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Holiness and its Tokens

In this paper I propose to examine the concept of holiness, which I take to be one of the most fundamental concepts in religion. I shall argue that the great diversity in the world's religions about what things are holy need not lead us to despair about attaining any knowledge in this field, for the following reasons.

Firstly, a remarkable agreement about the *connotation* of holiness exists among the world's religions in spite of the disagreement about its *denotation*. Here I shall largely follow Otto in discussing the meaning of 'holiness,' but I shall suggest a change in the logical priority of some elements in its analysis. A number of problems are resolved if the *essential* element in the holy (or the numinous) be taken as 'absolute worth' rather than the *mysterium* or 'wholly other.'

Secondly, the holy objects of the world's religions, about which there is so much disagreement, turn out on closer examination to be 'holy' only in a secondary, or derived, sense and not in the primary or basic sense.

Thirdly, from the essential meaning of holiness it is reasonable to suppose that the only Being who is holy in the full and proper sense should not be found among the objects of sense perception.

The above thesis leads, fourthly, to a consideration of the relationship between the holy Being who alone is fully holy and those 'holy' objects about which men disagree. This consideration raises both metaphysical and epistemological issues. In an attempt to understand these I employ the analogy of persons and their expressions (words, gestures, actions) and our knowledge of persons through their expressions. Events or objects which enable one to cognize another person or the holy Being I call 'tokens.'

Fifthly, this analogy raises a thorny question as to whether all tokens are necessarily expressions, and, how we are to distinguish between genuine tokens and mistaken tokens.

Sixthly, I consider some possible disanalogies between our knowledge of persons and our knowledge of the holy Being. For example, how is it epistemologically possible to be aware of holiness prior to awareness of the Being to which holiness properly belongs?

A THE MEANING OF HOLINESS

We are saved from the rather arduous task of surveying the world's religions, in order to pick out and examine the notion of holiness, by the fact that this has already been admirably done by Rudolf Otto in his work *The Idea of*

the Holy. Holiness, Otto tells us, is a complex notion, and the most distinctive element in it is what he calls 'the numinous.' This word is used to indicate the essentially religious element in holiness, over and above the moral and aesthetic ideas with which it has come to be associated. Such associations are inevitable, for when we think discursively of holiness we have to use terms culled mainly from the language of moral and aesthetic experience. But although these terms may indicate, they cannot adequately convey, what Otto calls 'the overplus of meaning' in the Holy. The numinous, Otto holds, is essentially nonrational and beyond the *ordinary* categories of human thought. This does not mean that we can say nothing whatever about it, because it has its own distinctive category, which Otto claims is known a priori, and by which the numinous experience can be grasped.

He summarizes his analysis of the numinous experience in the phrase *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, which may be translated as 'the mystery which overawes and fascinates.' Otto carefully indicates from religious experience the precise meaning of each of these three elements in the numinous.

The central notion appears to be the *mysterium*. Otto writes of it thus:

The truly 'mysterious' object is beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently 'wholly other,' whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb.¹

It is a misinterpretation of Otto to take the *mysterium* as 'wholly other' in a *literal* sense, because Otto says clearly that '*mysterium* itself is merely an ideogram, an analogical notion taken from the natural sphere, illustrating, but incapable of exhaustively rendering, our real meaning.'² Such literal interpretations of the notion of the 'wholly other' are always liable to occur. But if the numinous be taken *literally* as 'wholly other' this would make logically impossible some of the most typical features of religion, such as revelation, incarnation, reconciliation, and communion, all central features in the most highly developed religions. If God were literally 'wholly other' then it would be impossible to know anything about him at all – even that he is 'wholly other'; thus, as Professor H. H. Farmer remarks, the phrase taken literally is 'self-refuting.'³ Otto, however, is not to be held responsible for such misinterpretations of his position.

