
Religion Past and Present

Mysterium tremendum et fascinans

(325 words)

[[German Version](#)]

The expression *mysterium tremendum* was introduced by R. Otto as a basic concept in phenomenology of religion; the author translated it as *schauervolles Geheimnis*, “terrible mystery.” The concept forms part of a description of how the numinous can be experienced by the religious feeling of the human subject. Otto presupposed that religion (with F.D.E. Schleiermacher essentially defined as feeling) can be described not only within human subjectivity, but also in relation to an “object outside myself,” from which it derives its primary stirring of feelings (cf. [Feeling](#): II; III). Hence, *mysterium tremendum* denotes a reality outside the human subject that triggers feelings of fright, horror, dread, and awe. As such the *mysterium tremendum* stands in polar correspondence to the concept of the *fascinans*, which describes the numinous in relation to its being experienced in feelings of attraction, fascination, delight, and intoxication.

As a heuristic means of proving “the holy” as an *a priori* category, as Otto intended, the concept of the *mysterium tremendum*, together with that of the *fascinans*, has been rightly questioned as part of a fundamental criticism of the method of phenomenology of religion. Despite this, it is widely received as a description of religious experience, which is associated with strong feelings of fear, and has inspired artists in particular. For Otto, the *mysterium tremendum* and the *fascinans* are two sides of the same reality (“contrast-harmony”), largely in agreement with the Christian doctrine of ¶ God, which has a corresponding distinction, for example, in the concepts of *Deus absconditus/Deus revelatus*. Not everywhere in the history of religion are the terrible character and the fascinating character of transcendent reality seen in this way; in descriptions by religious communities they can also be more strongly distinguished.

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