

All Shall Love Me and Despair! Murphy on Divine Holiness

Sameer Yadav
Westmont College

ABSTRACT: In *Divine Holiness and Divine Action* Mark Murphy seeks to establish four key claims: first, that divine holiness consists in a supreme desirability of creaturely union with God and a commensurately supreme creaturely unfittingness for that union; second, that this holiness-concept is grounded in a value-gap between God and creatures which by default motivates God to withdraw from creatures rather than love us or seek our welfare; third, that the love and concern for creaturely welfare exhibited in God's creating and redeeming is a contingent and freely chosen override of the default stance of holiness; and fourth, that God should be thanked and emulated in virtue of exhibiting a kind of humility in overriding the demands of holiness for our sakes, though not worshipped or praised for this humility, since these latter attitudes should be reserved for necessary rather than contingent features of God. I argue that each of these four claims is mistaken, and further that it is a good thing they are mistaken, because if Murphy's account were right the appropriate response to God would be neither worship nor thanks but rather abject despair.

Those familiar with J. R. R. Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring* will recall that moment when Frodo the Hobbit encounters the incomparably beautiful Elf-Queen Galadriel and offers to her the one Ring of Power. Frodo hopes to rid himself of his responsibility to keep it from the evil designs of Sauron, the Dark Lord who relentlessly seeks it to impose his tyrannical rule. Weighing most heavily on Frodo was simply the burden of holding the Ring in his possession. Its allure of incomprehensible greatness uniquely corrupts all those who carry it, and at the prospect of becoming Ring-Lord, Galadriel exclaims,

I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!" (Tolkien 2012, 410)!

Becoming supremely great, Galadriel supposed, would consist in being utterly desirable and yet fearsomely unapproachable, thereby unleashing upon all who gaze upon her the most exquisite pain of languishing in longing and terror. Tolkien highlights Galadriel's corruption as an illustration of how the Ring's influence turns out to be more disastrous when distorting the goodness of its virtuous bearers than when amplifying the evil of its wicked bearers. In the margins of a drafted letter exploring how the Ring might affect the good and wise wizard Gandalf, Tolkien explains that whereas Sauron's corruption would have resulted in evil, it would nevertheless have been an evil that "left 'good' clearly distinguishable from it." Gandalf

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as Ring-Lord, on the other hand, would have been far worse because, like Galadriel, he “would have made good detestable and seem evil” (Tolkien 2000, 333).¹

In *Divine Holiness and Divine Action*,² Mark Murphy argues that for God to be holy is for God to possess, maximally and absolutely, just what the corrupted Galadriel wanted for herself: a desirability by all others for intimate union that is infinitely needful and attractive but also a superiority utterly disinclined to grant them that intimacy. I suspect that Murphy would agree with Tolkien that for any creaturely agent—whether elf, hobbit, human, or angel—wishing for holiness in this sense (desiring what Murphy calls “primary holiness”) would indeed constitute a corruption. But in a divine agent, on Murphy’s account, primary holiness is a necessary consequence of the value-gap between God and all of God’s creatures. A chasm yawns between God’s unlimited perfect goodness and our limited goodness. On our side of the gap, God’s absolute perfection merits our desire to be united with God even while our limited perfections and defects make us utterly unfit for union with God. On God’s side, a recognition of our unfitness for union necessarily affords God a default rational motivation to withdraw or keep distance from us. It follows that a holy God has no default obligation to love us or secure our welfare but rather sufficient reason to flee from any personal entanglement with us.

Any action on God’s part to draw near to us, whether in creating or redeeming, will thus necessarily be supererogatory on God’s part.³ We must accordingly regard everything that we in fact find a holy God doing to secure our welfare or seek union with us as a matter of God’s free and contingent willingness to *override* these default reasons to withdraw from us. God’s holiness therefore gives us a powerful defeater for the familiar objections to theism we find in the problems of evil or hiddenness. Those alleged problems wrongly assume that a perfect being’s goodness or love would necessarily require such a being to seek union with us and secure our welfare. On Murphy’s picture, by contrast, God’s refusal to seek our fellowship or flourishing is just what we should expect if indeed God is not merely good and loving, but also holy. Apart from God’s condescension, we not only would not but *should not* exist—sustaining us in being ill-befits a holy God. Moreover, having come to exist, only God’s prerogative to intervene on a default demand to reject us could save us from the appropriate consequence unleashed by God’s absolute holiness: that all should love God and despair.

