

THE RATIONALIZATION OF THE WORLD AND TREMBLING BEFORE THE SACRED POWER

Alexandre Khmaladze

Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

Georgia

Abstract

The object of this article's research is trembling before the sacred, examined as a particular form of human experience. The starting point of the text is the interpretation of trembling as the other side of fear - an interpretation fundamentally present in S. Kierkegaard's work *Fear and Trembling*. A person may be gripped by the feeling of terror in the face of an obvious threat, yet the soul can experience a powerful shaking even when no immediate danger exists. This state is multifaceted and manifold. It may arise in an encounter with the sublime, in the act of religious faith, or in the moment of genuine philosophical insight. The article describes the manifestations of this experience in various spheres of human existence: the genesis of reverence and sacred experience, the metaphorical and symbolic expression of the feeling of reverence in the image of the "abyss," and the Gnostic tradition that studies the feeling of reverence in and after the process of cognition.

In the modern world the sphere of trembling has narrowed considerably. In M. Weber's expression, the "disenchantment" of the world has occurred, transforming the sacred into the merely rational and reducing transcendent experience to the status of psychological anomaly or cultural remnant. Yet the experience of sacred power - of holy trembling - endures as a distinctly human experience. The article demonstrates that the experience of trembling contains various modalities; in expressing the sacred it is inherently ambivalent. The experience of trembling may manifest as a face-to-face encounter and relate to both objective and subjective reality. It is an indicator of existential truth. The novelty of the research lies in the attempt to show the multidimensionality of this experience in relation to various spheres of human existence, and in the author's argument that the desacralization of European human life - which drives the expulsion of trembling as an attribute of existential experience - represents a fundamental impoverishment of the human condition.

Keywords: Reverence, Fear, The sacred, Ambivalence, The holy, The sublime, Abyss, Truth, Gnosis, Existential.

Reverence is the finest portion of mankind; however much the world makes it precious, yet only through feeling its stir can it sense the infinite.

J.W. Goethe¹

Introduction

Any emotion that a human being experiences may be both simple and self-evident in everyday life and, at the same time, extraordinarily rich and deep - it may possess a power capable of transforming the person's inner world. Behind the label of such a feeling as fear lies an inexhaustible fullness of different states and nuances of the human psychic and emotional world. Within a feeling that seems at first glance familiar and comprehensible, a rich palette of different sensations is concealed: fright, anxiety, terror, awe-bound prohibition, reverence, and even the most extreme boredom. Each of these states is significant in its own right and differs from fear by its own particular nuance. In this article we shall attempt to define wherein lies the essential difference of the feeling of reverence from similar states, and why this distinction carries philosophical weight far beyond mere terminological precision.

¹ Goethe, J.W., *Faust*, Trans. P. Weinberg, Saint Petersburg, 1904. p. 230.

The relevance of the research is conditioned by the fact that, despite all secularization and disenchantment of the world, it is impossible to deprive a human being of the sense of the transcendent - it represents one of the primary needs. The rigorous scientific rationality of European civilization has given humanity many blessings; yet alongside this, an exclusively rational path of development leads us into a dead end. In this respect, the study of the human being through his most evident emotional manifestations creates the opportunity to look at humanity and the development of civilization from a new angle. In a state of holy reverence, in deep prayer or meditation, a person stands forth as a spiritual being and not merely a biological one. The question of what constitutes genuine experience, as distinct from its simulated or habituated form, lies at the centre of this investigation.

The methodological foundation of this article draws from phenomenological and existential philosophy, with particular attention to Rudolf Otto's analysis of the numinous, Martin Heidegger's account of existential dread, and Søren Kierkegaard's conception of trembling. The article proceeds from the conviction that philosophical analysis of emotional and existential states - far from being a marginal enterprise — constitutes one of the most urgent tasks of contemporary thought, precisely because such states illuminate what rational discourse alone cannot reach.

1. Holy Reverence

The feeling of holy reverence arises in the sphere of religious and mystical experience. There exist several approaches to the problem of the origin of religion and various beliefs, but it is important to note that the notion of religion arising from fear is unsubstantiated. Such an explanation is excessively superficial. The simple feeling of fear could not have transformed a human being into a seeker of meaning and a creator of culture. Fear, as a reactive state, is fundamentally directed toward the known and the concrete - the threat that is present, visible, and definable. Reverence, by contrast, arises before that which exceeds any determination, before a presence that cannot be categorized or confined within the boundaries of the ordinary.

In T. Roszak's view, primitive humanity began with wonder and enchanted observation of the surrounding world, even before the creation of the first tools.² Magic arose in the most ancient times; cultic rites, mysteries, hymns, and dances - all of this is no less important for defining the essence of human nature than the creation of tools and labour. And at the same time all of this is part of what may be called a religious worldview. It would appear that humanity began its birth with mystical visions and revelations, and only thereafter were the first tools fashioned and humankind mastered fire. Moreover, human beings first perceived the surrounding world through rapture and mantra, and only then began its practical appropriation.³ The creator of primitive culture was more captivated by the flickering of fire or the crack of thunder than by considerations of utility. This is no longer mere fear - it is already an attitude of reverence towards nature and the surrounding world. The seeds of religion and culture must be sought not in fear of natural phenomena but in the deep, holy feeling of reverence towards nature and the world.