A more serious question arises, however, as to whether the *mysterium* as 'wholly other' is to be taken as the *essential* feature in the numinous. Professor C. A. Campbell points out that, if the essential character of the numinous be the 'mysterious' in the sense of the 'wholly other,' as Otto seems to say, then the crucial question to be asked is whether the mysterious in *this* sense is

1. R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 28. (The German original, *Das Heilige*, appeared in 1917.)

2. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

3. H. H. Farmer, *Revelation and Religion* (London: Nisbet, 1954), p. 51.

'something peculiar to the religious consciousness, so that the religious consciousness cannot conceivably be explained in terms of anything other than itself.'⁴ He regrets that Otto's treatment of this question is 'disappointingly perfunctory.' Professor Campbell cites our experience of dreaming as a possible source of the notion of the 'wholly other.' In dreams we encounter mysterious shapes and events, which are sometimes completely discontinuous with events in our waking life. 'It seems to me, therefore,' Professor Campbell writes, 'that one need not look beyond dream phenomena to find ample justification for those who think that man's sense of the mysterious, even in its non-natural or supernatural meaning of the "wholly other" is easily accounted for independently of religious experience.'⁵ Otto's failure, therefore, to show that the *mysterium* cannot be accounted for in such completely nonreligious ways discredits (in Campbell's opinion) Otto's claim to have established the autonomy of religious consciousness.

This conclusion only follows, however, if Otto is saying that the *mysterium* as 'wholly other' is the *essential* characteristic of holiness. But, we must ask, is this the correct or the only way in which Otto may be taken? I have to confess considerable uncertainty as to the logical priority of the various things which Otto says about the numinous. But in this matter, it seems to me to be less important to inquire into what Otto *actually* says than into what Otto *ought* to have said, or what the truth about the numinous is. My suggestion is that the numinous be defined in terms of *absolute value*. Such a definition is at least suggested by Otto, and is quite compatible with the other elements in the analysis of the numinous that he offers. Most important of all, such a definition truly represents the facts of religious awareness and provides a basis for the autonomy of religion.

In my view the most fruitful suggestion that Otto makes occurs in chapter 8 of *The Idea of the Holy*, 'The Holy as a Category of Value.' The following quotations should bring out his main point. Otto writes that the worshipper

... passes upon the numen a judgment of *appreciation* of a unique kind by the category diametrically contrary to 'the profane,' the category 'holy,' which is proper to the numen alone, but to it in an absolute degree; he says '*Tu solus sanctus*.' This 'sanctus' is not merely 'perfect' or 'beautiful' or 'sublime' or 'good,' though, being like those concepts also a *value*, objective and ultimate, it has a definite perceptible analogy with them. It is the positive *numinous* value or worth, and to it corresponds on the side of the creature a numinous *disvalue* or 'unworth.'⁶

And again he writes,

It is not that the awe of holiness is itself simply 'fear' in the face of what is absolutely overpowering, before which there is no alternative to blind, awe-struck

4. C. A. Campbell, *On Selfhood and Godhood* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957), p. 375.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 377.

6. Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, p. 53.

obedience. 'Tu solus sanctus' is rather a paean of *praise*, which so far from being a merely faltering confession of the divine supremacy, recognizes and extols a value, precious beyond all conceiving.⁷

These and other such passages suggest a definition of the numinous in terms of value. I propose the following: *The numinous is that value which is given in experience as absolute and far surpassing all other values, and than which no higher value can even be conceived.* The reasons for preferring this definition are as follows.

Firstly, if absolute value be taken as the essential feature in the numinous, it is possible to see how the other elements in Otto's analysis are derived from it. The passage just quoted illustrates how this comes about. On the awareness of that 'value precious beyond all conceiving' man becomes aware by contrast of his own disvalue and utter insignificance, of his own creatureliness before the Creator. From this consciousness arises in turn the awareness of the numinous as *tremendum*, awe-inspiring and overpowering, and as a *mysterium* or 'wholly other' than our mundane existence and its values.⁸ But if, instead, 'wholly otherness' be taken as the essential element in the numinous, then we must simply accept the other strands of fascination and absolute worth as being *de facto* conjoined to it. We cannot *see* how psychologically, in the moment of religious consciousness, they arise from it or are related to it.

Secondly, if absolute value be taken as the defining element in the numinous, then we simultaneously establish two complementary points. On the one hand we make the numinous in *some* sense continuous with other values in human experience. But on the other hand, we assert that it is a *unique* value because it is the supreme and absolute value.

The first of these points entails a rejection of Otto's claim that the numinous is a 'category' in the Kantian sense and of the doctrine that the numinous is 'schematized' by the aesthetic idea of the sublime and moral ideas such as justice, mercy, and love.⁹ Yet my proposal preserves what is essential in Otto's schematization: namely, that there is a 'felt analogy' between the numinous and moral and aesthetic ideas, and that the connection between them is made, not by chance, but by 'an inward necessity of the mind.'

