

WRESTLING WITH HOLINESS

Sharing in the Travail of Creation

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THE QUESTION of holiness is central to both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures. According to the Book of Leviticus, for example, the Lord God says to the people of Israel, 'You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy' (19:2). This command is repeated in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount where his disciples are exhorted to 'be holy as your heavenly Father is holy' (Mt 5:48).

The Second Vatican Council in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, appealed to this Gospel text, amongst others, in order to underscore the call to holiness as central to Jesus' preaching and what it means to be Church (LG n. 40). The will of God is our 'sanctification' (1 Thess 4:3), yet the Council makes abundantly clear that this is not attained through our own works but by God's grace in Jesus Christ in whose person we are made 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet 1:4). To be truly sanctified is to receive the fruits of the Spirit who conforms us to Jesus Christ and empowers us to live the Christian life in this world as the perfection of love.

The truly Christian form of love as self-sacrifice, moreover, has to do with much more than the individual gaining entry into the glory of the heavenly life. As Donald Nicholl reminds us, 'Holiness is not an optional extra to the process of creation but rather the whole point of it' (Nicholl, 1981, 17). To be conformed to Jesus Christ is to place ourselves at the disposition of the whole of creation; we become one with the whole and 're-present' the whole (Nicholl, 1981, 21).

Notwithstanding the foregoing statements, there exists a common tendency amongst Christians to reduce holiness to moral perfection. This is especially the case in some

Protestant groups, although one does not have to look far to find this view well and truly alive amongst the Catholic faithful as well.

The purpose of this essay, which is a sequel of an earlier essay of mine titled 'The New Creation and Doing the Truth' (Novello, 2010), is to show that the idea of the holy contains a surplus of meaning above and beyond the meaning of moral goodness, and that an ontological view of holiness is required to acknowledge and safeguard this surplus of meaning. It will be argued that moral commands can be fulfilled only if we are united with the reality that commands them; that is, 'Only if being precedes that which ought-to-be, can the ought-to-be be fulfilled' (Tillich, 1959, 142).

The essay will begin by presenting Rudolf Otto's idea of the holy as coming to awareness in the human subject through the 'numinous' experience of boundless awe and wonder, which has roots both in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The second part will then discuss Christian responsibility and self-sacrifice, and will highlight in particular Dietrich Bonhoeffer's understanding of the cost of discipleship. The final concluding section will assert the need to appreciate knowledge of holiness as 'connatural,' not natural, and will refute an Aristotelian view of morality and justice which is based upon the principle of proportionality.

The Surplus of Meaning in the Holy

In his celebrated book *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto argues that the word 'holy' is not, as commonly thought, derived from ethics; rather, ethics is derived from the holy. The rational and moral is an essential part of the holy,

but it is not the whole of it.

In order to convey the non-rational (ineffable) surplus of meaning above and beyond the meaning of goodness, Otto adopts a word coined from the Latin *numen*; he speaks of a unique ‘numinous’ category of value and of a ‘numinous’ state of mind which is *sui generis* and irreducible to any other (Otto, 1958, 6–7).

Otto speaks frequently of the ‘feeling’ of the numinous, but this must not be understood as equivalent to emotion; rather, it is intended to convey the sense of a form of awareness that is neither that of ordinary perceiving or ordinary conceiving. The numinous is emphasized as something in the objective realm that transcends the sphere of the ordinary, the usual, the familiar, and awaits our discovery by being ‘felt’ as objective and outside the self (Otto, 1958, 11).

Otto does set himself the task of describing the nature of the subjective feelings that characterize this form of awareness, but that is because it is only through them that it is possible to come to an apprehension of the objective reference of the numinous. Such an apprehension does not occur in the clear light of day, however, but requires interpretation and discernment on the part of the human subject, since the numinous can be named ‘spirit’ or ‘daemon’ or ‘deva,’ or be left without a name (Otto, 1958, 27).

The object to which the numinous consciousness is directed is named by Otto as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. In this expression is contained the positive content (affective states) of the numinous experience, to which the *mysterium* or ‘wholly other’ (Otto, 1958, 26) stands as form. What the adjective *tremendum* conveys is the sense of ‘absolute unapproachability’ and ‘absolute over-poweringness’ or *majestas* of the mystery (Otto, 1958, 19), which produces in the creature the feeling of being but ‘dust and ashes’ and nothingness. This element of daunting awfulness and majesty is expressed biblically as the ‘fear’ or ‘wrath’ of God (Otto,



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1958, 18).

