

## Reverence for What? A Response to Haley’s “The Re-enchantment of Education”

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Gabriel Haley has offered us a valuable look at one way in which Rudolf Otto’s influence can be seen in the work of C. S. Lewis.<sup>1</sup> He argues that the influence goes deeper than Adam Barkman acknowledges in *C. S. Lewis’s List*, and he narrows his focus to explore this influence in *The Abolition of Man*. I am in hearty agreement with Haley that Otto’s influence on Lewis was substantial, and I am pleased to read Haley’s work tracing these links more carefully.

My response is of a tenor that combines affirmation with critique. In the first place, I applaud Haley in the direction of his work by pointing to additional works by Lewis that suggest indebtedness to Otto; in the second place, this very move can be understood as something of a criticism, since in the process I am suggesting that *The Abolition of Man* may not be the work that best reveals Otto’s influence on Lewis. Haley does not claim that *The Abolition of Man* is the only, or even the best, place where Otto’s influence can be seen in Lewis, and so my claim that other works show Otto’s influence more clearly is not necessarily a contrary one. The origin of my claim, however, is not only the strength of other texts’ resemblance to Otto, but the belief that *The Abolition of Man* does not lean as heavily on *The Idea of the Holy* as Haley claims.

Lewis is indeed a Romantic at times, and he devotes a great deal of attention to feelings of awe and longing. In *The Abolition of Man*, however, he plays the classicist. Haley claims that Lewis wishes education to inculcate a “minimally religious disposition of reverence *toward the world*,”<sup>2</sup> which would indeed accord with Otto. But is this so? I agree with Haley that reverence is Lewis’s object, in contrast to infinite criticism, but I argue that, in *The Abolition of Man*, it is not “the world” Lewis wishes to save from the ravages of overzealous critical thinkers but the role of tradition as guide to the world.

First, we turn to some works other than *The Abolition of Man* that show signs of Otto’s legacy in Lewis. Haley (rightly, I think) disagrees with Adam Barkman that similarities between Lewis and Otto are merely incidental.<sup>3</sup> While Barkman points out that Lewis almost certainly did not read *The Idea of the Holy* before it was translated into English in 1936 and that Lewis had already shown an inclination to discuss experiences of awe and spiritual longing long before that time, he gives too little consideration to Lewis’s later writings when dismissing Otto as a genuine influence.

The following texts were written considerably after 1936 and have ample room to incorporate Lewis’s lifelong themes, along with further developments gained from Otto. In the short essay “Meditation in a Toolshed” (1945), Lewis echoes Otto’s respect for the knowledge of religious insiders as coming from a worthy—and perhaps even from a privileged—epistemic location. In the novel *Till We Have Faces* (1956), Lewis takes an approach to discussing

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Haley, “The Re-Enchantment of Education: C.S. Lewis’s Idea of the Holy,” *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 17, no. 1 (August 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Haley, 2. Italics mine.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

encounters with the supernatural that differs from the “joy” and “sehnsucht” that feature in *Surprised by Joy*—which Adam Barkman found insufficiently similar to Otto’s “holiness.” In *Till We Have Faces*, holiness is full of the dread Otto imagines in primitive religion. It has a ghostly reek, is shrouded in darkness and mystery, and causes Orual to shudder in terror. It seems as if Lewis has brought Otto’s primitive religion to life.