In connection with the fact that beyond a purely religious state a human being can experience a particular feeling that is supernatural and mystical but relates not only to the sphere of religion, Rudolf Otto introduced the concept of the numinous. The numinous feeling is broader than the holy; it contains something inexpressible, connected with peak states of the soul, and possesses various modalities. What distinguishes the numinous from ordinary emotional responses is precisely its non-rational, irreducible character: it cannot be fully translated into conceptual language without remainder. Every attempt at full articulation leaves something out - a residue that withdraws from comprehension yet remains vividly present to experience.

² Roszak, T., *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, New York, 1969.

³ Gurevich, P.S., "The Desacralization of the Brain." *Journal of Philosophical Anthropology*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2015. pp. 6-19. <http://iphrras.ru/uplfile/root/biblio/phan/2.pdf> [L. s. 12.03.2026].

First of all one must speak of the sensation of “absolute supremacy (and inaccessibility),”⁴ which is regarded as the precondition of the feeling of “total dependence.” That which cannot be expressed in terms of magnitude and scale evokes in a person a peculiar, incomparable numinous feeling. It is precisely the inability to perceive or conceptualize greatness - insofar as the resultant experience is comparable to nothing - that gives rise in the person to a sensation and state of a special kind. This incapacity is not failure; it is, paradoxically, the condition of a deeper mode of contact with reality.

1.1. The Distinction Between the Sublime and the Numinous

It is also important to differentiate the numinous feeling from the feeling of the sublime, which was already described by Kant.⁵ Kant speaks of the absolute magnitude of a natural phenomenon, purging this feeling entirely of any religious motive. The feeling of the sublime contains a duality: the person experiences helplessness before the elements, and simultaneously a desire arises to overcome this natural phenomenon, to withstand the emerging threat, to tame nature. In such moments a person rises above himself, and here natural objects and phenomena do not produce the feeling of the sublime through fear - they awaken the highest power in the person. The reverence of the sublime is the overcoming of fear before the natural world, a spiritual ascent, a summons to action, overcoming, and fulfilment.

Whereas the numinous feeling may arise before the sensation of something whose full comprehension is altogether impossible, the sublime always retains a relationship to human rational or moral capacity. In the Kantian account, it is ultimately the person’s supersensible vocation - his dignity as a rational being - that asserts itself in the encounter with natural magnitude or power. The numinous, by contrast, does not affirm but rather dissolves the ordinary coordinates of the self. Before the numinous, reason is not triumphant but suspended; the self does not expand but is placed radically in question. This is why the numinous cannot be assimilated to a merely aesthetic category without distortion.

1.2. The Modalities of the Numinous

The numinous feeling cannot be called the sublime. It contains various nuances and modalities. The numinous feeling is a state of deep meditation or complete relaxation of consciousness, a state of immersion in peace and prayer. This feeling may unexpectedly shake a person, awaken in him the force and energy of life, raise him to invisible spiritual heights, only to draw him back just as unexpectedly and return him to the state of ordinary earthly existence. In such moments a person may be in a strange agitation, rapture, or even ecstasy - just as in a state of fear before an earthquake or trembling before the beyond. All these states necessarily arise before something that rises mysteriously above the human creature.

This state, denoted as *Tremendum* (the dreadful), arises only in encounter with something inconceivably mighty, dangerous, and searing. In ordinary life the very thought of it exceeds a person’s capacity. Such a deep, pre-seismic feeling of fear was described in his works by M. Heidegger, for whom existential dread is the necessary condition for contact with nothingness.⁶ Dread always arises in the domain that lies beyond the borders of human existence. This feeling can awaken a person, uproot him from habitual routine life. It is possible that precisely such a reverence filled with deep dread once awakened the consciousness of primitive humanity. This modality of the numinous feeling is the most archaic. At the same time, similar religious reverence contains an element of righteous wrath. The almighty Lord always has the right to pour out all his might upon a person, to become angry or indignant. Also noteworthy is the element of the sensation of absolute omnipotence in the feeling of reverence - *Majestas*. At its most extreme expression this feeling leads a person to the point where the subject dissolves in the object, which simultaneously emerges as the cause of all that exists and compels the

⁴ Otto, R., *The Idea of the Holy*, Trans. A.M. Rutkevich. Saint Petersburg: Saint Petersburg University Press, 2008. p. 20.

⁵ Kant, I., "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime." In: Kant, I. *Works in 6 Volumes*, vol. 2. Moscow: Mysl', 1964. pp. 125–224.

⁶ Heidegger, M., *What Is Metaphysics?* 2nd ed. Trans. V.V. Bibikhin. Moscow: Akademicheskiiy Proyekt, 2013.

person to sense his own “creaturely-ness.” Yet alongside this, holy reverence is also fascination and wonder, a desire for contact and participation in the divine - the feeling denoted as *Fascinans*.