The complementary point that the numinous is the supreme and absolute value, and therefore unique, restores what matters in Otto's description of it as a 'category' without introducing the thorny questions which that word must inevitably raise. It is important to stress that the concept of absolute value is not just a logical construct created by thought. As from the ideas of 'big,' 'bigger,' and 'still bigger' one might arrive at the idea of 'the biggest

7. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

8. This awareness is well illustrated in the record of Isaiah's inaugural vision in the Temple (Isa. 6:1-5).

9. Cf. Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, pp. 46f., 144f.

possible,' so, it could be argued, from the ideas of 'valuable,' 'more valuable,' and 'still more valuable' one might construct the notion of 'the most valuable possible.' The evidence of the religious consciousness, Otto's work clearly shows, is that the numinous is *not* a concept of a value constructed by thought, but is immediately given in *experience* as absolute value. It *becomes* a concept for thought only because it is first of all known experientially.

Thirdly, by taking absolute value rather than 'wholly otherness' as the essential element in the numinous, the threat to the autonomy and validity of religious experience as indicated by Campbell is eliminated. This argument, if taken in isolation from Otto's work as a whole, would clearly be circular. But if there are *other* good reasons, as I have argued, for holding that 'wholly otherness' is *not* the essential element in the numinous, then it is sheer folly to endanger the autonomy of religion by making 'wholly otherness' central.

B HOLINESS AND 'HÖLY' OBJECTS

We must now turn to our second main proposition: that the holy things which can be cited in every religion turn out on examination to be less than holy in the full and proper sense, but to be called holy only in some secondary sense. This conclusion must follow from the first proposition about the meaning of holiness; for it would be accepted, even by the devotees of a religion, that their holy places and objects do not possess an absolute value than which no higher value can be conceived. Yet they would wish to insist that these 'holy' objects have some kind of connection with the supremely valuable Being. They might point out, for example, that a distinction is drawn between degrees of holiness. One can find illustrations of this in the religion of ancient Israel. Here we have several gradations in the priestly hierarchy, from high priest through priests to Levites; and in the Temple rigid distinctions were drawn between the outer court, the inner court, the altar, and the Holy of Holies. The Levite could not approach the altar; the priest could not enter the Holy of Holies; and even the high priest could only enter it once a year, after appropriate ceremonies of purification. Likewise, there were distinctions in types of offerings. All these degrees of holiness are to be understood in terms of the proximity to God that is assumed to belong to different persons, places, and objects.

The implication behind this whole system is that God only is holy. As J. K. S. Reid writes: 'The constant witness of scripture is that holiness belongs properly to God alone ... If anything else is called holy, it is in a sense derivative from him and dependent upon him or upon his will.'¹⁰ Another recent writer, O. R. Jones, in a work entitled *The Concept of Holiness*, writes on this subject:

So close is the kinship that one may say that holiness is the very essence of God, so that God is sometimes called 'holiness.' Further it follows that talk about God

10. J. K. S. Reid, 'Sanctify, Sanctification,' in A. Richardson, ed., *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (London: scm Press, 1950), p. 216.

provides the paradigm use of the words 'holy' and 'holiness'; other people and various objects will only be called holy in virtue of their relationship with him.¹¹

Corresponding evidence to this, I believe, could be produced concerning the implications of all other religions, primitive and developed. The detailed empirical substantiation of this assertion, however, is obviously beyond the scope of the present paper.

Even granted the point that has just been made, we are still not rid of our problem; only now we have it in a rather different perspective. It appears that the disagreement that had puzzled us was *not* about what things were holy in the *basic* sense, but about what things were holy in a *derived* sense. My suggestion is that it is possible to indicate a larger general *implicit* agreement about 'holiness' in its primary sense than the *explicit* creeds and theologies of different religions at first glance seem to have. Is this suggestion correct? This question brings us to our third main point.