Lewis’s 1949 Pentecost sermon “Transposition” is perhaps where traces of Otto’s influence can be found most intricate and intact. Otto’s main interest in *The Idea of the Holy* is purported to be “an inquiry into the non-rational [in other words, ineffable] factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational.” If there is an a priori category of the holy that cannot be expressed in words, how are humans, bound by words, to talk about it? Lewis has almost the same concern in “Transposition.” Speaking about reports of glossolalia that are bound to sit awkwardly with well-mannered Anglicans, Lewis discusses the difficulty humans have in expressing supernatural encounters in human language. Like the witch in *The Silver Chair*, Lewis questions whether experiences that people attribute to the supernatural might be merely amplified projections of natural things. Both Otto and Lewis are interested in how the ineffable overlaps the effable when only one dimension of human language exists. Otto’s term for this is “schematization,” in which “the intimate interpenetration of the non-rational with the rational [is] like the interweaving of the warp and woof in a fabric.”<sup>4</sup> This happens as the holy, “having in the main no means of linguistic expression but terms drawn from other fields of mental life,” co-opts the language of other, more mundane uses.<sup>5</sup> Lewis’s explanation is quite similar: signs may have to double for realities on multiple planes. Love and sickness, for instance, might sometimes cause the same physical manifestations, but anyone who has experienced both will know the difference. A drawing of three-dimensional objects must resort to two-dimensional shapes to communicate, but anyone who lives in the three-dimensional world will be able to recognize the three-dimensional thing to which they refer.<sup>6</sup>

We turn now to *The Abolition of Man*. In my view, Haley has correctly identified a common theme between Otto and Lewis: one of credence. Haley uses Otto’s (but not Lewis’s) term “reverence” as the opposite of critical thinking. Otto takes seriously the experience of people (himself included, apparently) who have encountered a feeling of awe and the corresponding littleness of “creature-consciousness.” In fact, he claims to be addressing *exclusively* those who can relate to such encounters with the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.<sup>7</sup> In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis, too, takes emotions and experiences seriously—so seriously that he believes they must be held accountable and can either befit reality or be misplaced. Feelings do not get a free pass simply because they are feelings: he says that to sever feelings from correspondence to reality would in fact devalue humans and human emotions.<sup>8</sup> Lewis believes that a waterfall might actually *be* sublime, and feelings of humility would in fact be the *appropriate* response. When discussing the emotion, it is best not simply to discuss how the

<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 46.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Transposition,” in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 95-97; 100-101.

<sup>7</sup> Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 4, 20.

viewer felt and to grant this feeling merit on its own terms; it is important to consider whether reality was such as to deserve these feelings.

The object of reverence, however—the thing that is protected from deconstruction—is not the same for Lewis as for Otto. For Otto, it is on the one hand the feelings of the individual that should not be held suspect, and on the other hand, the numinous itself. Lewis, by contrast, spends very little time discussing the numinous, the holy, awe, or reverence—at least for their own sakes. The closest he comes to the numinous is when he evaluates his contemporaries Gaius’s and Titius’s illustration of the waterfall and their critique of a viewer’s claim that the waterfall is “sublime.” For Lewis, the waterfall could actually be sublime; but sublimity itself is not at issue. The waterfall could just as well be called beautiful or ugly or even angry. What matters to Lewis here is whether the viewer’s response accords with the waterfall itself. Unlike Otto, it is certainly not the feelings of the individual that must be given credence: feelings can be interrogated!

The true object of reverence in *The Abolition of Man* is tradition. This is perhaps the one thing missing in Haley’s otherwise excellent summary of the book’s central themes: if the emotions must be trained to align with reality, the plumb line that must guide them is traditional mores. Tradition thus plays a double role in Lewis’s argument: not only does it serve as evidence for Lewis’s belief that there *is* a standard human pattern for responding to reality (since he is confident in the similarity among diverse cultures’ mores), but it also becomes the mechanism by which each successive generation comes to learn what this standard pattern is.

This double function of tradition creates a tension for Lewis that does not beset Otto. For someone as confident as Lewis is in the universality and timelessness of the Tao, is it not surprising how vulnerable he seems to think it is to misguided twentieth century British textbooks? If the Tao is truly self-evident enough to rear its head in every time and place, how could it be at risk of being forgotten precisely in Lewis’s lifetime? Or conversely, if people’s access to universal human morality *is* radically susceptible to the influence of their secondary instructors, is it not likely that there have actually been a great many variations in morals and feeling across time and space, due to the whims and opinions of pedagogues at least as deviant as “Gaius” and “Titius”? This is as much as to say, how can the Tao be both as universal and as vulnerable as Lewis claims?