1.3. The Ambivalence of Reverence

Since holy reverence, i.e., the feeling of the sacred, contains two polar states that are paradoxically blended in one deep feeling, we can speak of the ambivalence of the feeling of reverence. This duality may be explained in various ways. The sacred is inherently non-uniform; such is its nature: it contains both the terrible, the impure, the repellent, as well as the inspiring, the holy, the attractive. The person does not stand before the sacred as before a neutral object but is drawn into a relation that simultaneously attracts and terrifies, that summons and repels. The category of the sacred therefore cannot be reduced to either the purely positive or the purely negative; it contains both and neither.

This is precisely what G. Bataille characterizes as a raging that permeates everything and engulfs the world, a defined *modus* of the world's holy principle.⁷ From the very beginning, a human being is in a dual relationship with the world: he experiences dread (for the apex of rage is death), yet simultaneously this engulfing force fascinates and attracts him. In turn, the raging violence to which every person is inclined gives birth to prohibition as a means of taming this evil element within the person himself. Yet any prohibition contains within itself the violation of this prohibition - transgression. These two elements - prohibition and transgression - are inconceivable without each other. Prohibition breeds fear, but simultaneously the desire to violate this prohibition also arises. The contradictory nature of humanity breeds the ambivalence of feelings. The point is that prohibition was the cause of the emergence of consciousness in the human being; it was precisely prohibition that gave the possibility of becoming aware of oneself and one's actions. Interesting, then, how the first prohibition itself arose. According to Freud,⁸ primitive people committed patricide and conscience “stirred.” But this too does not explain why primitive humanity developed a conscience. The origin of the moral sense requires a more fundamental account - one that points, ultimately, to the experience of the sacred itself.

1.4. Sacrifice and the Feeling of the Holy

In researching this problematic, René Girard introduces the concept of foundational violence.⁹ How are we to explain sacrifice and the sacred relationship to the sacrificial victim? In ancient societies, the violent death of a fellow tribesperson had to be compensated by the death of another person. Yet such blood vengeance is a catalyst of violence, since one murder was followed by a chain of murders on account of the non-equivalent blood-price of human beings. This gave rise to the necessity of a substitute victim. The murderer's fellow tribespeople themselves chose a person from their own tribe to be offered as a sacrifice so that the murder might be compensated. The mandatory ritual was the transference of “impurity” from the real murderer to his substitute, his double.

Subsequently the human sacrifice was replaced by an animal sacrifice. But the ritual remained the same: all the sins of humanity were transferred onto the sacrificial object - for example onto the scapegoat, which was slain according to the rituals and the sins accumulated in society were thereby destroyed. The relationship to such victims is dual. On the one hand, the victim took upon itself everything impure and sinful; it was not to be touched, sometimes not even to be seen (only the authorized priest did this, performing all actions so as not to become infected with the impurity himself). On the other hand, the victim became holy, for through its death it eliminated the impurity. René Girard sees in precisely these rituals the foundation of the feeling of the holy - rituals aimed at eliminating the violence that accumulates in human society over time. The sacred, in this reading, is not primarily an experience of transcendence but a social mechanism for managing the destructive potential of mimetic desire.

However, G. Bataille has a different approach to the question of sacrifice. Within the human being there is an inner, unconscious desire to return to the world of continuity, the world of the sacred. One cannot

⁷ Bataille, G., *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*. Moscow: Lodomir, 2006. pp. 60–67.

⁸ Freud, S., *Totem and Taboo: The Psychology of Primitive Culture and Religion*. Trans. M.V. Vulf. Saint Petersburg: Lenizdat, 2014.

⁹ Girard, R., *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. G. Dashevsky. 2nd ed. Moscow: Novoye Literaturnoye Obozreniye, 2010.

approach this world directly; a defined ritual must be performed, in the course of which something absolutely precious is sacrificed. The victim returns to the sacred world, while the one who offers the sacrifice briefly touches this world while the process is underway. Sacrifice is a kind of path - a technique of addressing the transcendent principle through the objectification of the victim. A discrete unit of the conscious, profane world, through ritual action, returns to the world of continuity. By offering sacrifice, a person performs a defined ritual that gives him an indirect possibility to return, to penetrate the world of the sacred, which is so desirable and attractive to the human being. Sacrifice in such a case turns out to be transgression - a passage from the profane world to the sacred world. The sense of trembling that accompanies the sacrificial act is not a by-product but its very essence: without this trembling, the ritual remains merely external performance, devoid of its transformative power.

2. The Abyss of the Soul and the Abyss of the World

Yet rage and violence are destructive elements, despite the force and might that exists within them. In searching for the source of the emergence of the feeling of holy reverence we may turn to the image of the abyss, which arose in the mystical philosophy of Jacob Böhme. Ungrund is the abyss that raged (or rested) at the moment when the world had not yet been created. What can be said of this state? In essence, nothing: there is no world, no human being, no time and space. This image is used in N. Berdyaev's philosophy and is inseparably linked to the concept and origin of human freedom. The abyss, in this philosophical tradition, is not simply a metaphor for ignorance or emptiness but rather the positive condition of all creation - the groundless ground from which everything proceeds and to which everything returns.