A Christian story affirms this picture, on Murphy’s reading, but it goes on to say that God *has* so intervened, through Christ’s incarnation and atonement, freely determining to act contrary to God’s own holiness to secure the intimate union that constitutes our supreme good. Explaining the motivational structure behind God’s redemptive acts in this way has a counterintuitive consequence: while we cannot rightly *blame* God for any withdrawal that persists in our experiences of (e.g.) evil, divine hiddenness, or everlasting hell (since such withholdings of divine presence just conform to the demands of God’s holy nature), neither can we rightly *praise* God in virtue of these redemptive acts of humble condescension. After all, Murphy argues, such acts are not rooted fundamentally in any necessary features of who or what God is that grounds our praise, but rather in wholly contingent features of divine

¹ See the marginal note on Letter 246.

² Hereafter, I will refer to page numbers in this book (i.e., Murphy 2021) using parenthetical citation in the main body of the text.

³ Here I take “supererogatory” acts to be acts that serve another’s interests in a way that goes beyond what is required or owed to that other. Murphy might object to this way of putting things, since he takes it that God does not owe us anything, and God cannot do more than what God is obligated to do for our sakes when God has no such obligations. But if God owes us nothing, then this just means that *any* act that serves our interests will be a supererogatory act, because every such act goes beyond what God owes us, which is nothing.

freedom—God might have freely expressed Godself equally well by refusing to redeem us. While we therefore ought not worship God in virtue of God’s redeeming acts, we can admire God’s status-denying beneficence as a norm to be *emulated*, a paradigm for our own status-denying relationships in service of one another’s welfare.

What should theists, and particularly Christian theists, make of this account of divine holiness? At the very least, it is extraordinarily creative and elegant in the way it draws together Rudolf Otto’s classic treatment of the simultaneous attraction and recoil of holiness experiences (the *fascinans* and *tremendum*), a negotiation of contemporary issues in perfect being theology, and some recent biblical scholarship on holiness. It is also admirably clear and rigorous in its argumentation (which should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Murphy’s work). But what is likely to strike many readers as it did me is just how austere the account is. One could be forgiven for agreeing with Tolkien’s judgment in the case of perfect beings no less than that of good elves or wizards: if Murphy’s theory is correct, and divine holiness renders the limits of creaturely goodness repellant to an absolutely perfect God, then this would seem to make divine perfection detestable, a feature of God more fittingly eliciting our lament and anguish than our worship.⁴ Fortunately for us, there are some very good reasons to think that the theory is not correct, and the focus of this essay will be to elucidate some of them.

In what follows I will decompose Murphy’s account into four distinct claims: 1) the proper concept of holiness consists of the desirability/unfittingness schema; 2) the divine/creaturely value-gap merits that schema and affords God default “requiring reasons” to withdraw from creatures; 3) God’s creative and redemptive acts can be explained as God’s justified overriding of the default; and 4) the appropriate human response to this structure of God’s acting humbly in service of our welfare is gratitude and emulation not praise. Each of these four claims is a necessary component of the overall view, and each successive component presupposes the plausibility or correctness of the previous one. I will take up each claim respectively in the four sections that follow and raise some objections that I take to be undercutting defeaters of that claim.

1. Holiness: Fixing the Concept

Murphy fixes a concept of holiness phenomenologically, by looking to the “attitudinal response characteristic of the encounter with the holy” (7). On the assumption that the God of Abraham is a holy being and that scripturally attested experiences of the Abrahamic God as holy are veridical, what are such experiences like—what features mark them out distinctively as *holiness*-experiences (22-23)? In order to identify the relevant features, Murphy looks to Otto’s classic treatment of the phenomenology of holiness in *Idea of the Holy* (i.e., Otto 1923). But whereas Otto characterizes holiness experiences in terms of “numinous” encounter with the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, Murphy seizes more narrowly on Otto’s picture of the paradoxical duality of the holy as that which both attracts (qua *fascinans*) and repels (qua *tremendum*). Little of Otto’s characterization remains in Murphy’s reworking of it. He reduces the range of responses to the holy that Otto canvases to two relations of fittingness for intimate union, describing the attractive dimension (*fascinans*) as the supreme desirability of intimate union with God and the repellant dimension (*tremendum*) as a feeling of proportionally

⁴ For a review that presses the question of worship-worthiness, see (Mariña 2021).

supreme unfitness for that desired union, such that the greater the intimacy desired, the greater the impression of unfitness for it (47). I found much of interest to engage with in Murphy's appropriation of Otto (particularly in what he decides to leave behind and why). But given Murphy's stated goals, the most fundamental evaluative question to ask is whether he has correctly identified the relevant concept of holiness to be explained by a theological theory—a concept that succeeds in capturing the scripturally attested “veridical experiences of the God of Abrahamic theism as a holy being” (22).⁵ On this score I think Murphy's candidate concept fails.