Two moral claims he elsewhere takes for granted will suffice to suggest that our answer is that Lewis has overestimated the universal self-evidence of his Tao. These have to do with war and women. In the first place, the beginning of *Mere Christianity* presents a number of moral truths that are supposedly universally recognized, among which is the difference between murder and killing in war. While surely in 1940s Britain it could be assumed that most of the public would agree that war could be necessary and even honorable, in 2007, the year I set out for Europe with a mission team, it could not. *Mere Christianity* was a book we were encouraged to recommend to any new acquaintances interested in pursuing religious questions, but one teammate had not read it yet. When he did so, he was appalled not only by the text itself, but also by the prospect of handing it to non-religious fellow travelers. His main objection was Lewis’s anachronistic assumptions about the acceptability of violence within war. Looking back now, I see that my teammate was right: in an age of U. S. military dominance and interminable “peacekeeping” missions, the morality of the military has a distinctly different ring for most of

the public now than it did seventy years ago. A self-evident difference between moral and immoral killing can no longer be cited as evidence of a Tao.

Regarding women, we see Lewis's assumptions clearly in his essay "Priestesses in the Church?" Here, he quotes Jane Austen's Caroline Bingley as saying, "I should like balls infinitely better if they were carried on in a different manner....It would surely be much more rational if conversation instead of dancing made the order of the day." Her brother, Mr. Bingley, replies, "Much more rational, I dare say, but it would not be near so much like a Ball."<sup>9</sup> Analogously, Lewis wishes his readers to acknowledge how self-evident it is that the Christian Church must have male priests. It might be more "rational" to allow women to be ordained, because they are clearly capable of the required tasks, and they could make up for a shortage of clergy besides. Simply, however, they are not what priests are. Likewise, a religion that features priestesses and the divine feminine might be very nice in its own way—but it is not Christianity. This line of reasoning, like Lewis's comments on war, was surely quite credible in the 1940s when no one had seen a female priest. Today, however, it seems quaint and naïve. I wonder if Lewis would be surprised to discover how little time it took for my own vision of pastors and priests to change when I first served under a female pastor. Today, what seems odd to me is a room full of clergy who are exclusively male.

Neither of these examples proves that Lewis is wrong and the newer ideas right. Perhaps those of us who celebrate women's ordinations are mistaken; perhaps soldiers are *not* guilty of murder when they kill under orders. Being "up-to-date" does not make us right. What these examples *do* show, however, is that the things we take for granted (things we might consider as part of our own Tao) can shift very quickly. They show that even Lewis overestimated the universality of the Tao.<sup>10</sup>

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor provides what might come as help for Lewis on this score. He makes a case for a fairly broad and largely stable Western "social imaginary" he calls the *ancien regime*. Pre-modern societies, predominantly rural and agricultural, seem to have shared an outlook in which the world appeared much more scaled to the human than the sprawling globe and impersonal cosmos we hold in our minds today. These societies saw nature as enchanted, as "porous" to the supernatural. Humans had a meaningful (albeit humble) place vis-à-vis the universe. People's individual identities were inseparable from their social role. Ethical hierarchies (such as the lay/religious divide) made it possible for society to hold together the perfectionists and the rest of us. The Church calendar, with high and low days, gave outlets to people's various impulses and need for meaning and belonging. Taylor's story unfolds a number

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<sup>9</sup> Lewis, "Priestesses in the Church?" *God in the Dock*, 234.