C 'GOD' ALONE IS HOLY

Given the essential meaning of holiness, it is not surprising that the possessor of this value in its *basic* sense is not the kind of object that can be easily and precisely indicated, but lies outside the ordinary objects of sense perception. I have just made the rather negative point that there seems to be evidence of general agreement among all religions that nothing other than God is basically holy. I now wish to argue the positive corollary of this: that there is a general implicit agreement among all religions that God is holy. An adequate discussion of this proposition would require research in religious anthropology, far beyond my present scope. Some indication of the reasonableness of this position is all I can hope to give at present. The possibility of doing so turns largely (a) on pointing out that we are talking about *implicit* beliefs rather than *explicit* theological statements, and (b) on refraining from incorporating too much meaning into the word 'God.' Suppose we limit the word 'God' to mean the 'ground of all existence,' or something like that; then I think we might manage to sidestep most of the difficult theological issues that divide polytheists and monotheists, deists and pantheists. It is just possible that we could include the Nirvana of the Buddhists and Matter of the Marxists under the concept of 'God,' if by God we mean no more than 'what ultimately is.' Now it is not at all unreasonable to use the word 'God' in this relatively unspecified way. There is an element of agnosticism in all religions about what one is to say about God. The 'high gods' of primitive religion remain vague and remote. Vishnu of Hinduism is known only in his 'incarnations.' Buddhism is dogmatic in its agnosticism about Nirvana. The greatest of Christian saints claimed only 'to see through a glass darkly.'

We may look at the matter historically. Man begins with awareness of 'holy objects.' The explication of what is implicit in being a 'holy object' leads to a movement away from such objects to the awareness of some Being which

11. O. R. Jones, *The Concept of Holiness* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961), p. 144.

they betoken and to which holiness properly belongs. This movement is one of the central themes in the long story of man's religious evolution.

If this be granted, then it might be claimed that the one thing which we most surely know about God is that he is holy, and that it is primarily through experience of his holiness, and through working out the further implications of this holiness, that we come to know whatever else we do know of him.

Indeed, the intuiting of the numinous is occasioned by things, such as mountains, cows, and cups. At first glance it might seem that the quality we call the numinous *belongs* to these things, but on closer inspection it is clear that it does not; that from the very nature of the numinous it *could* not in the full sense belong to these things; and that it must in its primary sense belong to something, we know not what, which is beyond all these ordinary things – something which is the ground of all existence, the unknown God. It is not that man knows God as such and such a being, and then sees or infers that he must be holy. Rather, he experiences the numinous and then infers from its nature that it must belong to such and such a kind of Being. This is the religious argument for God's existence, and ultimately the most satisfactory one.

D OUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE HOLY 'GOD'

Two questions arising out of this account of holiness come to mind; the one metaphysical and the other epistemological. Since the discussion of these questions seems to me to overlap, I shall formulate them together:

- 1 What is the relationship of the numinous Being to the numinous objects and events about which there is so much disagreement?
- 2 How is it epistemologically possible to be aware of the numinous, prior to awareness of the Being to which it properly belongs?

It would be unreasonable to expect easy and precise answers to these questions, because (a) of the great complexity of all ultimate questions in epistemology, and (b) of the lack of detailed content in the concept of 'God,' as I have just defined this word. However, provided we bear these things in mind, and do not expect more precision than the nature of the discussion allows, some kind of answer to these questions may be attempted.

The clue to both questions is, I believe, to be found in a consideration of other kinds of knowledge, and in particular of our knowledge of other persons.

F. R. Tennant points out the difference between the *psychic* and *psychological* standpoint in our perceiving an object of sense perception:

At the moment of perceiving a thing, we are unaware of performing synthetic activities: from the standpoint of our experience at that moment, the perception is immediate ... From the standpoint of the psychologist, however, the perception is neither simple nor immediate. These two standpoints, that of an experience and that of its exposition, have been named respectively the 'psychic' and the 'psychological' ...¹²

12. F. R. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology 1: The Soul and its Faculties* (Cambridge: University Press, 1928), p. 46.

H. H. Farmer applies this distinction to our knowledge of other persons.¹³ This knowledge is *psychologically dependent* upon our sense perceptions of the bodies, and in particular of the activities, of other persons. But our knowledge of them *as persons* is *psychically immediate*. It does not rest upon an argument by analogy from our own inner experience to theirs, although such arguments may play a supplementary role in our awareness of other persons.

We have no experience elsewhere of analogical inference producing that type of full assurance we have of one another's existence as personal beings ... That analogical projection may play a part need not be denied, but without a prior awareness, however dim, of some sort of personal, or at least living, other presented in and through sensations, there would seem to be nothing to call it into activity.¹⁴

It is important to point out, however, that not all sense perceptions of other persons enable us to know them as persons. The mere observation of a human body, silent and perhaps asleep, conveys nothing of him as a person. But it is in the gestures, the smiles and frowns, and most of all in the words by which he expresses himself, that his being and worth as a person are conveyed.