"The freedom of the Ungrund is neither light nor darkness, neither good nor evil. Freedom abides in darkness and thirsts for light. And freedom is the cause of light."¹⁰ The primordial non-existence, the abyss of emptiness, is the cause of the world and of human free will in general. The image of the abyss presents itself as the image of unconditional and groundless freedom. Berdyaev uses this concept to substantiate freedom as the principal problem of humanity. The ontological essence of freedom consists in the fact that at the moment when nothing yet existed, there was unconditional, complete freedom and the creation of everything was possible. This is the state of nothingness that preceded the origin of the world - the state of the abyss, when nothing has yet been created.

Jean-Paul Sartre's view is the opposite: he provides a description of a dialectical conception of nothingness according to which the foundation of the world is being, while nothing is the logical consequence of being, since it presupposes being in order to negate it. Nothingness, as it were, is added and attached to the mass of being so as to reveal this being. In the philosopher's view, the state before the beginning of the world could not have been nothing. When one says that there was nothing, one is in fact naming the totality of something, but designating it as nothingness. When one enters a room where a precious collection is kept and is told not to touch anything, it is by this "nothing" that the entire ensemble of what must not be touched is designated. Socrates himself, with his famous phrase "I know that I know nothing," designates by this nothing the totality of the being under consideration, as truth.¹¹

However, in the author's view, the symbol of the abyss is nothingness that exists as the condition for the possibility of the existence of life and being in general. The abyss is the condition for the possibility of filling with being. It is a rapid and inconceivable immersion in events. The abyss existed before the origin of the world, but it continues to exist as the condition for the emergence of everything new and untouched. Without the abyss, the existence of anything is impossible. This insight connects Böhme's mystical metaphysics with the existential phenomenology of the twentieth century: both traditions converge on the recognition that the depth of the human being exceeds any determination, any categorization, and that this excess is not a deficiency but the very ground of human dignity and freedom.

¹⁰ Berdyaev, N.A., *The Philosophy of Freedom. The Meaning of Creation*. Moscow: Akademicheskii Proekt; Yekaterinburg: Delovaya Kniga, 2015. pp. 61–62.

¹¹ Sartre, J. P., *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Trans. V.I. Kolyadko. Moscow: AST: Astrel', 2012. p. 78.

Freedom and reverence are inseparably linked to the metaphorical image of the abyss. The abyss of freedom frightens a person boundlessly, insofar as human life is finite, transient on the scale of the world and eternity. "Whoever reflects upon this will be shaken, and imagining that the material shell in which nature has enclosed him is placed on the edge of two abysses - the abyss of infinity and the abyss of nothingness - will be filled with reverence before such a miracle..."¹² The sensation of the infinity of the world and the inexpressibility of what may be called the abyss gives birth to the feeling of reverence before the infinity of the world. It is precisely this state of deep shaking that awakens the human essence in a person. An animal does not connect itself to the cosmos, does not attempt to study it or appropriate it in any way. A human being, on the other hand, is endowed with reason and the gift of searching, but all of this leads to the point where the person can only register the fact. Humanity lives on a speck of dust of the universe, of no concern to anyone, and in this situation its sole fate is - to fill the meaning of life with reverence.

The abyss is also depth. It is simultaneously inner depth, cosmic abyss, and exalting world. Here too there are two worlds: inner and outer. The abyss is the extraordinary depth of the human psyche, with all its convolutions, nuances, paradoxes, and dark patches. Anyone who has at least once attempted to comprehend the unknowable strata of the human psyche can say with confidence that within them a great many varied perversions, deviations, and simply inexplicable processes are concealed. It is also the invulnerability of the soul - the abyss is considered on the cosmic plane, that is, as that ideality, that spirituality towards which the person strives. It too has no boundaries; it, like the abyss, opens infinitely. But it is also the sensation of earthly fear - the abyss of that fear which a person experiences in birth trauma, in neurotic states, and in those states which, following Kierkegaard, are called reverence.¹³

The definitions of the abyss as Ungrund, as cosmic abyss, and as the abyss of the person's inner infinite psychic world are inseparable from one another; they are interrelated. The inner abyss of the human being is the cause of his freedom. This is also the principal problem: each person has his own personal abyss, an emptiness which on the one hand demands filling, and on the other is itself capable of filling everything around it. My own inexhaustibility, as a human being who possesses not only consciousness but also a soul, is likewise an emptiness. The abyss is simultaneously the possibility of being filled by everything and absolute emptiness. G.S. Pomerants, in his reflections on Dostoevsky, captures this double character of the abyss with particular precision: the encounter with the abyss in Dostoevsky is never simply destructive, but opens upon a dimension of being that ordinary existence conceals.¹⁴

The abyss gives birth to a fear filled with reverence that accompanies the person in the boundless emptiness of his compulsory actions. A person is obligated - and must himself give meaning to this emptiness. The individual must fill the surrounding being with his own personal and genuine meaning. Blaise Pascal's cosmic infinity, the cosmic abyss, is that which must be appropriated, filled with one's inner depth - an abyss of equal magnitude. Only by the infinity of the inner psychic world can the infinity of the outer world be filled. External spatial infinity pales before inner, spiritual infinity, because the infinity of the cosmos I can only imagine in representation, while my own inner depth I myself shall feel, shall be convinced of it through my own experience.