<sup>10</sup> One might reasonably ask, "What gives you the right to place Lewis side-by-side with the trends and common assumptions of the United States in 2018?" Does it not smack of the "chronological snobbery" Lewis so famously denounced? On the contrary: In both Lewis's "Introduction" to *On the Incarnation* (Yonkers: Saint Vladimir Seminary Press, 2011) and his essay "On the Reading of Old Books" (in *God in the Dock* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011], 217-225), he comments that there is nothing uniquely deserving of respect about the past, any more than there is about the present. Indeed, he says that books from the future would be just as helpful as books from the past in exposing our present blind spots. We, when looking back on Lewis today, have this opportunity to see what he could not.

of gradual historical changes—which, crucially, did not *have* to take place—that made possible the world in which we now live, in which it is fairly easy to disbelieve in the supernatural.<sup>11</sup>

Could Taylor’s *ancien regime* be what Lewis has in mind by the Tao—a social imaginary that could plausibly have been shared by all pre-modern societies? In today’s world, in which no one can say the limits of human technological mastery of creation, moral consensus is equally out of reach. But perhaps Lewis’s Tao can be summed up as what *would* have seemed self-evident in a tight-knit agricultural society, in which almost everything needful was accomplished by the power of human or animal muscles. The usual differences between male and female bodies would have seemed an immutable fact around which economy and society must be structured. When human bodies were routinely subjected to hard labor and the risks of disease and death in childbirth, and when the deaths of young people were much more common than today, the idea of killing a criminal or enemy soldier would certainly have seemed much more a matter of course. For Lewis the classicist, and others who immerse themselves in “old books,” the rapid changes of late modernity can seem like a serious exception to the “normal” human experience. The speedy advance of modernity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century could help us account for why Lewis is both so confident in the universal normalcy of the Tao *and* so concerned that it could be forgotten. It reveals why tradition would be such a vital guide to recalling what the world is really like: the world is *not* like that anymore—or, at the least, its essence has been obscured from view by the accoutrements of human mastery.

With the theme of human mastery, we return at last to Otto. A central element of the experience of the numinous is what Otto calls “creature-consciousness” and what Lewis calls “humility” in the face of the sublime. Otto is less interested in individuals’ need for a guide in their experiences of the numinous, and he is less concerned with the ethical implications that will figure into their proper response, other than to say that moral goodness will play some role. But what is foremost in his mind is the feeling of smallness and unworthiness that results from encounters with the numinous. Could it be that the smallness of “creature-consciousness” is a precondition to perceiving Lewis’s Tao?<sup>12</sup> And could it be that the progression of human mastery in late modernity is what has removed pre-modern moral consensus (to the extent that it existed) so far from view?

Let us imagine for a moment that Otto is correct and the numinous is accessible to us all, as long as our faculties are properly disposed to perceive it. What would it look like for powerful experiences of the numinous to be persistent and widespread among twenty-first century Westerners? If we are to be struck by a profound sense of our own smallness and humility before God (or the supernatural in another form), and yet still be surrounded by the pervasive signs of human deity—airplanes and automobiles, minutely planned urban landscapes, smartphones, same-day delivery, high-level medical interventions, reproductive technologies, gender reassignment surgeries, and the “total state”—what moral sense would result? Is there simply too much cognitive dissonance between these signs of mastery and this sense of being mastered? Would we feel a need to dismantle the signs of mastery? Would we go in search of a guide to an

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). See especially ch. 1, “The Bulwarks of Belief.”

<sup>12</sup> Lewis hints as much in *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 50-51.

older, simpler, more provincial way of life? Or would we, by contrast, simply find ways of expressing love and reverence for the world in its current form? Spend time in what remains of nature and perhaps become a passionate environmentalist? Dedicate ourselves to kindness and to remaking the cultural landscape in favor of diversity and inclusion?

Both options are plausible, and I think encounters with the numinous do now elicit both types of responses. One response to the numinous seeks to accord with tradition; the other seeks to accept and love whatever *is*. Lewis has staked his claim in the camp of tradition; Otto has made no such commitment. For this reason, I conclude that Lewis has departed from Otto in an important way. While Otto may have been championing reverence *for the world* itself, Lewis lifts up tradition as the proper pedagogical guide for us in our reverence—even in the moments when we encounter first-hand the majesty of Reality.