

The holiness of god
the fundamental
attribute religion
essay



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The attempt to quantify God so that humanity can grasp the vastness of His nature is indeed a formidable undertaking. Oftentimes, theologians speak of the attributes of God as those qualities of God's nature that He has chosen to reveal of Himself to humanity, either through natural revelation, or through specific revelation. " When we speak of the attributes of God, we are referring to those qualities of God which constitute what he is. They are the very characteristics of his nature." [1] Typically, God's attributes are grouped into two classifications. " In an effort to explain God according to Scripture, theologians have distinguished between his unshared attributes that belong to him alone, and God's shared attributes, which he bestows upon us to a lesser degree than he possesses them." [2] First are those attributes of God which are true of Him alone. This set of attributes is known as the incommunicable attributes, which refers simply to those characteristics of God that cannot be shared by anyone other than God; by virtue of His divine nature, He alone exemplifies these qualities. The second set is known as God's communicable attributes. These characteristics are those that God shares in some capacity with His creation; specifically with humanity as a part of His creation. God's holiness falls into both classifications; first as an incommunicable attribute, holiness is elemental to God's nature, and second, as a communicable attribute, holiness is fundamental to a right understanding of, and interaction with, God as Creator on the part of the created. This work will demonstrate the importance of holiness in both manners of qualification, in such a way as to highlight its fundamental characteristics to the nature of God, and to the nature of His interaction with His creation, as well as the reciprocal relationship between the creature and Creator.

Erickson says of the attributes of God, " There are two basic aspects to God's holiness. The first is his uniqueness. He is totally separate from all of creation. . . . The other aspect of God's holiness is his absolute purity or goodness. This means that he is untouched and unstained by the evil in the world. He does not in any sense participate in it." [3] Regarding holiness in particular, as a divine attribute Erickson also says, " The attributes are permanent and intrinsic qualities, which cannot be gained or lost. Thus, holiness is not in this sense an attribute (a permanent, inseparable characteristic) of Adam, but it is of God. God's attributes are essential and inherent dimensions of his very nature." [4] This distinction between Adam on the one hand, and God on the other, in relation to holiness is shared by other communicable attributes, but perhaps no greater gulf exists between man's ability to share in God's attributes anywhere than at this point. For example, mankind may demonstrate some limited measure of love, or mercy on his own, since unbelieving men may display these characteristics under the right circumstances; albeit in pitiful fashion. However, under no circumstance imaginable is mankind capable of demonstrating even the most miniscule amount of holiness, aside from God imparting it to him as a shared attribute.

With respect to any of the attributes of God, it must be stated that we know all that we know of God by virtue of His acts of revelation; those things that He has chosen to tell us of Himself. We learn much of what we know about God, from the multiplicity of references within Scripture concerning His name, and how He reveals it, as well as how He expects it to be revered. We may see that the " Lord's very name is holy, not just the places and things associated with him. ' Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me,

bless His holy name.' (Ps 103: 1)."[5]God's revelation to Moses at Mt. Sinai is indicative of God's desire to make Himself known. He says, " I AM WHO I AM (Ex. 3: 14). This revelation of his ' name' is also a revelation of his nature."[6]Along this same thought line,

Edmond Jacob points out that ' the name' is synonymous with Yahweh. So the

name ' always expresses the essential nature of a being, manifests the totality of the

divine presence.' Since ' name,' in fact, does refer to the essence of God's being, then

holiness seems to be most characteristic of his nature. In Jacob's words, " the relation

between holiness and the name reveals the identity of holiness with deity.'

Given the

fact that ' glory' is one of the manifestations of holiness (Is. 6: 3), it may be that even the

references to his ' glorious name' are really only an alternate rendering of the ' holy

name'.[7]

Scripture itself attests to the high emphasis placed by God upon His name. In the Old Testament alone, " there are five references to a ' glorious' name

and four references to a ' great name' of God, but all the others (23) refer to God's ' holy name.'"[8]" Since his name is so immediately bound up with his nature, the connection of holiness with the name is very significant. It seems to indicate that the holiness is the most important thing Israel needed to know about this One who was revealing himself to them."[9]Indeed, God's holiness is of supreme importance in His revelation to Israel because it distinguishes Him uncompromisingly from the pagan gods surrounding Israel at that time. It is important also to remember that part of God's holiness is his separation and transcendence. God was establishing Himself with the children of Israel as different and superior to the pagan gods simultaneously through the understanding of His holiness. God's holiness also serves to encourage His people to take up His ways, and to be like He is. The command to be holy as God is holy (1 Pet. 1: 16), is more than just an admonition to try to be good people. It is a command for His people to be set apart from impurity as God is set apart from it.

