

The Religious Impulse

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn that in nearly every religious belief system, some kind of impulse is present. We'll see that it's difficult to describe exactly what this is, but it's at the heart of religious life and practice, and it's linked with individual and collective drive toward and interactions with the mystery of the unknown. To help contextualize this, you will look briefly at the insight of several philosopher-theologian sociologists. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. What is the Impulse?
2. Friedrich Schleiermacher
3. Rudolf Otto
4. Emile Durkheim
5. Gerardus van der Leeuw
6. Paul Tillich

1. What is the Impulse?

Start by thinking of **impulse** as a non-rational drive or desire. In religious life, it's a motivation toward something, and it tends to involve the object of motivation as much as it does the actual movement. Words you could associate this concept with are desire and urge, or even need. It is the interplay between what is desired and the process of seeking that.



DID YOU KNOW

While this lesson will be focusing on the ideas that drive impulse, it should be noted that modern neuroscience is helping people understand this drive on an individual cognitive level. This is a great complement to the sociological and phenomenological approach to the study of religion.

This impulse is often triggered when a person begins to ask the ultimate questions of life: Who am I? Why am I here? What is the nature of the world around me? Is there a god or gods? What is my purpose? Do I even have a purpose? What is death? What happens after I die?

These kinds of preoccupations have plagued humanity for eons. They are not easy questions to grapple with, but almost everyone in every society confronts them in some conscious or unconscious way.

Religion, then, is an individual and collective response to these questions and the motivations and impulses behind them. The approach to the unknown often involves the unknown in one form or another.



TERM TO KNOW

Impulse

A non-rational drive or desire.

2. Friedrich Schleiermacher

In future lessons, you will look at the German Enlightenment, but for now, it is important to know it was a fertile time for actively engaging with these questions. Friedrich Schleiermacher was a very influential German theologian philosopher and protestant theologian during that time. He explored this interaction between subjective and objective knowledge.

Schleiermacher approached it from a theological and philosophical perspective. He determined that the union with the object of search in answer to the questions was not possible by human will alone. Something else was necessary. He describes this feeling of engagement with necessity as **“utter dependence”** or complete and absolute dependence.



TERM TO KNOW

“Utter Dependence”

A concept in the religious scholarship of Schleiermacher.

3. Rudolf Otto

In the late 19th century in Germany, Rudolf Otto described this experience with the Latin term “numinous.” This was to mean the power and the presence of divinity. He also used the terms “mysterium tremendum,” and “fascinans” to describe the subjective experience of the holy, the terror of the sacred, and **“the terror before the sacred”**. He extended it to the societies and cultures that gave meaning and context to the questions of life.



TERM TO KNOW

“Terror before the Sacred”

A concept in Otto’s religious scholarship.

4. Emile Durkheim

In the realm of sociology, these phenomena might be considered as ways of uniting people and maintaining cohesion. This is according to the famous French sociologist Emile Durkheim, who called it solidarity. The disparate and separate elements of experience needed some container for exchange and understanding; this container was society. He called it the “**Social Glue Theory**.”



TERM TO KNOW

“Social Glue Theory”

A key component in the sociological scholarship of Durkheim.

5. Gerardus van der Leeuw

In Holland at the same time, the religious philosopher Gerardus van der Leeuw was describing the same thing in terms of “**power**.” He put forth the idea that the sacred was compelling because it could be found everywhere. It represented power. The experience of otherness meant power. Things that were unfamiliar in the world were objects to be confronted. They manifest some relationship of power, some relationship with power, to power.



TERM TO KNOW

“Power”

A key concept in the religious scholarship of van der Leeuw.

6. Paul Tillich

A brilliant and poetic German American theologian philosopher named Paul Tillich wrote and spoke about this. He said that this process, this impulse, requires faith as an “**ultimate concern**.”

He describes the relationship between the questions of the philosopher—who must analyze the subjective elements of experience—and the answers of the theologian—who might offer structure, meaning, and guidance for the impulse that we’re talking about.

A quote for you as we close out this tutorial.

"Religion implies that man does not simply accept the life that is given to him. In life he seeks power, and if he does not find this, or not to an extent that satisfies him, then he attempts to draw the power in which he believes into his own life. He tries to elevate, to enhance its value, to gain for it some deeper and wider meaning. He who does not merely accept life, then, but demands something from it, that is, power, endeavors to find some meaning in life. He arranges life into a significant whole. Thus culture arises. Over the variety of the given, he throws his systematically fashioned net. From the stone he makes an image, from the instinct a commandment, and from the wilderness a tilled field. And thus he develops power."

Gerardus van der Leeuw from *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*; 1933.



TERM TO KNOW

“Ultimate Concern”

A key component of Tillich’s religious scholarship.



SUMMARY

What the impulse is behind religion might be difficult to describe, but nearly all religious belief systems express this impulse in individual and collective ways. It relates to a desire to understand the big questions of life. Covered were five key figures with ideas related to this impulse. **Friedrich Schleiermacher** gave his idea of utter dependence. **Rudolf Otto** developed an idea of the terror before the sacred and the *mysterium tremendum*. **Emile Durkheim’s** Social Glue Theory described the impulse as providing a means of solidarity in society. **Gerardus van der Leeuw** noted that power is a curious but sacred force behind this impulse. Finally, **Paul Tillich’s** idea of the ultimate concern expresses the nuances of faith as well as the relationship between subjective and objective acknowledgement.

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TERMS TO KNOW

"Social Glue Theory"

A key component in the religious scholarship of Durkheim.

"Terror before the Sacred"

A concept in Otto's religious scholarship.

"Ultimate Concern"

A key component of Tillich's religious scholarship.

"Utter Dependence"

A concept in the religious scholarship of Schleiermacher.

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A non-rational drive or desire.

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