The one feature of his phenomenology that Murphy needs most to get his account up and running is a scriptural attestation to holiness-experiences that veridically recognize our mere creaturely finitude as sufficient to make us unfit for a form of intimacy with God that would nevertheless be supremely good for us. But of the various features of holiness-experience he purports to find in the scriptural witness, this one is the most dubiously attested, if we can find it there at all. Murphy needs this particular kind of unfitness for intimate union with God because if our sense of unfitness arises from our defects or sinfulness alone, we would not need to appeal to the value-gap between absolute and limited perfection to account for it; the feelings of impropriety in our desired union would not (veridically) convey any inherent inaptitude for such union simply because we are limited creatures. The incompatibility between divine perfection and defective goodness (evil) would be sufficient to account for any such sense of our inaptitude constituent in holiness experiences. Perhaps it would still be the case that an absolute/limited perfection gap nevertheless *exists* and even that it affords reasons for God to withdraw from whatever is limited in goodness. But on a phenomenological approach to identifying a holiness concept, an essentially creaturely inaptitude for intimate union with God would not be a necessary or defining feature of scriptural experiences of holiness, and hence identifying such a gap as a possible explainer for that kind of experience would be irrelevant to fixing a *scriptural concept* of holiness.

So is Murphy's schema for this sort of holiness-experience scripturally attested? I don't suppose we have much trouble finding scriptural attestation to experiences of what Murphy, following Otto, calls “creature-consciousness”—the sense of one's experiencing oneself as minuscule or “as nothing” in the presence of a holy God (43; cf. Otto 1923, 20-21). Indeed, we can find many paradigmatic experiences of this sort, such as Moses in the Sinai theophanies or Job before the divine whirlwind. The trouble is that what Murphy needs from these experiences is much more stringent than mere exemplification of creature-consciousness. Instead, to find an instance of his schema he would need to find a case in which (i) this sense of one's finitude being overwhelmed, dwarfed, or “outclassed” by a sense of divine majesty is also (ii) an experience of one's *unfitness for intimacy* of some kind with God in virtue of one's finitude, and further that (iii) the unfitness one feels is an *unfitness-for* a particular form of intimate union with God that the subject supposes is *desirable* for them.

We do not in fact find any scriptural encounter with God in which all three of these conditions are met. Instead, creature-consciousness seems to me to figure into a different kind of pattern of holiness experience. In one sort of case we find such experiences meeting the first condition but not the second or third: expressions of being profoundly humbled by divine

⁵ Such scriptural attestations are a crucial source of evidence for Murphy's account because he proposes to treat them as “authoritative both with respect to the nature and the concept of holiness” (22).

splendor,⁶ but without any trace of frustrated desire or disqualification from any particular form of intimacy with God (e.g., Psalm 8). In another sort of case, such as Job’s confrontation with God, we find the first and second conditions being satisfied, but not the third. Here the Moses theophanies are paradigmatic. As many patristic and medieval commentators recognized,⁷ what we find in the case of God’s appearances to Moses is that Moses’s feeling unfit for union with God is due to the fact that it is *God* who is not fit—and hence not desirable—for certain forms of creaturely intimacy.⁸ In the encounter between God and Moses in Exodus 33:18-20, God’s explanation for refusing to grant Moses a greater intimacy with the divine goodness is precisely that its goodness *simpliciter* would have been bad *for Moses*: “You cannot see my face, because no human can see me and live” (33:20). Likewise, Job is *corrected* for presuming that God was an appropriate object for the kind of intimacy Job desired. God reveals a human desire for exposure to God’s unlimited or unaccommodated goodness to be inappropriate, “too wonderful” (Job 42:3),⁹ an ill-founded or *ersatz* desire not a veridical one. Contrary to Murphy’s required third condition, intimacy with the absolute perfection of a Holy God is not in fact supremely desirable for humans but fatally *dangerous* for us.