I have found the concept of a 'token' useful in making this point. A token belongs to the same genus as signs and symbols, and may be distinguished from them as follows. A person's expression is encountered as *sign* when it leads to the overt response normally made on the awareness of the immediate presence of the person whose expression it is. His expression is a *symbol* when it stands for, and leads to, *thought* about the person or about his ideas. His words, gestures, actions, etc., are *tokens* when they convey to the observer consciousness of the worth and significance of another person as a person.

Thus the same expression can often be taken in any one or more of three possible ways. Suppose that someone arrives at my door and says 'Good morning.' Taken as a *sign* these words indicate his arrival, and I respond, 'Come right in.' Or instead I may take the same words as a *symbol* representing an idea, which starts a train of thought which concludes with my retort, 'Not bad for the time of year.' But further, in addition to these two ways of taking my visitor's remark, I may take them as a *token* which makes me aware of the presence of another person *as a person*, whom perhaps I either respect or despise, love or fear, etc. Awareness of him as a person having a certain kind of significance, character, or worth seems to me to be the essential thing involved in taking a person's expressions as tokens, and without such tokens knowledge of another body *as a person* is impossible. Yet this awareness of a person goes beyond anything contained in the tokens by which it has been brought about. It does not depend upon those tokens, as a whole depends upon the parts of which it is constituted. Nor is this awareness built up by any kind of logical inference from those tokens; on the contrary, it is an immediate nonconceptual awareness, suitably described as an 'intuition.' Furthermore, apart from the original stimulation of this awareness, there is

13. Cf. H. H. Farmer, *The World and God* (London: Nisbet, 1935), pp. 15-19.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

not necessarily a close spatial or temporal connection between awareness of the tokens and awareness of the persons whose tokens they are.

The suggestion I have to make is that the 'holy objects' of religion bear a relation to the holy God similar to that which personal tokens bear to the persons whose tokens they are.

Now Otto's teaching on the a priori nature of our awareness of holiness¹⁵ seems to me to be very relevant to this discussion. What he says on this point is closely parallel, even if the terminology is different, to my description of our experience of persons. I shall therefore quote Otto, trying to bring out this parallelism by referring parenthetically to my preceding account. He writes, in chapter 14 of *The Idea of the Holy*, that our awareness of holiness 'comes into being in and amid the sensory data and empirical material of the natural world' ('holy objects' paralleled by personal gestures, etc.) 'and cannot anticipate or dispense with these, yet it does not arise out of them' (i.e., it is 'psychically immediate'), 'but only by their means' (i.e., it is 'psychologically dependent'). 'They are the incitement, the stimulus, and the "occasion" for the numinous experience to become astir, and, in so doing, to begin - at first with a naïve immediacy of reaction - to be interfused and interwoven with the present world of sensuous experience, until, becoming gradually purer, it disengages itself from this' (i.e., 'there is not necessarily a close spatial or temporal connection between awareness of the tokens and awareness of the persons whose tokens they are'), 'and takes its stand in absolute contrast to it ... We find ... involved in the numinous experience, beliefs and feelings qualitatively different from anything that "natural" sense perception is capable of giving us' (i.e., 'This awareness of a person goes beyond anything contained in the tokens by which it has been established.') 'They are themselves not perceptions at all, but peculiar interpretations and valuations, at first of perceptual data, and then - at a higher level - of posited objects and entities, which themselves no longer belong to the perceptual world, but are thought of as supplementing and transcending it' (i.e., 'an immediate non-conceptual awareness suitably described as an intuition').¹⁶

There are two further negative points which I made regarding awareness of persons, and these also, I suggest, can be applied equally to the awareness of holiness.

My first point was that awareness of holiness 'does not depend upon these tokens, as a whole depends upon the parts of which it is constituted. Nor is this awareness built by any kind of logical inference from those tokens.'

