

THE RESPONSE TO HOLINESS

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'HE is religious to whom something is holy'.¹ The most basic experience of man is the impact upon his own person of power from without. Towards the ultimate source (or sources) of this power he cannot be indifferent. He may react in one of two ways: he may regard it as something to be controlled and used, or as something to be served and propitiated. The first of these reactions is condemned by religion as such. It is the attitude defined as *hybris*, arrogance. Man attempts to place himself above the 'Source of Power' instead of acknowledging himself its lowly servant.

'You said in your heart,
I will climb the heavens,
I will raise up my throne
Above the stars of God.' (Isaias xiv, 13.)

The essence of religion consists in the second kind of reaction. Man feels himself confronted with an Other Being, one which wholly transcends himself and his own small circumstances, yet one from which constant impacts upon himself and his world are being experienced. The idea of holiness is in fact derived from these two elemental intuitions of Otherness and of Power. The holy is that which controls and transcends the profane, 'a Being of Power, strange and of a different order, dangerous and life-giving, terrifying and repelling and at the same time attractive, far away and near at hand, full of mystery'.² The impact upon his awareness of such a 'Being of Power' summons man to acknowledge its sublimity on the one hand and his own lowly dependence on the other. Worship is man's 'Complete Response'³ to this summons, the response of religion to holiness.

In the revelation to the Hebrews this summons and this response are projected on to a higher plane. Man no longer relies on his own dim perceptions of the transcendent 'Source of Power'. God is no longer content with the feeble response of natural religion. At a particular time, to a particular people, he has

1 N. Söderblom: *Werden des Gottesglaubens*, p. 162 ff.

2 S. Mowinckel: *Religion und Kultus*. (Göttingen, 1953), p. 32.

3 'Die allumfassende Antwort', S. Mowinckel, *op. cit.*, p. 31, p. 132 ff.

disclosed his own uniqueness, his own transcendence, his own Name. Such a disclosure demands its appropriate response. For Hebrew man it is not enough to deny other gods and other holinesses. It is his duty actively to mock and to deride them, to slay their adherents and destroy their emblems. All this is not merely to safeguard his own faith; also, and more fundamentally, it is a gesture of sheer worship, the fitting response to Yahweh's revealed uniqueness.

Again the revelation of Sinai has the effect of restoring to man his primordial dignity. Alone of all creatures it has been given to him to know the Creator by name. And again the response must correspond to the revelation of holiness. He must resume his place at the head of all creatures, commanding the universe to bow down before the holiness of its Creator, whom he alone can invoke by name.

The response to holiness in any context finds its primary and direct formulation in the hymn, the lyrical expression of God's sublime attributes as manifested in his marvellous works. Accordingly the hymns in the Hebrew psalter constitute a definite category, distinguished from other psalm-types by certain formal characteristics of their own. The structure of the Hebrew hymn preserves the dialogue of elemental religion, the summons of holiness and the response of worship. In technical terms the 'Invitation to Praise' is followed by the 'Grounds for Praise':⁴ 'Praise Yahweh . . . because . . . he is holy.'

The hymn is in fact the Israelite's immediate response to his inspired vision of Yahweh's works. He is possessed by the experience of sublimity and power. He perceives as no one else can, the creative impact of holiness on the world which Yahweh has made, on the people whom he has chosen and redeemed, on the individual man whom he cherishes and preserves. World, people, and individual must be commanded to respond. This is indeed the elemental feeling which underlies the 'Invitation to Praise', the introductory part of the Hebrew hymn.

'Sing to Yahweh a new song! Sing to Yahweh all the earth!'
(Ps. xcvi, 1.)

'Honour Yahweh Jerusalem! Praise your God Zion!'
(Ps. cxlvii, 12.)

⁴ 'Der Aufforderung zum Lob', and 'Die Begründung des Lobes'. These expressions derive originally from H. Gunkel: *Einleitung in die Psalmen*.