While we haven’t the space for a more substantial elaboration here, this encounter belongs to a wider scriptural picture of the characteristic attitudinal responses to the encounter with divine holiness that exhibits a schema contrary to Murphy’s—one in which God’s fitness for intimacy with us is necessarily limited (corresponding to our finitude) and our unfitness for intimacy with God is contingently due to our defects and sin. This pattern is also what explains the divine introduction of a system and apparatus of *mediation* that can both appropriately “modulate” the divine presence to become fitting for us and us for it—whether by the cloud on Sinai, the divine hand covering Moses in the cleft of the rock, the cultus, or the Incarnation. God’s holiness is whatever accounts for this divine and creaturely unfitness for intimacy with one another together with whatever accounts for the necessary mediation that makes divine/creaturely union possible. The scriptural idea that God’s holiness demands ours, as Mary Douglas (1966) emphasized, is the idea that God’s holiness is manifest to us in the “wholeness” of a system of mediated intimacy that brings God and creatures together into a single carefully regulated social order. While clearly existing for our benefit, every manifestation of the divine presence modulated by the order also carries traces of God’s transcendent or unmitigated glory while every human response brings the possibility of a transgression of the mediating order—either of which if sufficiently unleashed would bring creaturely chaos and disaster in their wake. The *mysterium* that so centrally characterizes Otto’s account and that Murphy neglects is characteristic of scriptural holiness experiences not only because a sense of mystery or felt ignorance is a necessary constituent in the feelings of wonder and awe associated with holiness experiences (see Fuller 2006), but because such experiences track the conceptual connection between God’s holiness and the self-accommodation of God’s transcendent glory *for our sakes*.

Encounters with God’s holiness were accordingly understood to be encounters with a majestic goodness or terrible beauty that comes to us from beyond the boundaries of our finitude where, precisely for our own good, we are not permitted to go seeking the unmediated

⁶ Indeed, manifestations of divine holiness are much more frequently and reliably correlated than manifestations of holiness and creature-consciousness. See, e.g., 1 Chron. 16:29; 2 Chron. 20:21; Psa. 29:2; Psa. 96:9.

⁷ For a paradigmatic example, see Gregory of Nyssa’s *The Life of Moses* (1978).

⁸ See Murphy’s discussion on desirability-for as reducible to fitness-for (39).

⁹ The significance of the whirlwind encounter is controversial in Jewish and Christian commentary traditions. For a reading of Job emphasizing God’s unfitness see (Yadav Forthcoming).

(or improperly mediated) intimacy with God that was denied to Moses (see Eichrodt 1961, 270-281). So I suspect Murphy is wrong to suppose that a scriptural concept of holiness includes God's absolute or unlimited desirability for creaturely intimacy, and further wrong to suppose that creaturely finitude of itself makes one unfit for the kind of intimacy with God that finite creatures ought to desire. But by misidentifying the concept of holiness, the rest of Murphy's argument turns out to be an attempted explanation of the wrong target concept.

2. The Default Divine Motivation

Even so, suppose we nevertheless ignore these problems and grant Murphy his holiness schema. He argues that God's desirability for intimacy and our corresponding unfitness for that intimacy is an attitude that is merited by the value-gap between God's absolute perfection and our limited perfection. His reasoning goes like this: the absurdly large differential in goodness or excellence between God and creatures implies a status difference between God and creatures. God's unlimited goodness places God on a level above limited creaturely goodness, and those of differing statuses merit treatment that befits their status (112-113). But it can be unfitting or inappropriate for those of higher statuses to enter into intimate relations or become unified with those beneath their status (113). Examples of this inappropriateness include neophyte philosophers in a seminar room who rightly feel out of place with others intellectually superior to them (42), or novice tennis players rightly feeling it would be "obscene" to attempt a championship game with a pro (116). Given God's absurdly elevated status in every category including one of interpersonal union, God has reasons of status to find any relationship whatever with creatures similarly inappropriate or obscene, whether creating them or entering into intimate relations with them (118). These are, further, "requiring" reasons—motivational constraints that God has by default—due to a rational requirement God has to recognize and respond expressively to God's own value (121-122). Just as we should suppose that the tennis player would need a justifying reason to flout their default status as a pro and debase or degrade themselves by playing a shockingly inferior player, we should suppose something analogous about God's relation to all finite creatures precisely in virtue of their finite goodness as compared to God's absolute perfection.