But there is also another aspect in which the mystery shows itself as something uniquely attractive and ‘fascinating’ (Otto, 1958, 31), so that we feel an impulse to turn our gaze towards it and allow ourselves to be captivated and entranced by it. Otto says that on the rational side of the element of fascination are concepts such as ‘love, mercy, pity, comfort’ (Otto, 1958, 31), all of which belong to the natural psychical life of the human being, although here they are thought of as absolute and in completeness, so that there is always a surplus of meaning which is non-rational (ineffable). The *mysterium* is experienced in its positive character as something that bestows upon the human being ‘a beatitude beyond compare’ (Otto, 1958, 33). Because it is something bestowed by the wholly other, this bliss or beatitude is something qualitatively more than the natural feeling of the joy of love or of being comforted by a friend. To use a New Testament text, the ineffable beatitude in view consists in becoming ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Pet 1:4).

St. Paul has this element of fascination in view when he writes, quoting the prophet Isaiah: ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’ (1 Cor 2:9). It is in the religious feeling of longing or desire to be elevated to union with God, as well as in the solemnity of public worship or private devotion, that the moment of fascination is recognized as a living factor. The special character of the mystery of the holy is some-

thing that can be experienced and thus felt, but this feeling is not derivable from any other feeling because it is qualitatively *sui generis*.

The ineffable and uncanny nature of the *mysterium* is the reason why the major religions of the world have separated holy places of worship; to enter the sanctuary is to enter the realm of the wholly other which is distinct from and beyond the world, yet at the same time immanently present to the world as its absolute origin and ultimate end.

Support for Otto's reflections on the mystery of the holy is to be found, for example, in the Book of Genesis. In the story recounting Jacob's dream at Bethel (Gen 28:10–17), when Jacob awakes from his dream he says: 'How terrifying is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' To enter into the house of God is 'terrifying,' yet at the same time it is attractive and alluring inasmuch as it is the 'gate of heaven.' The Letter to the Hebrews also draws attention to the element of dread in the encounter with the holy when it declares, 'It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (10:31).

The encounter with the living God involves dread because it results in the turning of the tables. When we gaze into the eyes of holy people such as Jesus Christ or St. Francis of Assisi, 'we soon find that their eyes are, in turn, gazing into ours, scrutinizing us, bringing out the impurities behind our motives for looking into their lives' (Nicholl, 1981, 9–10). Yet there is also something intrinsically alluring and captivating about holiness, so much so that once we have encountered it there is simply no turning back and we begin a new journey of wrestling with the ineffable mystery of the holy.

To wrestle with the holy entails giving up the pursuit of a secure and comfortable existence, which is why worldly people accustomed to the habit of calculation and the pursuit of pleasure tend to give holy people a wide berth. It is significant that the name 'Jacob' which appears in the Hebrew Scriptures means 'the

supplanter,' but after the experience of wrestling with the Holy One and having prevailed, Jacob's name is changed to 'Israel' which means 'the perseverer with God' (cf. Gen 32:24–28). The people of Israel are those who strive or persevere with God and with humankind, who wrestle with their call to holiness in the midst of the trials and ravages of history, knowing that there is no turning back the tide of God's self-communication which has bound them to the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* in covenant relationship.

Responsibility, Self-Sacrifice, and the Cost of Holiness

Responsibility arises out of 'response' and there can only be response if there is a call from the Holy One who created us for the very purpose of becoming holy by partaking of the divine nature. Holiness, as stated earlier, is the whole point of the process of creation.

Certainly a note is heard in the call to holiness which is daunting and terrifying because the responsibility is awesome and the cost of genuine response is simply beyond our calculation. Yet if we respond faithfully to the call we will discover that responsibility is also tremendously 'bracing' (Nicholl, 1981, 60).

Few, however, respond generously to the call to holiness, because we do not like initiative to be taken out of our own hands and we resist admitting that our calculated plans for attaining comfort and security amount to nought. 'So long as our lives are in our own hands we will never give up the very thing we need above all to give up if we are to be changed, whether that thing is our money, our house, our good opinion of ourselves, our good name, our health or our very life' (Nicholl, 1981, 134).