3. Truth Filled with Reverence

The problem of knowing the world is accompanied by the subjective feeling of reverence. Today the world is dominated by the rational cognition of the surrounding reality, whereas Berdyaev continues the most ancient Gnostic tradition: "The teaching on the Ungrund and on freedom is a bold attempt to understand the creation of the world from the inner life of the Deity."¹⁵ The mysterious and unattainable process of the creation of the world can be described only from the perspective of its essence - of the one who created this world. All attempts at rational approaches reduce to hypotheses that are constantly changing. It is unknown what further discoveries await humanity. It may be that ancient gnosis was and

¹² Pascal, B., *Pensées*. http://royallib.com/book/paskal_blez/misli.html [L. s. 12.03.2026].

¹³ Kierkegaard, S., *The Most Unhappy: Collected Works*. Compiled and annotated by A. Sukhovey. 4th ed. Moscow: International Bible Society, 2011.

¹⁴ Pomerants, G.S., *Openness to the Abyss: Encounters with Dostoevsky*. Moscow: Sovetsky Pisatel', 1990. p. 14.

¹⁵ Berdyaev, See footnote 9, p. 60.

is closest to the truth. It is impossible to know being through intellect. Truth is sometimes universally significant, but it may also be subjective, individual. The Gnostic insistence on the primacy of experiential knowledge over doctrinal formulation has, in this respect, a permanent value that transcends its historical context.

“The whole of new philosophy - the final result of all new philosophy - has clearly revealed its fateful impotence to know being, to connect the cognitive subject with being.”¹⁶ If one speaks of a state of spiritual searching, of the attempt to answer a question that is known to lie beyond the framework of truth or falsehood, then in such a case the correctness of the answer is determined by the inner subjective declaration and the feeling of truth. The rationalist tradition, which identifies truth with logical consistency and empirical verification, is insufficient here. It can tell us what is the case about the external world but falls silent before the question of what it means to exist, to suffer, to love, and to die.

Reverential knowing possesses a distinctive epistemological structure. It is not the detached contemplation of an object by a neutral subject, but rather a transformation of the knowing subject himself in the act of knowing. Genuine philosophical understanding - as distinct from mere information acquisition - always involves this transformative dimension. When a person truly grasps a fundamental truth about existence, something in him is irreversibly altered; he cannot return to his former state of unreflective certainty. This is why Kierkegaard insists that genuine existence is always “interested,” never merely objective. Philosophical truth, for Kierkegaard, is existential - it must be lived, not merely thought. It is in this sense that reverence serves as an epistemological criterion: only what genuinely shakes the person can claim to have reached his existential core.

Reverential knowledge, which seems to come from nowhere, possesses unquestionable value for the person. Such knowledge may be the most correct and accurate for a particular individual. The feeling of reverence is an important and perhaps the only indicator for confirming existential truth. Genuine contact with existence compels the person’s soul to be shaken to its depths. And the preliminary renunciation of total, all-encompassing, rational, scientific knowledge may be the condition for the most complete and true knowledge. When a person consciously rejects the rational comprehension of the world and turns to the irrational, senseless, open knowledge of the world in all its contradictoriness and absurdity, only then can he approach his own personal existential truth. This is not irrationalism in the pejorative sense - a rejection of reason as such - but a recognition that reason must know its own limits and acknowledge that which exceeds it.

Reverential knowing demands great courage. It is the complete renunciation of reliable knowledge and the surrender to one’s faith, to the transcendent principle of the world, to the absolute - or, if you will, to God. Great courage is required to plunge into the abyss with the boldness of faith, to perform the “leap of faith” according to Kierkegaard, so as either to receive everything or to lose everything. In this act of faith, in this volitional effort, the person is always somewhere at the edge of the abyss. Here there are no guarantees, here there is no strict logic of reason. Here there is only the riskiness and danger of faith, here are its attraction and its heroism.¹⁷ To decide to renounce everything in favour of faith, to perform a bold act - is boundlessly filled with reverence. It is precisely in this reverence that the person acquires his own eternal existential truth.

It is impossible to stop at a rational, concrete, and schematic comprehension of truth. The human being and the world around him are not arranged like a machine in which we would be able to discover and analyse every detail of the mechanism. It is impossible to surrender entirely to strict scientific rationality. “We know truth not only by reason but also by the heart: it is precisely the heart that helps us comprehend first principles, and the efforts of reason, which cannot achieve such comprehension, are in vain against the arguments of the heart.”¹⁸ Subjective truth, which can be found and perceived only from the position of the irrational principle in the human being, is often more significant and far more productive than rational truth.