In carving out this path of reasoning, Murphy moves far too quickly from the facts about God's superior status to the requiring reasons this affords God to withdraw from creatures. It might be that the value-gap doesn't imply a status differential at all, if divine and creaturely goodness cannot be plotted on the same scale and God's value is truly *incomparable*. But even if the value-gap does imply a status-differential it does not follow from this that unitive relations with creatures would be inappropriate. Rather, whether or not a relationship between two parties of differing statuses counts as inappropriate depends entirely on what kind of relationship it is. It is therefore telling that in all of the cases that Murphy considers, the relevant relationship consists in a shared activity structured around a normative expectation that participants are peers of roughly equivalent excellence, goodness, or skill. Status differences introduce impropriety by flouting that norm and hence failing to respond rightly in that context to the greater value of the superior party. Murphy's argument then proceeds *a fortiori* by suggesting that God's absolute superiority will introduce this same sort of impropriety in every possible context of shared activity between God and creatures (118). But that is wrong. It will only introduce impropriety into all those contexts of shared activity, unitive relations, or intimacy which require roughly *symmetrical* goodness, skill, or excellence

between the relevant parties to that activity. There are, however, plenty of intimate relationships premised on asymmetric status and these are perfectly adequate to satisfy expressive norms of status recognition.

If, for example, we were to change the example such that the relationships between the relevant parties were those of instructor and pupil—a philosophy professor with a neophyte student, a pro tennis player offering a beginner’s lesson, a parent showing a child how to tie a shoe—then the alleged impropriety of a status difference between the two parties in the relationship disappears. Such a difference is instead appropriate, and just what the relationship leads us to expect. Asymmetric status relationships not only assume but *normatively require* a status difference in order to be appropriately realized. My spouse is my equal at tying shoes, and our roughly comparable status would introduce its own impropriety or “obscenity” into the (patronizing) activity of my teaching her how to tie shoes. Along with symmetrical status relationships, asymmetrical status relationships can just as easily be unitive and intimate and involve shared activity, it’s just that the union and intimacy of the activity in question incorporates those of differing statuses in a way that preserves and respects their differential excellences, values, or skills. But quite obviously, God’s unitive relationship with creatures does not purport to be a symmetrical one. Rather, the scriptural witness conveys a human relationship to God grounded in an asymmetric relationship of reflecting or imaging God that involves demands of ritually mediated worship, instruction, and personal and social formation.¹⁰ Far from acting contrary to the status differential between God and creatures, every dimension of divine/creaturely relation in the scriptural witness in fact inherently assumes an expectation of God’s superior status and betokens (to and for Godself as well as communicatively and symbolically for creatures) a satisfaction of the rational demand to expressively recognize God’s own value.

But if God’s exalted status affords God requiring reasons *either* to withdraw from creating and engaging with creatures *or* to create and engage creatures in some sort of fundamentally asymmetrical status relationship, and the latter is what we actually find in the scriptural witness, then we have no need of Murphy’s framework to account for it. Had I more space, I would object to several features of Murphy’s handling of the biblical evidence, though he acknowledges the contestable character of the readings he suggests.¹¹ There is, however, one scripturally based objection worth pressing. Murphy at various points suggests that God may sometimes act on reasons of status to maintain a relative distance from creatures (245). But his account does not in fact provide sufficient resources for explaining this familiar form of attenuated divine presence. On Murphy’s view, reasons of status given by God’s absolute holiness do not afford God reasons to remain *relatively* distant from creatures but precisely as distant as merited by the “absurd” status-differential that generates that demand (37), namely, radically and *maximally* distant. But it seems puzzling to suppose that God’s holiness affords God reasons of status to remain maximally withdrawn from the necessarily finite goodness of creatures, and then to appeal to those reasons to explain why we find the Abrahamic God

¹⁰ For more discussion of the kind of asymmetrical relationship to God I take to be exhibited in Christian scripture, see (Yadav 2018, 76).

¹¹ I think Murphy is mistaken, for example, in following those who treat the Hebrew *qds* as having a basic meaning of “separateness,” and further sees “holy” and “impure” as semantic opposites. Clines (2021) persuasively shows that rather than emphasizing God’s “separateness” *qds* is more reliably read as indicated that which God has uniquely made *God’s possession*, and which God has come to associate with who and what God is. The idea therefore seems nearly opposite of Murphy’s—the notion of primary holiness is not one of divine exaltation beyond the reach of creatures but rather a divine exaltation that dignifies creatures by “lending” the exalted divine status to them.

acting to maintain a *relative* and *proximate* distance from Israel, making them a special divine possession occupying a “Goldilocks zone” of mediated divine glory—one positioned away from the unmediated danger of the divine presence on the one hand, and elevated above the domains of commonality or sinfulness on the other. This makes less sense if Murphy is right because if reasons of holiness prevail, God should be completely at a remove while if reasons of love prevail then the relevant reasons of status will have already been overcome and this required distance annulled, leading us to expect God’s nearness unmitigated by any vestige of unapproachability.