The heart, not the mind, is the organ for responding to the Holy One, for the heart grows by living out the risk of love and it sees a future that is beyond the reach of the mind and its plans; that is, a future that is essentially open-ended and undetermined. To re-

spond generously and faithfully to the call of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* is an act of total responsibility whereby we take complete hold of ourselves and place ourselves at the disposition of the whole; we no longer live apart from the whole but become one with the whole through self-sacrificing love.

The cost of holiness is nowhere more highlighted than in Jesus' command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Mt 5:44). A few verses later Jesus expresses this radical command in terms of holiness: 'Be holy as your heavenly Father is holy' (Mt 5:48).

This command to love our enemies indicates, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer so keenly stressed, that the Christian life is characterized by the quality of the 'extraordinary,' the 'peculiar,' that which is not 'a matter of course' (Bonhoeffer, 1959, 136). To love our enemies is no ordinary love, it is not a love which can be realized within the realm of natural possibilities, for it is the love of Jesus Christ himself which is the way of the cross, that is, of self-sacrificing love for the sake of the whole. The extraordinary quality of the Christian life is something which the disciples of Jesus Christ *do* inasmuch as it is a partaking in his redemptive passion, that is, a sharing in the victory of divine love over the powers of death in this world of ours.

Needless to say, the command to love our enemies goes against the grain of every natural instinct and desire for self-preservation and self-maintenance by the exercise of power, which is why those who passed by Jesus while he hung on the cross derided him: if he were truly the Son of God then he would come down from the cross; God would save him from his enemies and deliver him from his anguish (cf. Mk 15:29–32; Mt 27:39–44).

This Gospel text indicates how anthropocentric our understanding of divine power really is and why we find the proclamation of the Messiah 'crucified in weakness' (2 Cor 13:4) so scandalous and incredible. The God of the crucified Christ is a God whose power is exercised through the unfathomable depths

of a compassionate love which disarms evil by drawing its sting, a love which requites evil with good (Bonhoeffer, 1959, 127).

The radical command of Jesus to love our enemies leads to another fundamental point concerning the Christian life, which was also emphatically stressed by Bonhoeffer. To be disciples of Jesus does not mean that we follow a universal law or adhere to a programme of ideals worth pursuing; rather, it means to be 'summoned to an exclusive attachment to his person' which affects our whole existence (Bonhoeffer, 1959, 49). Since it is Jesus himself who calls us and we follow him in faith, this implies that grace (the gift of his person) and commandment (obedience to the call) are to be thought of as forming an indissoluble unity.

Bonhoeffer formulated the following proposition to convey this fundamental unity: 'only he who believes is obedient and only he who is obedient believes' (Bonhoeffer, 1959, 54). This proposition intends to dispel any notion of a chronological distinction between faith and obedience to Jesus' command, and insists instead that obedience is constitutive of faith, that faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience. Faith is inauthentic if it does not obey Jesus' command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, which effectively amounts to the obligation to pray and hope for the salvation of all (cf. 1 Tim 2:4).

The Christian life, as Paul emphasizes with great clarity, is none other than the way of the cross, yet this lack of ambiguity regarding the will of God terrifies us, hence we try to make the will of God something that can be defended by logical arguments so as to make it more palatable and easier to accept. For Paul, God mandates the following of Jesus who is defined by the cross. 'We must exhibit the self-sacrificing, empowering love that Christ showed in his crucifixion. We must bear in our bodies the dying of Jesus in order that the life of Jesus may be manifested to the world' (Murphy-O'Connor, 2000, 43).

Holiness, then, costs not less than everything; by the loving sacrifice of our lives we show that the grace of God in Jesus Christ is costly grace. The Christian, as von Balthasar sums up the matter, is ‘planted’ into the one and only form of life which is the crucified form of love, which means that to behold the ‘glory of God in the face of Christ’ (2 Cor 4:6) is to commit ourselves fully to the way of the cross, for *love alone is credible* in this world of ours (Balthasar, 1969, 110).