A second relevant point, which should be further elucidated, concerns the reasons for describing the awareness of holiness (or of a person) as a priori (or 'psychically immediate'). There seem to me to be two reasons which are equally sound in the case of persons and in the case of holiness. (1) The nature of these values is 'qualitatively different from anything that "natural"

15. Cf. Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, chapters 14 and 17.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 117. (All the parenthetical quotations are taken from my own text two paragraphs back.)

sense perception [their tokens] is capable of giving us';¹⁷ that is, their origin cannot be empirical. (2) Once apprehended by the mind, even if initially through the stimulus of tokens, the continued and subsequent apprehension of persons and of holiness does not always require the help of sensory tokens. One might cite the case of telepathic awareness of other persons. Telepathy is, however, simply the most convincing, because the most extreme, form of what I take to be a normal feature of our experience of other persons, especially of those whom we love. That is to say, we have an awareness of their presence which does not depend on sight, sound, or other sensory tokens. Mystical experience provides the parallel experience in religion of our awareness of holiness after all sensory tokens have been removed.

We are now in a better position to try to answer the question which we posed. That was: 'What is the relationship of the holy God to the holy objects and events about which there is so much disagreement?' It would now seem that these holy objects and events are tokens of the holy God. There are two ways of putting this relationship, the one epistemological and the other metaphysical. *Epistemologically*, religious objects and events seem to be rather like *tokens* of the holy God, in a way similar to that in which personal gestures, etc., are tokens of persons. *Metaphysically*, it would seem to follow that, if our analogy is correct, religious objects and events might be considered to be *expressions* of the holy God.

E GENUINE TOKENS AND MISTAKEN TOKENS

But are all tokens in fact expressions? Common sense would seem to indicate that, if anything is a token which arouses awareness of either man or God, it can only be so because it is an expression of the person or of the deity whom it conveys.

The trouble with this view, however, is that it seems difficult to reconcile with the variety of holy objects and events which we have already noted. We might be inclined to allow that they are all tokens of the holy God, on the ground that they give rise to an awareness of the numinous, which we have already argued must belong to God alone. But to call them all expressions of God seems to suggest an irrational and fanciful kind of behaviour on God's part. Here, however, it would be unwise to assume that we know what we do not know. Why should we assume that we can know so clearly the marks of divine rationality? Or to be more concrete, why should not God express himself in the holy cows of Hinduism, in the Arabic words of the Quran, and in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, without thereby contradicting himself? These questions surely require examination before we can give a clear answer to our earlier question as to whether all religious tokens are in fact expressions.

However, if we consider personal tokens, and ask the question whether all of these are in fact expressions, the answer is rather easier. One thinks of the friendly wink which put us in rapport with an erstwhile stranger, but which

17. *Ibid.*

turns out on closer acquaintance to be only a nervous twitch. On a rather different level, words of endearment, which betoken a particular quality of personality, sometimes turn out on longer acquaintance to be simply routine ways of speaking. That would not necessarily mean that they were not personal expressions at all, but only that they were not expressions of that particular quality of personality which they had seemed to betoken.

Clearly, then, we are entitled to say that not all tokens are in fact expressions of what they seem to betoken. We have seen that this is so in the case of personal tokens. It would seem reasonable to extend this possibility to religious tokens and, without making any judgment of fact, to say in general terms that not all religious tokens are necessarily expressions of the holy God whom they betoken (without unduly prejudicing the answers to the questions about divine rationality, holy cows, Arabic words, etc.).

In order to clarify terminology, I wish to distinguish between 'mistaken tokens' and 'genuine tokens.' Both of these, I suggest, are to be called 'tokens,' on the ground that they both convey the values which they betoken; but only a genuine token is an expression of the person or of the holy God whom it betokens.

But how are 'mistaken tokens' possible? A token which conveys a value of which it is not in fact an expression could only do so, it seems to me, if the awareness of that value is already, in some sense, in the mind a priori. This does not necessarily involve an absolute a priori awareness of that value apart from all experience, but only the kind of a priori, of 'psychically immediate,' awareness of personality or of holiness which I have just described.

There are many who might be inclined to argue from the *possibility* of 'mistaken tokens' of holiness to the *probability* that many of the religious objects of mankind are, in fact, 'mistaken tokens.' I would myself have much sympathy with this argument, even if I should wish to proceed cautiously in discriminating between the *genuine* and the *mistaken* tokens. What criteria are we to use in this attempt at discrimination? One might be inclined to distinguish between objects and events which occur in *nature*, on the one hand, and objects and events which are the consequences of human intentions in *history*, on the other. The former, being clearly not the work of men, might seem more likely than the latter to be expressions of the holy God. This line of argument would suggest that the starry heavens, mighty mountains, trees, and flowers are more likely to be genuine tokens of holiness than Arabic words or bread and wine.