Compare: it makes little sense for a pro tennis player to benevolently accept a match with a novice, then insist *afterwards* that the match incorporate signs and banners communicating that the novice has no business playing a pro. The entire point of the decision was ostensibly to disregard the gross mismatch in status and such signage would undermine that point (or at least render its benevolence as something more like petty flexing). Likewise, on Murphy’s account, a merely a limited pattern of withdrawal within the wider context of intimate relations would be an insufficient divine response to the expressive demands of God’s own value. So why the required recognition of relative distance (via Israel’s cultus) in God’s movement toward intimacy? Murphy might reply that if the ritual expressions of God’s distance cannot satisfy the expressive demand on God’s response to God’s own value perhaps it arises from reasons of love rather than reasons of status, as a response to human value, to promote our good.

But on Murphy’s picture divine withdrawal does not serve our good. It is an (appropriate) obstacle to our good. Accordingly, biblical Israel’s ritual and symbolic reminder of human unfitness for intimate relation with God seems to undermine rather than contribute to the achievement of intimate union with us—God’s purported benevolent aim for overriding the reasons of holiness in the first place. If you encounter a homeless person covered in filth and determine to offer them a hug, you diminish rather than enhance the benevolence of that determination if you require that they first confess how repulsive they are. Or consider a romantic partner who accepts a marriage proposal knowing full well that they are “marrying down,” but then insists on a prenup specifying that their inferior partner receive regular and elaborate ceremonious reminders of this fact. It does not take a good therapist to recognize here a practical irrationality that dooms this relationship from the start. Interpreting Israel’s cultus as an elaborate reminder of the necessity of God’s “holding of the divine nose” in the movement toward intimacy toward us therefore serves neither as an adequate expressive response to God’s value nor an adequate promotion of human value found in intimacy with God.¹²

¹² A concept of holiness like the one I suggest above on the other hand allows us to see primary and secondary holiness as God’s benevolent act of making both Godself and ourselves fit for intimacy for one another in an asymmetric status relationship that serves both expressive and promoting goods, and hence makes God’s holiness a source, means, and condition of God’s intimacy with us rather than an obstacle to it. Likewise, God’s primary holiness is essentially concerned with God’s “glory” or “splendor” which, unlike God’s status, can be accommodated to and conveyed by creatures as a secondary holiness in which we *receive* and *participate in* God’s holiness (e.g., Isa. 55:5; Heb. 12:10) rather than merely *signs* or *pointers to* God’s holiness.

3. Divine Action and Justifying Reasons

Perhaps Murphy can meet these objections and show that an absolute withdrawal from creatures is the *only* rational affordance necessitated by the status differential between divine and creaturely goodness, and further that God's overriding of the "requiring reasons" for the sake of intimacy with creatures can be shown to fit well with the rationale behind the ritual requirements of Israel's cultus. The third main component of his picture is to hold that all of the creative and redemptive acts of God toward creatures count as instances of God acting contrary to the default rational demands of primary holiness (157). God can flout those demands rationally, however, insofar as God is motivated by what Murphy calls "justifying reasons," i.e., "reasons which do not in any way necessitate divine action, but which nevertheless are such that God may freely and rationally act on them" and which, in the context of Murphy's holiness framework for divine action, may aptly be called "reasons of love" (133). Murphy emphasizes that the justifying force of these reasons are "not functions of some generic weighing of the goods that give rise to the reasons" but rather agent-relative, depending "very much on features of the agent whose reason it is" (157).

But if God's agent-relative valuing of creatures that affords God justifying "reasons of love" is a *contingent* valuing, then what are the more fundamental agentive dimensions of God it is contingent *on*? Such a valuing of the relevant "reasons of love" is ultimately grounded in some necessary feature(s) of God whose reason it is—so what is it about God's character that accounts for God's contingent valuing of creatures? The natural reply here is that it is God's *necessarily loving* character that gives rise to the contingent valuing of creatures that in turn generates the relevant justifying reasons of love that override the demands of God's holiness. However, Murphy's version of perfect being theology commits him to denying that God's essential intra-Trinitarian love includes any necessary disposition of creature-love (101ff). This seems to introduce an explanatory gap into Murphy's account. How can he make sense of God's contingent valuing of creatures without bottoming out in some notion of an essential, necessary, or defining divine disposition of benevolence or univolence toward creatures—or at least toward the creaturely natures or *possibilia* in the divine mind? Apart from some such underlying disposition, what is it in God that makes possible the contingent valuing of creatures? Is it simply a brute contingency? Might the divine nature have equally well made possible a contingent *dis*-valuing toward creatures that overrides the default with, for example, reasons of hate that motivate God to everlastingly torture all creatures just because they are creatures?

