

# Précis of *Divine Holiness and Divine Action*

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ABSTRACT: This article is a précis of Mark C. Murphy's *Divine Holiness and Divine Action* (Oxford University Press, 2021), which offers an account of God's holiness and of the difference this view of God's holiness should make to our understanding of divine action.

Louis Berkhof writes,

It does not seem proper to speak of one attribute of God as being more central and fundamental than another; but if this were permissible, the Scriptural emphasis on the holiness of God would seem to justify its selection (2017 [1932], 50).

And yet the contemporary literature on the divine attributes has largely ignored God's holiness. In *Divine Holiness and Divine Action* (Murphy 2021), I aim to get clearer on what God's holiness is, enabling us to put that understanding to work in drawing inferences from truths about God's holiness to truths about what features God must exhibit to count as absolutely holy and truths about what sorts of actions God would (or would not) or could (or could not) perform. In pursuing these aims, I am beginning from a starting point — that God is supremely holy — the truth and obvious centrality of which all Abrahamic theists should endorse.

The first overall aim is to give an account of the concept and nature of holiness. My point of departure is Rudolf Otto's account of the holy in his celebrated *The Idea of the Holy* (1923), a work that has been tremendously influential (though also massively criticized) in religious studies but which has had almost no uptake in philosophy of religion. The enduring core of Otto's work is that the experience of the holy, of a mysterious being that is wholly other, has a dual character, which he characterizes as of a being that is both *fascinans* and *tremendum*. The best way to appropriate Otto's work for an account of the nature of holiness is to characterize that nature of holiness *normatively* in terms of what *merits* this sort of dual response. Roughly, for God to be holy is for God to exhibit those features that make fitting both an overwhelming *attraction* to God by all beings distinct from God and the *separation* from God of those who are in some way of limited goodness.

The second overall aim is to give an account of what features a being must exhibit in order to make that distinctive dual response to that being a fitting response. The thesis that I defend is that, at least in the case of entirely unqualified holiness, we cannot make sense out of these reasons and the seemingly disparate responses that they call for unless those features constitute or entail absolute perfection. Unqualified holiness entails the perfection of the being who possesses it, and so to ascribe holiness to God is to commit oneself to an Anselmian account of God as an absolutely perfect being.

The third overall aim of the book is to exhibit the fruitfulness of this notion of divine holiness in addressing disputed theological questions. In order to think well about questions

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of divine action — what God would (or would not), or must (or must not), do — we need a defensible framework or frameworks of divine action, a scheme or schemes by which divine action can be explained and predicted. The standard frameworks for divine action employed in contemporary philosophy of religion are the morality and love frameworks — respectively, that necessarily God is motivated by the norms of morality and that necessarily God is motivated by maximal love. I articulate a rival framework for divine action, the holiness framework, according to which God is motivated to act in ways that are responsive to God's own value by keeping distance from that which is deficient, defective, or otherwise imperfect. I aim to articulate such a framework not only as an attractive addition to, but also as an alternative to, the morality and love frameworks. I aim also to show how it generates distinct approaches to the longstanding problems of divine action regarding creation, incarnation, atonement, and salvation. Further, it provides a resource for a more adequate understanding of a central theme in the Christian account of God's dealings with the world, which is that God's interaction with the world exhibits a striking sort of humility.

The book's argument is carried out over an introduction and eleven chapters.

In the Introduction, I make clear some of the assumptions that I am working under. First, I assume *realism* about holiness, the view that holiness judgments describe, and that some such positive judgments are veridical. Second, I assume — along with the consensus of Scripture scholars on the how the relationship between God's holiness and the holiness of creatures is characterized in both testaments — that only God's holiness is primary; all other holiness is derivative from God's holiness. I call this derivative holiness 'secondary' holiness.

In Chapter 1 I consider various conceptions — some prominent in theological literature, some advanced in philosophy of religion — of holiness. Some theologians have held that to be holy is simply to be God, or to be divine; I argue that even if the property *being holy* eventually is identified with the property *being God*, an account of holiness should provide also an account of what is distinctive about conceptualizing God in terms of holiness (rather than, say, in terms of omnipotence or sovereignty). Some Scripture scholars identify holiness with *separateness*; this also seems in a way right, but unless we are given some accounting of the sort of separateness at issue, the account is uninformative, and various ways of trying to spell it out (e.g. in terms of what is *set apart* by God, or what is *wholly other*) end up being similarly uninformative or clearly different from holiness. The Kantian notion of holiness as moral perfection is also rejected: not only does it seem possible to affirm God's holiness while denying that God is properly evaluable by moral standards, there is a strong consensus among Scripture scholars that neither the priestly nor prophetic conception of divine holiness is reducible to moral perfection. The only two sustained attempts by philosophers in the past fifty years or so to give a systematic account of holiness — that offered by O.R. Jones (to be holy is to exhibit divine personality; Jones 1961) and that offered by Quentin Smith (to be holy is to be the most exalted being in a privileged genus; Smith 1988) are also failures.

