

Editorial

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This special issue of the *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* contains four articles, the first three of which, by Jörg Lauster, Margaret Olin, and Ola Sigurdson, respectively, were originally delivered as keynote lectures at the conference “Approaching the Numinous in the Arts Today”, held at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University in May 2022. The conference was the result of the research project “Approaching the Numinous – Intersections between Religion and Aesthetics in a Secular Society”, led by Jayne Svenungsson and funded by the LMK Foundation. The author of the fourth article, George Pattison, played an important role in the conception of the project and also delivered a keynote address at an earlier project event.

The overarching question of this special issue – and of the research project as a whole – is how aesthetics and art intersect with ideas and experiences of the holy in today’s modern, ostensibly secularized society, whose citizens are often sceptical of religious institutions, yet may feel a strong pull towards spirituality. In addressing this question, a key concept for the project – and in several of the contributions – is the notion of the numinous, coined by Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) in his 1917 book *Das Heilige*.¹ With this term, Otto sought to postulate the irrational feeling of awe as the basis of religion, an

1. Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, Munich 1963.

idea that appeals to many who find religious doctrines outmoded but value the experience of the sacred. In Otto's thought, the ability to intuit the numinous was affined with aesthetic sensibility. The four authors in this special issue approach the topic of how the arts and the holy meet in modernity from different scholarly perspectives and reflect on a wide range of artistic expressions.

In the first article, Jörg Lauster examines how the relationship between religious experience and aesthetic experience has been understood by thinkers in the tradition of German liberal Protestantism, from Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) to Paul Tillich (1886–1965) to Ulrich Barth. The latter scholar identified four common characteristics that define and link the two experiences – fulfilment of meaning, interruption, passivity, and transcendence – and Lauster finds these components in works of art by canonical Western artists, from Raphael (1483–1520) to Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), and Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890). Lauster cautions, however, against understanding the structural affinity between religious and aesthetic experience as meaning that art and religion are “the same thing”. Both represent human attempts to approach or mediate the numinous, but they have been given different goals and mandates. Art can open our horizons towards a beyond, religion teaches us how to live in relationship to it. Neither, Lauster argues, can replace the other.

The word “numinous” is often applied to experiences of nature or art that evoke a sense of the divine. But why, Margaret Olin asks in her article, is the numinous not associated with artworks of social justice, works that speak of man's exploitation of – and ethical responsibility to – his neighbour? Ideas relating to the numinous have been associated with an aesthetic of emptiness and abstraction, from Otto to twentieth-century art theorists. However, Olin shows that modern Jewish philosophers such as Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) have articulated something like the numinous in their writings on inter-human relationality. Drawing on this dialogic dimension of the numinous, Olin examines a seminal artwork of social justice, Martha Rosler's 1974–1975 *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, which juxtaposes photographic and textual representations of a run-down New York neighbourhood. In Rosler's work, as well as in works by contemporary artists concerned with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Olin finds an aesthetic of emptiness traditionally associated with the numinous, but here at home in the encounter with the vulnerable, destitute human other.

In the third article, Ola Sigurdson discusses the experience of the numinous in relation to built spaces, such as the Pantheon and St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and to spatial factors. His point of view is phenomenological: anyone who enters a numinous space does so as an embodied being, inevitably enmeshed in spatio-sensory relationships with his or her surroundings. Therefore, Sigurdson argues, the experience of the numinous should be considered essentially aesthetic. Sigurdson applies the spatial metaphors of the vertical and the horizontal to numinous experience. He does so through a reading of Mircea Eliade's (1907–1986) 1957 book *The Sacred and the Profane* (in which Otto's *Das Heilige* appears in the very first sentence) and some of the book's commentators.² While Eliade emphasizes the vertical power of the numinous that takes hold of the experiencing subject, his critics emphasize the horizontal, performative function of collective rituals. Sigurdson considers both approaches insufficient. They are too general and too one-sided, he argues, and do not do justice to the dialectical intertwining of verticality and horizontality in concrete experience. Sigurdson argues for a new phenomenology of numinous spaces that takes into account their specific and diverse materiality as well as our multisensory experiences of them.

In the final article of this issue, George Pattison discusses what it means that religious icons are sometimes used in military conflicts. Does the icon then become a battle-flag, he asks. The issue is framed by the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and, in particular, the "sacralization" of Russian war aims by Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill. This kind of misuse of religious symbols is not the only role icons can play in the context of war, Pattison argues. As a counterexample, he cites a scene in Sergei Bondarchuk's (1920–1994) film adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's (1828–1910) novel *War and Peace*, in which Russian soldiers before the Battle of Borodino bow in reverence to the icon of Our Lady of Smolensk – not to increase their nationalistic fervour, but in acknowledgement of their own finitude. Through an examination of the historical use of relics and icons, Pattison argues that they do not necessarily serve militaristic purposes in war, but can also serve as reminders of human mortality and the prospect of a community beyond death.

The four contributors approach the subject of this issue from different angles, but they all demonstrate the value of looking at the history of both theology and aesthetics to better understand our own contemporary spiritual dilemmas. ▲

2. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, New York 1959.