Knowledge of Holiness as ‘Connatural’

The Gospel of Christ contains an extremely important teaching in respect of knowledge of holiness; namely, conversion of heart and forgiveness of sins are portrayed as concomitant aspects of the Gospel message, rather than as cause and effect or condition and promise (cf. Lk 24:47; Rom 5:8).

From the vantage point of the life, death, and resurrection of the Holy and Just One (cf. Acts 3:14), there is simply no basis for the view that forgiveness is only for those who were sinners but have now become righteous through repentance and the fulfilment of the requirements of the law. The teaching that the sinner must take initiative and do penance in order to receive grace (cf. John the Baptist) has been turned upside down by the person of Jesus, for he brings the glad tidings that the sinner is accepted by God even before any act of repentance. First comes the grace of unmerited forgiveness, then the conversion of heart to love God above all else. What holds in the dawning of the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus is the ‘law of grace’ which engenders a higher righteousness since to be granted unconditional pardon by God involves the granting of forgiveness to others (cf. Lord’s Prayer), even those who persecute us and put us to death.

Holiness should not, then, be reduced to a moral concept or identified with moral perfection, for it is an unfathomable ontological reality. The saint is the ‘divinized’ human per-

son, that is, one who is conformed to the crucified Christ and shares in the very life of God who is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8). To be in union with Him who is the New Creation in person is to be transformed into a new being (Tillich, 1956, 16). It is not simply by knowing God that we shall be transformed into the likeness of God, but rather by being united with God, through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit. Knowledge of holiness, in other words, is ‘connatural,’ not natural (Nicholl, 1981, 11). With connatural knowledge ‘to know’ and ‘to be’ cannot be separate, whereas in natural knowledge they can be separate, which means that transformation is integral to learning about holiness. The *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* breaks into ordinary reality with terrifying and fascinating power, shaking it and driving it beyond itself (the ontological element), yet at the same time the holy is the judgment over all-that-is, it illuminates what ought-to-be and commands what we should be (the moral element). Only, however, if the ‘holiness of being’ precedes the ‘holiness of what ought-to-be’ can the ought-to-be be fulfilled (Tillich, 1957, 56; Tillich, 1959, 142).

In such a perspective, the concept of justice formulated by Aristotle has no place; that is, everyone gets what they deserve according to quantitative measurements (this is the principle of proportionality). Instead, since justification by grace is the highest form of divine justice, which is grounded in divine love, ‘transforming justice has divine character’ (Tillich, 1959, 144). Love accepts that which is unacceptable and renews the old being so that it becomes a new being. Love is creative and creativity includes risk, and it is precisely this awesome character of the holy that ensures an open-ended and undetermined future full of promise. By wrestling with the dynamics of holiness, by placing ourselves at the disposition of the whole and representing the whole in self-sacrificing love, we bear in our bodies the life of the Crucified One for the sake of our world groaning for its salvation (cf. Rom 8:22).

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It is an old saying about any task you undertake that when you have done ninety-five percent of the work you are halfway there. The truth in this paradoxical saying will be acknowledged by anyone who has ever made a piece of furniture or marched thirty miles at a stretch: that last piece of precision work or that last mile feels to take more out of you than all the rest of your efforts put together. The same pattern seems to be repeated in the journey upon which the Holy One draws us: the nearer we get to the Holy One the more intense the demands made upon us if our course is to be sustained.

There is a sense of shock when we are struck by the intensity of the demands made upon us at this last stage, because up till now what we, for our part, have been doing has been mainly disciplinary. That is to say, we have acquired the discipline to begin the task, to assume the responsibility for our own being, learning how to stop, be silent and detached, how to use our daily life as a spiritual exercise and take our share in the community. When a person observes these disciplines steadily, year in and year out, he grows serene and balanced. He appears to an outside observer to be so securely centred that nothing could ever shake him. And then something happens. He is struck by a form of suffering so intense that it shakes the very fibres of his being. To him it feels as though he has no centre left - indeed as though he had never had a centre; and all his hardy won balance seems to have been shattered.

It is at this stage that the seeker is made to feel a complete beginner once more and to realize the truth of Thomas Merton's dictum that no one can become holy without being plunged into the mystery of suffering, a mystery that is insoluble by analytical reasoning ... you are left with a terrible sense of impotence (Nicholl, 1981, 129-30).