Moving in thought, from God's revelation regarding His name, there are several key factors worthy of consideration with respect to holiness as it is fundamental to God's nature. In the prophet Isaiah's vision (Isa. 6: 3), it " is interesting to note that while Isaiah sees God as the sovereign King, his description of his essential being is not in terms of sovereignty, or even righteousness, mercy or love. Rather it is the holiness of God that stands at the very heart of his nature."[10]Holiness it seems, as a part of God's being, is the driving force behind the perfection of all the other attributes of God. In fact, " Gustaf Aulen, in his Faith of the Christian Church, expresses his conviction that ' holiness is the foundation on which the whole conception of

God rests.”[11]It is seen as the basic or fundamental attribute because “there is no standard for God; He Himself is the standard of holiness. God is under no law of holiness; He Himself is the law of holiness.”[12]God’s nature is supremely perfect; a perfection driven by His holiness, as to be without comparison. God absolutely could not be God if it were not for this supreme perfection, which is His alone. Anything less than absolute perfection, and undeniable holiness in Him would denote some fundamental flaw, which, even on the smallest scale, would preclude His being God. The underlying thought of holiness is being separate from all that’s impure. This is the divine perfection by which God is absolutely distinct from all creatures and exalted above them in infinite majesty. God is distinct from His creation in that He is set apart from creation by virtue of His purity. Holiness is fundamental because in a sense all of God’s other attributes rest on this one attribute of perfection. God’s level of perfection in all His attributes must have their basis in the level of perfection that stems from His holiness. From this point, we see that His holiness is fundamental to all of his attributes. Equally as important, humanity’s right understanding of God is predicated upon the absolute perfection of His holy nature. God’s holiness – His very essence, as communicated to His creatures, is a derivative of absolute perfection. “There is an emphasis given to this attribute above all the other attributes. There are certain attributes we prefer, because of personal benefit derived from them. We esteem God’s love, mercy, and grace before His justice, wrath, and anger. But in the Bible, the holiness of God has preeminence over all the others.”[13]It is from this standpoint that we describe the holiness of God as being transcendent or above all the other attributes. This

transcendence establishes holiness as a foundational attribute. Coppedge
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depicts how holiness, as a transcendent and foundational attribute, relates to other traditional characteristics below:

14It is the transcendence of God's holiness that establishes it as the foundational attribute of God. " Many see holiness as the foremost attribute of all because holiness pervades all the other attributes of God and is consistent with all He is and does." [15]

Having established the primacy of holiness as an attribute of God, attention may now be turned to the implications of this basic attribute as it is inherent in God; before it may be imparted to man. First, in thinking about holiness as an incommunicable attribute, there are several concepts that one must grasp to rightly understand who God is, and how the nature of His being affects His creation. Theologians may say that God's holiness is incommunicable because there is a level of perfection in His holiness that may not rightly be ascribed to any part of the creation. Exodus 5: 11 says with wonder, " Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, Fearful in praises, doing wonders?" God's holiness has a gloriously incomparable aspect to it, which is its incommunicable component. God's holiness also has an eternal aspect to it. John said, in commenting on the activities surrounding " God's throne . . . ' each of the four living creatures' . . . never stop saying, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" [16] (Rev. 4: 8). Holiness resides in God to the extent that it cannot be imparted to humanity in the same way. Isaiah also records the cry of the seraphim, as they say " Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" (Is. 6: 3). In Isaiah's mind, the earth is full of God's glory as an implied result of His holiness. "<https://assignbuster.com/the-holiness-of-god-the-fundamental-attribute-religion-essay/>

There can be only one Being who is absolutely perfect – holy... Further, if perfection is thought of as moral perfection, then absolute perfection implies holiness as well. God is absolutely perfect, and what is absolutely perfect is set apart from all else. Therefore God is holy; He is perfect in and of Himself...”[17]J. L. Dagg says, “ God is immaculately holy. Goodness, truth and justice, are moral attributes of God. Holiness is not an attribute distinct from these; but a name which includes them all... It implies the perfection of the assemblage; – the absence of everything in it contrary to either of the properties included.”[18]This immaculate holiness is an element of God’s transcendence in that His holiness, a holiness of absolute, undeniable perfection, sets Him apart from all else; God alone possesses holiness to this degree. While man may aspire to some level of holiness, holiness as depicted in Scripture belongs to God alone. Holiness of this degree is fundamental; since only God possesses holiness to this level, it emanates from Him to His creatures through revelation and experience. It does so because God wills it to be this way. Because His holiness emanates from Him to humanity, mankind is drawn to God in a way that would be impossible without such emanation. Isaiah demonstrated this experience when in God’s presence he exclaimed, “ Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts.” (Isa. 6: 5). It is this perfection that allows humanity to revel in, and marvel at, God’s holiness. That He is perfectly holy is an assurance to His creation of the perfection of His other attributes. God’s holiness “ is the divine perfection by which God is absolutely distinct from all creatures and exalted above them in infinite majesty.”[19]A similar thought concerning God’s holiness as an

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incommunicable characteristic of His nature is one that some have called His “majesty-holiness . . . this aspect of God’s holiness is the one less thought of, and it actually bears greater affinity to infinity, Aseity, and unity—non-moral divine attributes.”[20] God has majesty as the King of kings, and Lord of lords because of His holiness.