In Chapter 2, I propose that we build an account of primary holiness — the underivative holiness God exhibits — that takes as its starting point Otto's theory of the experience of holiness. While there is much in Otto that is worth rejecting or bracketing — his appeal to the primacy not just of experience but of first-person experience, his account of holiness as 'nonrational,' the Kantian categories within which he frames his view, his speculative history of religion — his idea that the distinctive mark of the holy is its involving both a *fascinans* aspect and a *tremendum* aspect is both plausible and fruitful. The *fascinans* aspect is that the holy is experienced as overwhelmingly attractive. The *tremendum* aspect is that the holy is experienced as repelling, but in a normative sense — one experiences the holy as something with respect to which one is not fit to be in its presence, and so one is out-of-place by drawing

too near. I argue that this is the basis for a plausible theory of the nature of the holy: to be holy is to be a being with respect to which such responses are *appropriate*.

Chapter 3 defends an argument from divine holiness to divine perfection. The intuitive idea is that as holiness requires a sort of ‘value gap’ between the holy being and others — it is the greatly superior value of the holy being that makes union with that being desirable for other beings, and makes intimate unity with the holy being at some level unfitting — a *necessarily* holy being will have to be infinitely and unqualifiedly valuable. For otherwise there could be beings other than God that approach the holy being’s value, at least in certain contexts, in such a way that union with God will not be overwhelmingly desirable and extremely intimately union unfitting. I consider the case that the God of the Bible must be thought of as absolutely holy, and note that appeal to holiness, while not ruling out other ways of trying to argue to an Anselmian God on the basis of Scripture, is nevertheless in some ways a more promising route than others extant.

One of the desiderata that a theory of God’s holiness, primary holiness, must meet is that it must be possible to offer an account of how secondary holiness — the holiness of beings other than God — derives from it. The aim of Chapter 4 is to exhibit that possibility by sketching a plausible account. It is not sufficient, I say, to give a model of how the holiness of nondivine objects derives from *God*. One must provide an account of how secondary holiness is to be explained in terms of *God’s holiness*. I argue that holiness functions in the manner of Aristotelian *pros hen* homonymy, in which there is an explanatorily central property and other properties called by that name are thus denominated because they stand in a relevant explanatory relationship to the central notion. (Aristotle’s standard example is ‘healthy’: the central case is the healthy living thing, and others things (organs, activities, diets, exercise regimens, appearances) are called healthy because they constitute, serve, are signs of, etc. healthiness in the organism.) While I think that there are indeed multiple such relationships to holiness (as there are for health), the main derivative sense of holiness applied to nondivine things amounts to being an object such that intimate unity with it *counts as* intimate unity with God, and so one has reason to desire standing in those relationships to the holy objects while also being unfit to stand in those relationships unless one is in the normatively appropriate condition for doing so.

Chapters 5 and 6 articulate a theory of divine action framed in light of God’s absolute holiness. In order to think through questions involving divine action, one needs a ‘framework for divine action,’ a scheme that enables one to explain and predict what God does. The objective of Chapter 5 is to downgrade the plausibility of the two standard frameworks for divine action in the contemporary philosophy of religion literature: the morality framework and the love framework. The morality framework holds that God, being morally perfect, necessarily acts in accordance with a set of universal moral standards. The love framework holds that God, being perfectly loving, necessarily exhibits the desires constitutive of love toward creatures to their maximum. While not attempting decisive refutations of these frameworks (which I criticize in greater depth in Murphy 2017), I argue that (a) there is a very strong basis to think that God does not necessarily have normative reasons to adhere to the norms of morality that bind us humans, and that only if God were to have such reasons could such norms apply to God, and (b) that the view of God as necessarily maximally loving seems at odds with the norms for perfection in love, relies on a false view about the way that our desires give us reasons to act, and founders when confronted with the difficulty of specifying adequately an intrinsic maximum for being loving.

