Holiness

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Holiness is a central concept in the religious traditions of the world, as well as in academic theology and religious studies, but it is surprisingly absent from standard discussions in philosophy of religion. For example, holiness is rarely considered as a topic of philosophical analysis in its own right; and metaphysical treatments of God's nature usually omit holiness from the list of divine attributes in favor of properties such as immutability (see IMMUTABILITY AND IMPASSIBILITY), simplicity (see DIVINE SIMPLICITY), OMNISCIENCE, and OMNIPOTENCE. However, in addition to its great religious significance, holiness merits an entry in this encyclopedia because even despite its comparative neglect it has still generated sufficient philosophical reflection to require yet further engagement.

Religious roots

The English word "holiness" comes from the Old English *halignes* ("without blemish") but in Jewish (see JUDAISM) and Christian (see CHRISTIANITY) Bibles it is used to translate words derived from the Hebrew קֹדֶשׁ (*kodesh*) (normally interpreted to mean both "set apart" from common use and "dedicated" to God) and the Greek ἅγιος (*hagios*) and its derivatives (often interpreted to mean "different" or "other"). "Holiness" is closely associated with the English word "sacred" from the Latin root *sacr-* (normally translated as "holy") from which is also derived "sacrifice," "sacrament," and "sanctuary." In ordinary English usage "holy" and "sacred" are more-or-less interchangeable, although some scholars have noticed a preference for the former in theology and for the latter in religious studies. For example, some scholars use "sacred" to refer explicitly to holiness in its ritual or nonmoral aspects.

The operative concepts within this complex of Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and English words – perfection, being set apart or separated, being dedicated to divine use or purpose, being somehow different from or other than the natural or ordinary – find analogues not just in Judaism and Christianity but in other world religious traditions as well, both ancient and contemporary. While what is considered holy varies greatly, the concept itself seems remarkably consistent. The related concept of *tapu* or "taboo" from Polynesia focuses more specifically on prohibitions regarding certain persons, places, practices, and objects, but highlights how pervasive in human culture is the intuition that some things are "special" and thus either "off-limits" entirely or have "restricted access" to certain persons under particular conditions. For example, in some religious traditions formally designated physical spaces are only accessible for

those who hold a certain social status (such as priesthood) or who have undergone a required period or ritual of purification or who belong to a specific gender.

In most religious traditions holiness is associated primarily with divinity (variously understood) and then secondarily with the persons, places, practices, and objects that are believed to have a special relationship with that divinity. Thus, in the Jewish and Christian traditions, holiness is ascribed preeminently to God. Indeed, in Judaism and Christianity God is understood to be uniquely and essentially holy – particularly in the senses of perfect, set apart, and other – and the source of all holiness. Even Judaism and Christianity can therefore ascribe derivative but real holiness to their scriptures, to their communities (the Jewish people, the church), and to individual persons (rabbis, priests, monastics, saints). Orthodox and Catholic Christianity also developed a complex theology of holiness regarding the priesthood and the sacraments.

In ancient societies, holiness – both in its divine origin as well as in all secondary and derivative forms – was initially understood in objective and ritualistic terms but gradually became associated with (although not entirely assimilated to) moral goodness, virtue, righteousness, and justice. Ritual holiness is thus distinguishable from what Christians call "sanctification," the progressive subjective conformation of individual human character to paradigmatically divine qualities such as love, compassion, patience, and generosity. A priest might thus be ritually holy in virtue of ordination and yet not personally holy in terms of sanctification. And, again, analogous developments may be found in other religious traditions, with pervasive tensions between holiness understood in divine/derivative and objective/subjective terms. Another pervasive contrast obtains between the resulting dualities of sacred and secular, clean and unclean, pure and impure, although these categories are contested by some scholars and rejected by some traditions.

From Kant to Otto

As the great religious traditions of the world developed out of their original cultural contexts and written scriptural bases, concern with holiness remained constant (whether explicitly or implicitly) in subsequent reflection on the divine nature, its implications for human beings, and the places and practices of ritual worship. However, in Western philosophy holiness emerged as a distinct topic in Immanuel Kant's (see KANT, IMMANUEL) *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion* (published posthumously in 1817) with Kant's influential definition of holiness as "the absolute or unlimited moral perfection of the will." He continued: "A holy being must not be affected with the least inclination contrary to morality. It must be *impossible* for it to will something which is contrary to moral laws" (Kant [1817] 1996, 409). The twofold significance of Kant's definition was to (i) identify holiness with morality and (ii) locate it within the will of an individual personal agent, whether divine or human. For Kant, therefore, holiness ceased to be a property that could be attributed to a place (like a building or city), a natural feature (like a river or mountain), or an object (like a book or statue). Rather, in his philosophy holiness became a perfectly

virtuous disposition or character state. Consequently, for Kant holiness could only be attributed to human beings with extreme caution (properly understood, he said, "no being but God is holy") and certainly not because of some objective ritual status such as being a priest, monk, or nun. As a moral disposition of the will, holiness for Kant acquired a purely subjective interiority that prohibited more objective or external manifestations.

