the intentionality of mystical experience. In his previous publications, he leaves the reader with the impression that mystical experience is substantially, if not wholly, constituted by its religious tradition. Only such a position can provide adequate support for his case for a pluralistic approach to mystical traditions. In response to King's assertion, however, that the contribution of the religious tradition to the mystical experience is relatively insignificant, he acknowledges that he does 'not assign percentages to mediation'. But if he does not, then his case for pluralism collapses and he must begin to focus his attention on the unmediated aspects of mystical experience. Until he does, however, he will be vulnerable to the charge that he reduces mystical experiences to mystical intentions. How are we otherwise to interpret his claim about the 'self-fulfilling prophetic aspect' of all mystical experience, a judgement we could hardly expect many practising mystics to endorse? While Katz continues to appear to claim that mystical experiences are substantially or wholly constituted by their religious traditions, his critics will be entitled to argue that what he has done is simply to replace previous unjustifiable methodological assumptions, that either all mystical experiences are essentially similar (e.g.

Stace and Smart) or that some forms of mystical experience are more valuable than others (e.g. Zaehner), with his own equally unfounded methodological assumption, namely that all forms of mystical experience are equally false. This is the price – whether he intends it or not – which he must pay for his pluralism and his ‘academic self-consciousness’.

We can conclude this evaluation of Katz’s pluralism by returning to consider Otto’s treatment of numinous experience in the light of it. Clearly, Otto’s account of religious experience and language in *The Idea of the Holy* is epistemologically naive in its failure to acknowledge that all experience is mediated by language and tradition. However, that no experience is entirely unmediated does not entail that numinous experience is substantially determined by its religious tradition. It is perfectly reasonable to argue that the contribution of the religious tradition to numinous experience is relatively insignificant. In fact, in the light of our previous criticism of Katz’s discussion of the epistemological conditions of experience, we can conclude that the degree to which tradition influences experience will vary considerably from one type of experience to another. Not only will there be variations between religious and non-religious experiences – the latter being largely determined by their cultural contexts – but also between different moments of numinous experience itself. It is clear that *tremendum* and *fascinans* moments of numinous experience are influenced by their religious traditions to a much greater degree than *mysterium* moments of numinous experience.

Finally, I want to conclude this article by offering my own account of the significance of Otto’s use of analogical language in *The Idea of the Holy*. However, in order to do this, it is necessary first of all to identify two important epistemological assumptions which provide the background to Otto’s observations about the analogical language of numinous experience. These need to be explained, if we are to understand Otto’s position.

The first of these assumptions is that numinous experience is similar to other feeling states, and shares with them the specific property that nobody can make clear to another who has never had a certain experience in what the quality or worth of it consists. Accordingly, Otto argues, analogical language about numinous experience in *The Idea of the Holy* (what Otto frequently speaks of as ‘ideograms’)⁵⁸ is not meant to convey an idea – by which I mean a mental picture – of what numinous experience is like to those who have had no prior acquaintance with it, but rather to assist those who have had previous numinous experience to attain a deeper understanding of it. The second epistemological assumption which it is necessary to identify, if we are to understand Otto’s use of analogy, is that, whether we are

⁵⁸ Otto defines ‘ideograms’ as symbolic statements, which refer to a ‘unique content of (religious) feeling . . . to understand which, a man must already have had the experience himself’, *The Idea of the Holy* (p. 60); and he observes, for example, (p. 107) that ‘wrath’, ‘fire’ and ‘fury’ are excellent ‘ideograms’ for the non-rational element of awfulness in numinous experience, the *tremendum*.

conscious of this psychological process or not, we are constantly subjected to an endless stream of varied, often unfamiliar, sometimes complex, sometimes less well defined, transient feelings (some of which are religious, some of which are not). Otto believes that the purpose of his religious vocabulary is to help his readers to distinguish religious experiences from other similar experiences with which they are liable to be confused, such as aesthetic, moral, and emotional experiences.

It is against this background that I believe we can piece together from *The Idea of the Holy* a fascinating account of the function of analogical language in the process of interpreting religious experience. The most important details of this account⁵⁹ are the following: Like so many other feelings, religious experiences, at least initially, often lack structure. Often on first acquaintance they appear to the mind as inchoate, an elusive and tantalizing confusion, and thus we cast about for analogies for these confused religious experiences, which are provided by Otto's language about the *tremendum* and *fascinans* moments of numinous experience. We use the better known to elucidate the less familiar; and the moment of insight into the relatively unknown numinous feeling occurs at the same time as the choice of analogy for it, although it must be emphasised here that the choice of analogy can only be subsequently understood by someone who has already had a numinous experience.⁶⁰ To repeat, what I think Otto is doing is to use what we notice about more familiar feelings to name, and thereby to notice for the first time, something similar in numinous experience itself, without overlooking what distinguishes it from all other experiences. This is his process of naming the moment of numinous experience by finding an analogy for it.

It is in this way that moments of numinous experience are distinguished from one another and at the same time identified as religious experiences. They can now in this form be remembered long after they have taken place, since these experiences have sufficient definition for them not to be confused with any other experiences. Here, I suggest, we find an important clue to interpreting Otto's complex vocabulary about religious experience. Such a religious vocabulary is intended to draw attention to previous discriminations within religious experience and thereby to prevent the cognition of subtle variations of such experience from being forgotten. Moreover, the memory of such subtle variations of religious feelings may contribute to the creation of further similar, numinous experiences.

What I am, in fact, proposing here is that Otto understood his religious vocabulary to be capable of creating greater sensitivity to subsequent religious experiences, and also of ensuring that numinous experiences are consciously acknowledged as religious and then committed to memory as

⁵⁹ I am much indebted in the following account to Sallie TeSelle's provocative work on the use of metaphor in theological discourse, which can be found in her *Speaking in Parables* (London, 1975)

⁶⁰ For example, the idea of anger can only be properly understood as an analogy for the *tremendum* moment of numinous experience once one has had some direct acquaintance with such experience.

such.⁶¹ It is this memory of religious experiences which I suspect he believed would bring about an increase in the incidence of subsequent numinous experience. Moreover, there is an important conclusion to be drawn from this observation. Otto's analogies and 'ideograms' for numinous experience may have profound significance for those who have had numinous experiences but now find them difficult or impossible to remember. Clearly, if Otto's analogical language helps some of his readers to recall numinous experiences which they had partially or completely forgotten, this would offer some explanation for what many of them regard as the striking evocative qualities of *The Idea of the Holy*. I suggest that Otto actually intended through his writing about religious experience in *The Idea of the Holy* not only to evoke novel numinous experiences through the process of association of analogous feelings, but also to assist in the recovery of memories of numinous experiences long since forgotten and thereby to convince his readers of the reality, vitality, value and authority of religious experience. These observations, I believe, explain why Otto writes about numinous experience at all, when he insists that its distinctive features cannot be adequately communicated by language.

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⁶¹ That numinous experiences are not always interpreted religiously has been frequently suggested. See, for example, J. C. A. Gaskin, *The Quest for Eternity* (Harmondsworth, 1982); R. Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox* (New York, 1966); D. Hay, *Exploring Inner Space* (Harmondsworth, 1982).