The aim of undermining confidence in the morality and love frameworks is to help us to take seriously the possibility, developed in Chapter 6, that the only framework *necessarily*

characterizing divine action is the *holiness* framework, on which divine action responds appropriately to God's *own* perfection by being motivated to keep what is deficient, defective, and imperfect at a distance from God. The more imperfect the being, the stronger the reasons God has to refrain from intimate unifying relationships with that being; the closer the intimate relationship, the stronger the reason God has for refraining from that intimate unifying relationship with a given imperfect creature. I argue that such a framework makes intelligible our response to God as holy and fits well within our ordinary practical thought about ways in which some actions, things, and relationships can be beneath one. This is not *at all* to deny that God acts on reasons of love; rather, the view is that reasons of love are not reasons that require God to act — they are, in Joshua Gert's categorization, "justifying" rather than "requiring" reasons, reasons that God may act on but need not, even in the absence of reasons to the contrary (Gert 2004, 19-39). God acts on reasons of love toward creatures contingently, if at all.

The remaining chapters of the book explore how some perennial problems regarding divine action in the Christian context appear when we take the holiness framework to be the sole framework necessarily characterizing divine action while taking God's reasons of love to be no more than contingently acted upon by God. The aim of Chapter 7 is to explore how acceptance of the holiness framework along with the rejection of the morality and love frameworks transforms how we think of perennial problems of theism, including whether God necessarily creates, what sort of tension there is between God's existence and the existence (and extent, etc.) of evil, and whether a perfect God could remain hidden to creatures. With respect to creation's modal status: I argue that there are powerful arguments from the morality and love frameworks for necessitarianism about creation, sufficient to make God's creating the default, departure from which requires adequate divine reasons to the contrary. By contrast: under the holiness framework, the default status is *against* creating. Because creation is an intimate relationship between God and other things — God brings into being, conserves, concurs with, and has intimate knowledge of all other existing things — and all such other things are imperfect, the holiness framework entails that God has strong standing reason not to create at all. Since God creates, God must have *some* reasons to do so, and I identify these with justifying reasons of love which God need not, but did, act on. With respect to evil: the rejection of the morality and love frameworks undermines the problem of evil as typically formulated, which challenges the existence of God as perfect decisionmaker — given the evil of the world, there could not be an all-powerful God who chooses perfectly (in accordance with the demands of morality or maximal love). The problem of evil, under the holiness framework, is not about evil's *justification*, but just about God's having to be intimately related to it, given its existence: the holiness framework entails that God has motivation not to be intimately related to what is evil, but God has to be intimately related to it, given its existence and God's intimate relationship to all that exists. With respect to hiddenness: the problem of divine hiddenness is framed in terms of God as characterized by the love framework (though it can also be framed in terms of the morality framework); given that framework, the default setting seems to be that God would reveal Godself to be known more broadly than God in fact has. But with the rejection of the love framework and acceptance of the holiness framework, the default would reverse: since *being known by* is an intimate relationship, God would have reason to remain hidden rather than known by us limited, imperfect persons. God's willingness to be related to this world is, I argue here, against the reasons given by divine holiness, and are accounted for only through the reasons of love for us that God graciously, contingently acted upon.

Chapter 8 addresses the bearing of the holiness framework on the doctrine of the Incarnation. It develops two lines of argument. The first concerns the existence of a very fundamental normative problem of Christology that has been neglected in favor of a metaphysical problem. The Chalcedonian Definition of the Incarnation holds that Jesus Christ is one person with two natures: divine and human. What is taken to be the basic philosophical problem regarding the Incarnation is the metaphysical problem of how this is so much as possible (Cross 2011, 453). I argue that there is an equally fundamental problem that is not metaphysical but normative, rooted in the holiness framework (see also Adams 1999, 95). Since assumption of a nature is the most intimate relationship that a divine person could stand in with respect to a created being, and all created beings are dramatically limited, it looks like a divine person would have overwhelmingly strong reasons against becoming incarnate. The solution to the normative problem is familiar from earlier chapters: because God has justifying reasons of love toward creatures, then God can — either for the benefit of creation generally or for the specific aim of redeeming sinners — choose to accept the unfittingness resultant upon becoming incarnate for the sake of creatures. The second line of argument concerns the relevance of the holiness framework to the claim that Christ is not just sinless but impeccable — that not only does the incarnate God not in fact sin, but also that in any world in which God becomes incarnate, the incarnate God does not sin. I reject a number of accounts of impeccability: that it requires no explanation, that it has a trivial explanation due to the divinity of the incarnate God, that it can be explained in terms of the ‘mechanics’ of assumption (that is, what happens metaphysically when a human nature is assumed by God), and that it can be explained in terms of the aims God has in becoming incarnate. I argue that a better explanation is from the holiness framework: that given the holiness framework, it is unsurprising that God would be unwilling to enter into the *most intimate* sort of relationship possible with a creaturely nature that exhibits the *worst sort* of defect, that is, sin.