Murphy's view confronts a much more serious problem, however, once again in the form of adequately cohering with a scriptural portrayal of God: while he can rightly acknowledge that a scriptural picture affirms God as holy and not profane (72), his account nevertheless requires us to say that God *violates the demands* of God's own holiness. This carries an implication utterly alien to a scriptural picture, which is that any and every act of God toward creatures is necessarily an act in which God *profanes Godself*. To profane something holy or sacred is to *desecrate* it, to fail to recognize and/or respond to it in the way merited by its extraordinary value.¹³ To use Murphy's analogies, part of what makes championship matches between pro tennis players and novices "obscene" is that—whatever the benevolence of their intentions—in acquiescing to the match the pros respond inappropriately to their superior status and thereby *demean* or *debase* themselves.

¹³ See Roger Scruton on "profanation" in (Scruton 2011, 151-152) and compare to (Hackett and Huehnergard 2021).

We simply do not find the God of scriptural witness portrayed as suspending, forfeiting, or acting in any way contrary to the normative demands of God's own holiness. The opposite seems to be true: God is portrayed as insisting on an appropriate creaturely recognition and response to the normative demands of God's holiness precisely out of an explicitly expressed divine *self-respect* that maintains and upholds whatever God's holiness demands (e.g., Lev. 19:2; 21:8). The incarnation seems an obvious counterexample here, both in the humility of assuming a human nature (Phil. 2:5-11) and in the various ways that Jesus courts ritual impurity for the sake of others, even to the extent of embracing a ritually cursed death, that he calls us all to embrace as well, to join him in dying "outside the gate" (Heb. 13:12). But rather than being willing violations of a genuine norm of holiness, Jesus's status-denial is routinely associated with a truer or more deeply congruent *satisfaction* of that norm. His apparent violations of the ritual demands of holiness were in fact advanced as ways of conforming to those demands, and thus his status-denying form of life and death are made for his followers means of their *sanctification*, their conformity to Christ's holiness.¹⁴

The irony of Murphy's account is that by making God's retreat from creatures a necessary demand of holiness, even God's command that Israel ritually respect God's holiness is in fact a profaning of God's holiness and a call for creatures to profane it. After all, against the requiring reasons of absolute withdrawal dictated by God's holiness, Israel's holiness code requires God to draw near to creatures in order to govern and meet out the relevant sanctions of the ritual and requires creatures to draw near to God by way of their participation in the prescribed rituals. God thus strictly speaking profanes Godself and requires creatures to profane God by way of a series of acts (mistakenly?) depicted in scripture as a means of *conforming* to the normative demands of God's holiness. Likewise, while Murphy rightly denies that there could be any such thing as "primary unholiness" (72), God's acting upon reasons of love and against reasons of holiness implies that God's acts of love toward creatures are expressions of an *unholy love*, whereas a scriptural portrayal of God's *hesed* (covenant-love) is clearly regarded as a holy love. A theory of holiness that commits us to the profanity and unholiness of God's loving acts of redemption not only strains coherence, but courts blasphemy. We ought to take this as an indication that something has gone disastrously wrong.

4. Praise and Worship of the Holy One

Suppose, however, that these objections can be overcome, and that all of God's engagements with creatures are in fact motivated by contingent justifying reasons of love that run contrary to the requiring reasons of God's holiness. What sort of responses do God's necessary holiness and contingent creature-love merit from us? On Murphy's theory, we are entitled to affirm that God's holiness merits our worship and praise for God's exalted status as the absolutely perfect being (26, 56-57), and merits as well our desire for intimate union with God due to all that God's greatness affords for our happiness (37). God does not merit worship or praise in virtue of God's acts of humility and love, however, because these acts are not grounded in what or who God necessarily and essentially is. As merely contingent acts, God might equally well *not* have chosen to engage creatures at all or acted in ways contrary to the reasons of love, and yet a Holy God *qua* perfect being would have remained equally worthy of praise and

¹⁴ For a defense of Jesus's apparent violations of ritual purity as fundamentally guided by his commitment to their creaturely mediation of God's holiness, see (Thiessen 2021).

worship (249). Still, while contributing nothing to God's praiseworthiness or worship-worthiness, God's humble and loving acts are worthy of our thanks, as well as our emulation in the humility and love we owe to one another (254).