The Kantian interpretation of holiness was rejected decisively by the German scholar Rudolf Otto (see OTTO, RUDOLF, AND THE NUMINOUS) (1869–1937) in his influential 1917 treatise *Das Heilige* – first published in English in 1923 as *The Idea of the Holy*. Trained not just in philosophy and theology but also in the historical and comparative study of world religions, Otto retrieved an older and arguably more authentically religious concept of holiness in his famous definition of the holy as a "numinous" nonrational reality, a *mysterium tremendum* evoking both fear and fascination in those human beings who come into contact with it. Otto's technical term "numinous" derives from the Latin *numen* (divine power or will) and expresses his conviction that encounters with the holy have an irreducibly distinctive character that cannot be defined or captured adequately in other conceptual categories. If you have not experienced it, then you cannot understand it. Though it is properly subject to rational philosophical analysis, the divine will always exceed human understanding, for it is not merely rational and is indeed beyond rationality. Likewise, though the concept of holiness was eventually and properly extended to include goodness, virtue, righteousness, and justice, it cannot be reduced to ethical categories: the holy is not exclusively moral in Kant's sense but contains "an overplus of meaning." In short, the holy is "wholly other" (*ganz Anderes*) and is best apprehended through intuitive feeling rather than inferential reason (Otto [1917] 1958).

After Otto

Otto's interpretation of holiness exercised enormous influence in twentieth-century philosophy of religion, religious studies, and Christian theology, and became a touchstone for most subsequent treatments, whether cited in agreement or disagreement. While many details of Otto's theory were rejected by later scholars, in philosophy of religion the term "numinous" to describe a certain type of religious experience still remains in play, as does Otto's critique of the Kantian view of holiness as exclusively a matter of the moral perfection of the will. Later theorists in the phenomenology of religion such as Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) paid tribute to Otto even as they revised and expanded his work; and current phenomenological philosophers such as Espen Dahl defend elements of both Otto and Eliade against more recent empirical and reductive analyses of holiness. For Dahl, it is necessary to overcome the dichotomy between sacred and secular and to find holiness in everyday life and aspects of general human culture such as art and music. Even in supposedly secular societies, people still encounter holiness in unexpected ways

and places: "the holy prompts an experience of something *more* or *different* in our otherwise familiar environment" (Dahl 2011, 9).

Analytic philosophers of religion are more inclined towards a metaphysical investigation. Is holiness an ontological property that supervenes on or inheres within a person, an object, or an action; or is it rather a social or relational concept that requires some formal ceremonial act to be instantiated? That is, are some persons, objects, and actions intrinsically holy, whether anyone recognizes it or not, or does holiness always depend upon some public designation such as a performative utterance or ritual? The Jewish philosopher Alan Mittleman argues that both ontological and performative theories of holiness are problematic in isolation, as is the Kantian attempt to reduce the holy to the good – extended into Judaism by figures such as Hermann Cohen (1842–1918). Mittleman's solution is to combine elements of both ontological and performative theories:

> *God* is Israel's way of acknowledging and affirming ultimate value. The ontology in play here is that of the goodness of being. *Holiness is that designation by which the underlying goodness of being is asserted, stabilized, and protected in Jewish life and thought.* (Mittleman 2015, 32)

In a parallel development, Robert Merrihew Adams is a Christian metaphysician, philosopher of religion, and ethicist who has included the holy as a category within his moral philosophy. Defending a form of theistic Platonism built around the Good rather than the Right, Adams recognizes holiness as an important indication of goodness but also sees it in more than human terms. Following Otto, he argues that the divine perfection is manifest in holiness even when it seems to deviate from conventional moral categories:

> The Holy is fascinating, the Holy is beautiful, the Holy is bliss, the Holy is just, … the Holy is love … but "nice" is definitely not the word for it. From a human point of view, the Holy has rough edges. It screams with the hawk and laughs with the hyenas. We cannot comprehend it. It is fearful to us, and in some ways dangerous. (Adams 1999, 52)

Holiness as evidence for God

The post-Otto philosophical discussion of holiness has thus divided into various streams: phenomenological, analytic, and reductive. While the reductive approach construes holiness in purely secular sociological terms, the phenomenological and analytic approaches remain open to holiness as divine manifestation or religious experience, something potentially supernatural and thus significant within our experience or theory of reality. One specific consequence of Otto's rejection of the Kantian definition of holiness that has assumed recent significance is that holiness can again be attributed to persons, places, and things as well as to God. But since it is still seen as derived from God, this mediated holiness has been construed as evidence for divine existence in two different ways.

First, holiness is not directly equivalent to the idea of "enchantment," but debates about the secularization of some human societies and the so-called "disenchantment of the world" through science and instrumental reason created links between older discussions of holiness and more recent discussions about the potential sacramentality of the natural and built environments. For example, David Brown has argued that both natural landscapes and human buildings can be holy or sacred, and thus places in which the world is experienced in religious terms as a site of mediated divine presence. In so doing, Brown argues, such places provide non-inferential experiential evidence against purely naturalistic understandings of the world (Brown 2004).

Second, in the early twentieth century the traditional appeal to saints as evidence for the truth of one religious tradition over another was redeployed as evidence for the existence of God as such. For example, what Basil Mitchell and others call "conspicuous sanctity" (Mitchell 1973, 41) and what Sarah Coakley calls "supreme altruism" (Coakley 2012, 26–27) can be seen as evidence for theism because such holiness arguably does not make sense in a nontheistic theory of the universe. Less ambitiously, Patrick Sherry claims that the existence of saints is a "truth-condition" of Christianity and other theistic religions, in that "the absence of saints would tend to falsify some doctrines" (Sherry 1984, 48). Sherry argues that although the existence of human holiness does not verify theism, the total absence of such holiness would falsify it. Human holiness is thus essential for rational belief in divine reality.

See also: CHRISTIANITY; JUDAISM; KANT, IMMANUEL; OTTO, RUDOLF, AND THE NUMINOUS

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