The aim of Chapter 9 is to contrast what we would expect and require from a theory of the Atonement if we take divine action to be governed by the holiness framework and if we don’t. I proceed by closely examining Eleonore Stump’s recent account in her book *Atonement* (2019), which is a self-consciously unqualifiedly and exclusively love framework account. I argue that Stump’s way of dividing theories of the Atonement into ‘Thomistic’ and ‘Anselmian’ views, based on whether the obstacle to union with God is in us or in God (respectively), is deeply misleading; rather, the appropriate distinction is between views that take the obstacle to be psychological (as Stump’s own view does) or normative (as satisfaction and penal substitution views do). I attempt to show that, by Stump’s own lights, the ‘stain on the soul’ — the way in which past sin, even if repented of, is an obstacle to union with God — requires a normative treatment, and that the holiness framework provides a plausible explanation as to why this would be: so long as the stain on the soul remains, one’s imperfection normatively precludes the fuller unity with God through indwelling that is constitutive of our good. Without attempting anything like a theory of the Atonement, I sketch how one might take the suffering death of Christ to be central to the overcoming of the normative obstacle constituted by the stain on the soul.

In Chapter 10 I reflect on how appeal to the holiness framework should shape our understanding of the traditional Christian doctrine that there are two possible final destinies for humans: Heaven or Hell. The holiness framework raises problems for the notion of a populated Heaven: given the unfittingness of intimate creaturely union with God, and that our heavenly good consists in being in unimaginably close unity with God, how can this be a real possibility for any of us? I argue that Heaven should be understood *epektatically*. Everlasting life, on this view, is a continual perfecting of the human in a way that makes even closer union

with God more fitting, which in turn makes further transformation toward perfection possible. The holiness framework, by contrast, helps to explain the possibility of a populated Hell, that is, a condition in which some humans are eternally separated from God. Love framework ways of understanding divine motivation make the rejection of a populated Hell nearly irresistible. Efforts to show that exclusion from heaven is possible even within the love framework — which must claim that that exclusion is an inevitable consequence of the creature's own psychological constitution and its orientation toward evil — seem to rest on an implausible human psychology or implausible claims about the limitations of love in the face of willed alienation. Efforts to show that exclusion from heaven can be explained by the morality framework, in retributivist terms, founder in the face of the proportionality constraint on just retribution. The holiness framework makes intelligible why persons would be permanently excluded from intimate union with God: some humans' unfitness for union with God could be so extreme as to preclude not only God's being in union with them, but also God's even appropriately acting so as to aid effectively in their transformation. If humans can become thus settled in evil, they can find themselves in a no-way-out: they are too unfit not only for divine company but even for effective divine aid.

The final chapter, Chapter 11, considers a theme that has emerged over the previous four chapters: divine humility. It is plain from Scripture that we should think that there is some sense in which God exhibits humility: the Son exhibits humility in taking on a human nature and being obedient unto death (Philippians 2:8). But it seems plain that if the argument of Chapters 7-10 is correct, then the story of creation is throughout a story of divine humility. In making this claim, we require a conception of humility that is compatible with its being a feature exhibited by God. There are some views of humility in which this would not be possible, for such conceptions of humility (for example, Snow 1995 and Wielenberg 2004, 102-112) involve the recognition of one's own limitations, weaknesses, and dependence, none of which God exhibits. But there are conceptions of humility that do allow for humility to be exhibited even by a being of unlimited greatness. One such view well-suited to this task is the conception of humility as a disposition not to invoke reasons of status when deciding whether to act for the sake of other worthwhile ends (a view defended in Roberts and Wood 2003). For us humans, it is often true that alleged reasons of status are not real reasons at all — rather, humility requires clear-sighted recognition that what one might take to be reasons of status are not even good reasons. But in the divine case, the reasons of status are genuine, the very reasons invoked in the holiness framework. God is humble insofar as God has not stood on God's status — which God would have been perfectly reasonable to do — by refraining from creating at all; or, having created, by staying aloof and not revealing Godself to us; or, even if revealed to us, refraining from becoming incarnate as one of us. Instead God has done these things — not acting on reasons of status, but on reasons of love, reasons to promote the good of creatures. It is a further positive feature of the holiness framework that it enables us to capture better the way in which God's relationship to creation is that of nearly unthinkable humility.

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