While Murphy elaborates how and why God merits our worship, our desire for intimate union, and our grateful emulation of God's humility and love, he also introduces some distortions into each of these three responses. In each case the trouble can be traced to the same source: a radical kind of agent/act disjunction in his account. Namely, his framework forbids God's contingently humble and loving *acts* from being distinctly revelatory of God's virtuous character or dispositions as a perfect *agent*. Murphy supposes that in freely choosing these acts God is choosing to adopt a particular "way of life" with respect to creatures (255), but this way of speaking obscures an important disanalogy between God's choice of a way of life and ours. When we choose a way of life, we are choosing *whom we wish to become*. Likewise, if someone has truly acted in a caring way, we ordinarily take this to mean that they have manifested that they are a *caring* person. Evidence that a person is not or could not be a *caring person* casts doubt on our judgment that their act was indeed an act of care. Similarly, when we act on reasons of love, our acts do not plausibly count as "loving" unless they are grounded in an agent who is or is becoming loving. Murphy's account requires us to block these inferences in God's case, but this allows unwanted elements to creep into the motivational structure of the responses merited by God's necessary holiness and contingent love.

This radical agent/act disjunction, for example, seems to motivate not so much a gratitude *to* God, but rather a gratitude *for* God's saving acts. If those acts offer no evidence of a divine *character* essentially disposed toward my good, but one entirely compatible with being disposed toward my ruin or entirely indifferent to my existence, then I should certainly be grateful that God's will happened to break my way, but this kind of gratitude is a characteristic response toward *luck*, not the characteristic gratitude we have to or for persons in the context of intimate relationships. This is not helped by considering that our good fortune has taken the form of a divine act. A noble may intentionally allow some coins to drop from their carriage as they pass through our peasant village, but if we are to be grateful to the noble rather than merely grateful for the coins, we would need to know that something of their true selves was disclosed in the favorable dispositions shown toward us in that act, something incompatible with releasing poisonous snakes instead. It is for just that sort of reason that scriptural texts emphasize the way that God's redemptive acts toward us reveal to us who and what God is, and this is just what we are given to emulate. Our emulation of Jesus's kenotic status-denial, for example, seems explicitly rooted not in our imitation of the act but the *mindset* of Jesus the divine person (Phil. 2:5), and it runs contrary to the direction of the passage to suppose that this mindset of Christ is a mere accident of the divine will, compatible with its contrary—it is instead given as an explicit reason for our worship (2:9-11). Supposing that God expresses something distinctive about the divine nature or character by way of God's status-denial is also a central motivating feature of liberation theology, which essentially presumes a divine disposition of *solidarity* with the oppressed. Murphy's account is thus not, as he supposes, compatible with theologies of liberation (119). A God whose perfection of mind and will necessarily fails to incline toward a just human order but might equally well (and by natural inclination!) retreat from such an order is not the God of the oppressed.¹⁵

These considerations about the negative impact of Murphy's act/agent disjunction on the quality of our gratitude and intimacy with God also extend to the quality of our worship. Had

¹⁵ See, e.g., (Boff and Boff 1986, 48): The "situation of poverty constitutes a challenge to God himself in his innermost nature" (48).

Galadriel's fantasy of exaltation been satisfied, the inhabitants of Middle Earth might have worshipped her, but it would have been a worship more aptly motivated by self-interest and servile submission or self-subordination than by reverence and loving surrender.¹⁶ Something similar seems to be true with the God of Murphy's theory. God's exalted status and freedom from any natural or essential inclination or obligation to love us and the consequent radical contingency of God's redemptive acts prevents us from reading divine dispositions or intentions off of any of God's acts. The fact that we can expect God's valuing to exhibit a systematic coherence rather than caprice (158) is no comfort here, because an absolutely perfect God without any underlying loving or moral inclination or obligation toward us might coherently and systematically deceive us, exhibit indifference to our suffering, or torture or abuse us according to some contingent scheme of valuation hidden from us. We might well continue to worship the divine perfection, therefore, responding to it with the praise it is rightly due, even while also rightly responding to God's holiness in constant terror caught between the twin threats of divine withdrawal and the radical contingency of God's favor. Let us all love God, and despair!

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¹⁶ For an account of the difference between worship as surrender and worship as submission, see (Stump 2022, 76-80).

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