¹⁶ Böhme, J., *Aurora, or the Morning Redness in the Rising*. Trans. from German. Moscow: Politizdat, 1990. p. 12.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, S., *Fear and Trembling*. Trans. from Danish by N.V. Isayeva and S.A. Isayev. Moscow: Kulturnaya Revolyutsiya, 2010. p. 43.

¹⁸ Pascal, See footnote 11.

Thus, for example, the realization of “I am” throws a person out of the ordinariness of being, compels him to start, and becomes the cause of existential reverence. However, this must be an existentially genuine realization - truly one's own, truly inwardly assimilated, clear knowledge. “I am” means that I exist beyond the desire of my own existence. “I am” depends on me only insofar as I am free to choose the path of my own being or non-being. This is not only the physical state of the ageing of the flesh; it is also a metaphorical movement towards life or towards death. The very givenness of “I am” lies upon the person as his own personal, inseparable problem. “I am” is an obligation, a duty before life.

4. Is Reverence Disappearing?

It must be said that reverence is imperceptibly departing from human life. The diagnosis, however, must be carefully formulated. Obviously one cannot claim that human life is entirely exhausted and no longer contains anything that can touch the soul, heart, and mind of a person. The fact of the comprehensive disenchantment and desacralization of European human life is evident, and was already identified by Max Weber as one of the defining features of modernity.¹⁹ Without a certain depth of reverence the emotional world of a person will be ordinary and self-evident. Existence demands reverence, a special attitude towards life, and a special immersion in various emotional states. The disappearance of reverence is not simply a cultural impoverishment; it is a symptom of a deeper anthropological crisis - the erosion of the human being's capacity for genuine transcendence.

Love may be an amusing adventure or a state of reverence. According to Sigmund Freud, it was originally Eros that lay at the foundation of human spiritual life. It was precisely this feeling that created an innumerable quantity of works of genius in art. It is precisely this feeling that maintains life on earth and, perhaps, it is precisely this feeling that underlies the world. What happens today? The human being has ceased to fall in love; passion has departed, the state of euphoria, flight, boundless joy, and all-encompassing desire has departed. When one puts a simple question to someone: “Do you love this person?”, after a certain pause one receives the answer: “I don't know, I simply feel comfortable with them.” Where is the attitude of reverence? Must there be or not be a feeling of adoration, all-encompassing love, deep reverence? Sacred feelings of such height have become rare; the human being has ceased to burn with love. The reduction of intimate life to the language of comfort and functionality signals not a liberation from illusion but a loss of the capacity for deep feeling.

The description of intimate closeness, its perception, is what is “accepted as normal.” The act of closeness between two people must contain mystery, deep intimacy, a sense of unity, the desire to open in the other and to experience oneself at the peak of earthly bliss. This irrational process has turned into a senseless habit and has been desacralized. Mechanical movements, all manner of sexual sophistications, variants and forms are subject to the formula “sex is good for your health.” In this profane intimacy, without the feeling of the secret sacred reverence, a person not only does not improve his health but, on the contrary, loses it. Without a sense of mystery and wonder, without genuine desire, sacred cognition is impossible.

The same change has emerged in humanity's attitude towards death. In contemporary civilization death has long since ceased to signify reconciliation or acceptance. The person is hidden after death, solely so as not to resemble a corpse. However, there also exists a different attitude towards death. According to Heidegger, an animal dies, while a human being accepts death. Reconciliation with death is an existential act, possible only under conditions of a particular disposition of the person, of a special attitude towards it. The existentialist perceives death courageously and stoically: what is the point of weeping and lamentation, if death is inevitable and the person is required to accept it?

Here it is necessary to note such an existential as suffering. The whole of contemporary culture is directed towards avoiding suffering by any means. All manner of pain relievers, antidepressants, and entertainments are summoned to give a person in any situation the possibility to avoid or suppress this feeling. But there exists an ancient sacred conviction that accepts suffering and has an utterly courageous attitude towards it. Stoicism calls upon the person to face any life situation, to be prepared to receive suffering. The anaesthesia of suffering - its pharmacological, technological, and cultural

¹⁹ Weber, M., *Selected Works*. Compiled and edited by Yu.N. Davydov. Moscow: Progress, 1990. p. 222.

suppression - is not simply a practical convenience but a philosophical stance: it declares that the person need not encounter the depth of his own being. In avoiding suffering, contemporary culture avoids the abyss. And in avoiding the abyss, it forfeits the sacred.

The sensation of miracle has disappeared; faith in God has become doubtful. Of course, after Nietzsche's works Christianity could not remain the same, and even Kierkegaard himself was persecuted for criticizing the Church. The matter here is not the institution and not the system, but rather that the world surrounding the person has lost its captivating mystery - that dimension capable of evoking a feeling of reverence before an unknowable world. Rational knowledge and the attempt to find absolute truth have led the human being to scientism. The desacralization of the brain has occurred.²⁰ Formerly this human organ was an enigma of nature. Scientists did not know how to approach its study, what to do, how to understand the arrangement of the brain. Today everything has been studied; every spiral ganglion has its description and function, the brain has been analysed and broken down into parts, the enigma has practically been solved.