'Bless Yahweh my soul! Innermost depths of me bless the name
of his holiness!' (Ps. ciii, 1.)

In the 'Grounds for Praise' which follow this 'Invitation', the psalmist utters the holiness to which he is responding, his own vision of Yahweh's sublimity. He is inspired to perceive the deep inward significance of Yahweh's works. He experiences holiness as a continuous creation all about him, and must articulate his experience in solemn lyrical praises. Thus holiness is felt essentially as a creative impact. Everything falls into place round this fundamental concept. Yahweh is uttering the world, the people, the individual person into the plenitude of being. He is moulding and canalizing his holy breath (*ruah*) into words. Words are beating down on the dark waters of chaos, on the people oppressed and degraded, on the individual soul polluted and darkened by sin.

'The voice of Yahweh on the waters!

The God of glory sets them thundering!

Yahweh on the great waters!' (Ps. xxix, 3.)

The Word cleaves the chaos, separates from it a chosen part, Yahweh's 'portion' to be fashioned into an image of his own glory, moulded and stamped with his own holiness. The central experience to which the thought of Israel forever returns is her own creation at the Exodus, that point at which Yahweh suddenly breathed and spoke into history itself. It was his word then which crushed and thrust back the forces of chaos embodied in the Egyptians. His commanding word separated Israel from the nations, to be ordered and fashioned after his own likeness. The creative word of Yahweh becomes Israel's eternal law, infinitely to be loved and praised, meticulously to be obeyed.

'Thus speaks Yahweh your *Creator*, Jacob,

He who *moulded* you, Israel.' (Isaias xliiii, 1.)

It is as a macrocosm of this historical experience, vaster and more dimly perceived, that the creation of the world is seen.

'By the word of Yahweh the heavens are made,

By the breath of his mouth all their forces;

Piling up the sea-water into a heap,

Storing the deep in strong-rooms.

He has uttered and it is: He has commanded and it stands.'

(Ps. xxxiii, 6-7, 9.)

Again at the personal and individual level, chaos in the person

of the 'unrighteous ones' (i.e., those who are not ordered by Yahweh's word) is repulsed and the 'cosmos' of the righteous who live by Yahweh's law is 'renewed' by his word and blessed by his *ruah*.

In fact all the attributes of Yahweh shine forth in this single elemental creative act: his power in the crushing of chaos, his wisdom in the ordering of all creation, his mercy in breathing the cosmos into life and fruitfulness. But the splendour of Yahweh's creative act is more than an historical or primordial memory in the experience of Israel. She is actually awaiting the final 'Day of Yahweh' when he will visit and 'judge' the work of his hands, create it anew, bring it to its predestined consummation in an act of unprecedented glory. More than this, the psalmist actually feels the inward significance of the present moment in his people's history. He feels it as a stage in a vast creative process starting at Sinai and now nearing its completion. Holiness is an explosion of Yahweh's mystery and power into history and into the world. And already the thunder and tumult of his approach can be heard.

'The voice of Yahweh shattering the cedars!
Yahweh is shattering the cedars of Lebanon!
He is making Lebanon buck like a calf!
Syria like a buffalo steer!'

(Ps. xxix, 5-6.)

The gentiles, the blind creatures of the world, shudder at the impact. But Israel understands. In the deepest and most literal sense she 'has the answer'—the response to holiness. It is given to her eyes to pierce the chaotic darkness, and where others see only tumultuous storm-clouds, she sees the mouth of Yahweh moulding the words of a new creation, and where others feel only destroying tempests she knows that she stands once more caught in a creative blast of the holy breath of God. Alone of all creatures, alone articulate amid the dumb and blind and insensate of the gentiles the man of Israel stands on the dark world, looks up undismayed to Yahweh-Creator in the 'face-to-face'⁵ of the covenant-bond, and to the exploding impact of his holiness responds with hymns.

5 cf. A. Neher: *L'Essence du Prophétisme*. (Paris, 1955), p. 112, 133, 182 ff., 344.