On the other hand it could be argued that some things in nature might be considered to have more significance as tokens than others. Now human personality itself, as part of nature, is one of the ways (it could be held) in which the holy God is expressing himself. It could be argued that human personality is the most valuable thing in the world apart from holiness. It would seem to follow from these considerations that human personality and all the creations and actions of persons in *history* may be tokens of holiness, and that where these are *genuine* tokens they will be tokens of greater significance

than the tokens which occur in *nature* apart from man. The consequence of this line of argument would seem to be that, if Quranic words, or chalice and paten, are *genuine* tokens of holiness, they are tokens of greater significance than stars or snowdrops. Thus it might well be that we had an inverse relationship between the degree of assurance of the genuineness of a token and its significance. It will be appreciated, of course, that I am here only touching the edge of a vast and complex field, and that I can give no more than hints as to what might be profitable avenues of enquiry.

F THE ELUSIVENESS OF 'GOD'

Let us turn now to the second of the two questions that we posed earlier: How is it epistemologically possible to be aware of holiness prior to awareness of the Being to which it properly belongs?

A question such as this presupposes the acceptance of a number of notions which should be examined. Is it even conceivable that we should be directly aware of 'the ground of all existence'? It is certainly conceivable that we should be aware of that 'ground' as an intellectual concept; but this is not the point. Can we be *directly* aware of God, as distinct from the expressions, revelations, or tokens by which he manifests himself, and as distinct also from that awareness of his supreme significance which we call his holiness? I think not. Whatever further cognition of deity there may be – and that may be considerable – is not *direct*, but is the result of *thought*. One of the most profound and sensitive of the world's religious thinkers says emphatically, 'No one has ever seen God.'¹⁸ I take him to be excluding both direct sense perception and direct metaphysical perception as possible ways of cognizing deity – although not, of course, excluding cognition of his 'glory' (as the context of St. John's words makes clear), through the tokens of his revelation.

How is this cognition significantly different in nature from our cognition of persons? We are directly aware by sense perception of the tokens by which persons express themselves, and of their personal worth as conveyed by these tokens. That there is such an awareness of personal worth is obvious to most of us, and it is this awareness of personal worth which makes intelligible most moral behaviour, and is implicit or explicit in very many systems of ethics, as for example that of Kant. All this I am prepared to argue. But it is not apparent to me that there is any *unmediated* awareness of persons as such, apart from their behaviour and apart from their worth. The elusiveness of the self has been argued by David Hume and by many more recent thinkers; and I am not aware that anyone has yet successfully caught and exhibited the self. That does not mean that I do not think that the self or the person is a reasonable *inference* of thought. It *is* a reasonable inference, but beyond awareness of a person's expressions, revelations, or tokens, by which he manifests himself, and awareness of his personal worth, whatever *further* cognition of his personality there may be – and that may well be considerable – is not *direct*, but is the result

18. John 1:18 (RSV).

of *thought*. In all this, it seems to me, the epistemology of our awareness of persons and the epistemology of our awareness of the deity are similar.

In one respect, however, there is a conspicuous difference. Persons have physical bodies. Bodies are important because they provide an obvious centre of correlation of personal behaviour which conveys personal worth. God, however, it would seem, has no body, and therefore we lack an obvious centre of correlation of the divine behaviour. It is in the desire to fill this lack, doubtless, that theological doctrines such as the incarnation and the doctrine of the church as Christ's body owe their origin, at least in part. Another sort of suggestion which bears on this theme is that the whole universe is God's body through which he works. All these suggestions have some merit, and are worthy of more careful investigation than we can accord them at present. God's lack of any obvious body need not, however, destroy the basic parallelism that I have presented, for the following reasons:

- 1 It seems clear to me that it is not the human body whose worth we respect (although we may well respect it as having value as a living thing, and indirectly as the body of a person), when we are aware of giving respect to a person; nor is it the body that we mean to refer to (although we may include the body in our reference), when we speak of a person.
- 2 Although a person is dependent upon his body for the creation of expressions, he is not dependent upon his body for the continuance of these expressions. The words he speaks or writes and the plastic art he creates, once uttered or created, have an existence and worth of their own. In these respects, it seems to me, the basic parallelism between our knowledge of personal worth and our knowledge of holiness is seen.