No one is any longer surprised by the ideas of the post-human, the technoid, and transhumanism. Science enthusiasts are convinced that it is necessary to reassemble the human being so that he becomes more durable or immortal, and to transfer consciousness into a neural network. Of course, this is an example of the manifestation of the unconscious inclination to destroy that precious human being whom we knew until now. Such zealotry for self-destruction must be countered by a reverential - sacred - relationship not only to life as a phenomenon of miracle (for from the scientific standpoint, the emergence of intelligent life on earth is inexplicable), but also a reverential attitude towards death - as the mysterious act of transition from one state to another, as the process of completion and a kind of continuation of life.

Yet the longing for trembling has not been entirely extinguished in contemporary culture - it has found new, often surprising vessels. In the realm of contemporary art, practitioners such as Bill Viola have sought to recreate the numinous through the immersive power of video installation, confronting viewers with images of birth, death, and elemental force that resist easy consumption. Marina Abramović's durational performances - demanding of both performer and audience an endurance that approaches the boundary of the bearable - represent a deliberate recovery of the sacred function of ancient ritual: the transformation of the self through encounter with its own fragility. In the domain of collective social life, this hunger for the numinous makes itself felt in unexpected quarters: the shared silence that falls upon crowds gathered to witness a solar eclipse, the spontaneous outpouring of grief following the loss of a beloved cultural figure, the eerie collective breathlessness of a stadium before a decisive moment - these are secular experiences, yet unmistakably charged with what Otto would have recognized as the tremendum. Scholars of digital religion, most notably Heidi A. Campbell, have observed that even the networked world, for all its tendency to flatten experience and commodify attention, has become an unexpected site of spiritual searching: online communities of grief, shared witnessing of natural wonders, and moments of live-streamed collective awe all testify that the hunger for the sacred persists beneath the surface of the digital everyday. The sacred does not simply vanish when its traditional forms hollow out - it disperses, migrates, and reasserts itself wherever human beings find themselves standing before something they cannot fully comprehend or control.

In his everyday life the person is in a state of openness of his own being; the person is unfinished, something is lacking him for the sensation of his own wholeness, for being in wholeness. This thirst for wholeness and striving towards a transcendent feeling is not equally developed in all people - for some, faith comes easily, while others are completely unable to understand what is being talked about. Obviously not every person will feel his own incompleteness. Contemporaneity supplies the person with various substitutes and simulations of genuine existence - more precisely, a series of means to banish the feeling of incompleteness from the domain of actual consciousness, from the domain of genuine being. Yet this thirst is unkillable, and however much we try to cover it up or eliminate it, there always remains the oppressive, searing sensation of incompleteness. A person's completeness, the experience of his own wholeness, is granted only for a moment - in a boundary experience of the world

²⁰ Gurevich, P.S., *Philosophy of Culture*. Moscow: Aspekt-Press, 1994. p. 78.

and in the deep, complete comprehension of oneself within it. One such boundary state is the sacred feeling of terror or reverence.

The question arises: why, generally speaking, must reverence not disappear? What does it give us? All of this is necessary so that through the act of thinking and the emotional assimilation of these givens we may push ourselves towards what is called a genuine human being, that we may draw closer to what we call a person. The cultivation of deep feelings in oneself, constant work with the world of emotions and experiences, the desire to understand those close to us better and more fully, leads to a deep and impressive transformation of human being. It is paradoxical that if the standard of living in a state rises (expressed in material wellbeing), then the number of suicides increases proportionally. The fewer the problems and cares, the less meaning is found in life. The sacred feeling of reverence is necessary in order to kindle in a wayward person those states and experiences that bring each individual closer to what is called a human being.

Conclusion

In the contemporary epoch, which Max Weber characterizes as the “disenchantment of the world” (*Entzauberung der Welt*), the feeling of holy reverence manifests in a particular way. The rationalization of the world, scientific knowledge, and technological progress have, on the one hand, liberated the person from superstitious fear of the forces of nature, but on the other hand have caused the loss of that dimension of being which is connected with transcendent experience. The exclusively rational path chosen by European civilization, despite its undeniable achievements, has revealed its limits: it has been unable to grant the person the fullness of being, a deep existential meaning, since meaning, by its very nature, lies beyond rational calculation and utilitarian benefit.

It is precisely in this context that the concept of sacred power acquires special significance. Sacred power is not the same as political or economic domination. It represents that transcendent authority that is not subject to rational discourse, yet before which the person experiences numinous reverence. This is a power that does not seize but awakens; does not subjugate but elevates; does not destroy but transforms. It is founded not on compulsion but on that deep inner experience which Rudolf Otto describes as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* - the mystery that is simultaneously terrifying and attractive.

In this regard, sacred power differs from profane power in that it does not strive towards external submission, but demands the person's free, inner consent - his readiness to transcend the boundaries of his own empirical, egoistic “I” and to touch the foundation of being. It is precisely in this act of voluntary self-transcendence, in this transcending of the “I,” that the magic of true sacred power reveals itself: it does not deprive a person of freedom but, on the contrary, activates it, making it a choice in the relationship with the truth of being. As Nikolai Berdyaev observed, the true greatness of the human being consists not in the institutions and technical achievements he has created but, in his ability to be the subject of a relationship with the divine, the infinite, the mysterious.

In the contemporary world, where everything - from the brain to love - is subject to scientific analysis, technological optimization, and market relations, the deficit of the experience of sacred power is felt particularly acutely. The human being is becoming ever more the captive of imitations and simulacra: faith is replaced by formal membership in religious institutions, love by the technologies of intimate relations, the acceptance of death by the medicamentous anaesthesia of its biological end. Despite this, the capacity for reverence as the possibility of contact with the sacred dimension of being cannot be fully destroyed. It is deeply rooted in human nature, for it was precisely the reverential attitude - and not utilitarian interest - that stood at the origins of human culture, religion, and consciousness.

Thus, the feeling of holy (sacred) reverence, despite its manifoldness and ambivalence (it contains both terror and fascination), represents the most important indicator of the person's existential truth. It marks that boundary where rational reasoning ceases and the sphere of faith, intuition, and personal experience begins. It is precisely at the edge of the abyss, before that nothingness that precedes all being, that the person acquires the possibility to experience the fullness of his own being and freedom. This freedom is not merely a choice between this or that product, idea, or way of life. It is a deeper freedom - the

freedom to see the mysterious in the world, to sense within it the trace of the sacred, and to find the strength to live in accordance with this sensation.

Accordingly, the preservation and cultivation of the sacred feeling of reverence in the contemporary world is not merely a matter of psychological comfort or emotional variety. It is the condition for the preservation of the person's identity as a spiritual being. It reminds us that there exists a dimension of reality that cannot be measured in molecules, cannot be calculated by algorithms, and cannot be purchased on the market. This is the dimension where true sacred power reveals itself - a power that does not dominate but grants being with meaning, depth, and greatness.

Bibliography

1. Aupers, Stef, Houtman, Dick, Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital. Leiden: Brill, 2010;
2. Bataille, Georges, The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy. Moscow: Lodomir, 2006;
3. Berdyaev, Nikolai, Studies on J. Böhme. Study I. The Doctrine of the Ungrund. Journal The Way. No. 20, 1930;
4. Berdyaev, Nikolai, The Philosophy of Freedom. The Meaning of Creation. Moscow: Akademicheskii Proekt; Yekaterinburg: Delovaya Kniga, 2015;
5. Böhme, Jacob, Aurora, or the Morning Redness in the Rising. Moscow: Politizdat, 1990;
6. Campbell, Heidi A., Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds. New York: Routledge, 2013;
7. Freud, Sigmund, Totem and Taboo: The Psychology of Primitive Culture and Religion. Saint Petersburg: Lenizdat, 2014;
8. Goethe, Johann, Wolfgang. Faust. Saint Petersburg, 1904;
9. Gurevich, Pavel, S The Desacralization of the Brain. Journal of Philosophical Anthropology, vol. 1, no. 1, 2015. <http://iphras.ru/uplfile/root/biblio/phan/2.pdf> [Last seen 12.03.2026];
10. Gurevich, Pavel, Philosophy of Culture. Moscow: Aspekt-Press, 1994;
11. Gurevich, Pavel, Spirova, Eelvira, Forms of Human Being. Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy. Moscow, 2016;
12. Girard, Rene, Violence and the Sacred. 2nd ed. Moscow: Novoye Literaturnoye Obozreniye, 2010;
13. Heidegger, Martin, What Is Metaphysics? 2nd ed. Moscow: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2013;
14. Hutchings, Tim, Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media. London: Routledge, 2017;
15. Kant, Immanuel, Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime. In: Kant, I. Works in 6 Volumes, vol. 2. Moscow: Misl, 1964;
16. Kierkegaard, Soren, The Most Unhappy: Collected Works. 4th ed. Moscow: International Bible Society, 2011;
17. Kierkegaard, Soren, Fear and Trembling. Moscow: Kulturnaya Revolyutsiya, 2010;
18. Otto, Rudolf, The Idea of the Holy. Saint Petersburg University Press, 2008;
19. Pascal, Blaise, Pensées. http://royallib.com/book/paskal_blez/misli.html [Last seen 12.03.2026];
20. Pomerants, Grigory, Openness to the Abyss: Encounters with Dostoevsky. Moscow: Sovetsky Pisatel', 1990;
21. Roszak, Theodore, The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition. New York, 1969;
22. Sartre, Jean-Paul, Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology. Moscow: AST: Astrel, 2012;
23. Weber, Max. Selected Works. Moscow: Progress, 1990.