When the Creator’s holiness has been physically manifested to His creation, it has a brilliant effect. In Isaiah’s vision from chapter six, he notes that the seraphim had to cover their faces to remain in God’s presence, (Isa. 6: 2ff.) Isaiah’s account of the seraphim brings to mind other encounters with God’s glory that have similar effects on the beholder, such as; Moses reaction to God’s presence at the burning bush (Ex. 3: 1-6), the Israelites reaction to Moses as he descends the mountain after having been in God’s presence (Ex. 34: 29-35), and the disciples reaction at the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17: 1-8). Many times, God’s holiness is likened to a consuming fire! In each example, the glory of God was such that it caused the beholder to fall before God in worship. This brilliant glory, which is the visible manifestation of God’s holiness, is so powerful that it elicits profound responses from His creation in every case.

Through the incarnation, God has not only invited mankind to participate in His holiness, He has demonstrated that it can be done, and how it should be done. By his sacrificial death on the Cross, Jesus Christ enables us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to share in the holiness that he embodies and accomplishes for us. Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5: 8), indicating that the heart condition is a key component to mankind’s ability to commune with the Father. It is precisely this purity of

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heart, which is the result of mimicking God's purity that is pleasing to God. All too often, the idea of attaining holiness is discounted, or neglected altogether, as if it is unattainable. The enemy desires that we have this defeatist attitude. However, Mark Driscoll states with regard to communicable holiness that " we mirror God when we hate sin and love holiness by repenting of our sin and fighting against sin in the world." [21] Certainly, it would be inaccurate to suggest that perfect holiness is within the grasp of humanity; however, since God has commanded mankind to ' be holy' (1 Pet. 1: 16), one must assume that it is attainable through repentance, at least in some acceptable degree, within the confines of this life. Humans have the ability to exhibit limited holiness, yet it is not an attribute which is innate or one which emanates from their being. In fact, a number of accounts throughout Scripture indicate that when man encounters God's holiness it has had a profound impact.

Holiness is also seen as communicable, in that God does share His holiness with humanity in some senses. The idea that God shares His attributes with humanity in any sense is an indication of His desire to have an interactive relationship with His creation; mankind in particular. It is a reflection of His character that He desires such an interaction; in no sense does God need this interaction, but Scripture is clear that He desires it and goes to great lengths to make it possible. As a result of God's activity in making His being known, and providing a means of interaction, it is right that He alone is the object of man's worship. While God's holiness is essential, man's holiness is derived from His nature. " In some ways, we are like God. At our best, we have qualities or attributes that dimly reflect God's." [22] It is this dim

reflection that characterizes mankind's existence for now. One is reminded of Paul's discourse in the great love chapter of Corinthians, wherein he says "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known" (1 Cor. 13: 12-13). It is this anticipation of seeing and knowing that encourages Paul as well as the believer today. One day, we will see as we are seen, and know as we are known; that will indeed be a glorious day. On that day, man may look upon the glorious holiness of God, and not turn away in fear, or hide his face from God's glorious radiance.

However, even in this life, some measure of holiness is surely attainable for mankind, since God commands His creatures to "Be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11: 44, 45; 19: 2; 20: 7; 1 Pet. 1: 16). Holiness in man is a symbol of the holiness of God, but is also a humble aspiration to be more like God. Holiness in man is seen in a relational aspect. God's purpose for sharing His attributes with humanity is certainly to foster obedience, but also to transform humanity into His image, as depicted in 2 Cor. 3: 18. Here, God speaks through the Apostle Paul to His church, and says "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image (emphasis added) from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord." One remembers Isaiah's encounter, when in the presence of the Lord both he and the seraphim were overwhelmed (Is 6: 2-6), and marvels at this New Testament approach to God's presence, given by God for the edification of His saints. The noticeable contrast between the Old Testament and New Testament depictions of the workings of God's holiness are indeed a source of blessing for those believers on this side of the cross of

Christ. While this holiness is certainly limited, it remains true that God has now commanded the attempt to become in nature as He is, limited though the success of that effort will be. This holiness in man is reflected holiness. How it is that man may exhibit such an attribute of God? Creation reflects the attributes of the Creator. Quite simply, holiness in man is impossible apart from God; however, holiness in man is a reality because God's holiness overflows into the lives of His children. God's holiness comes from that eternal fount, just as does His love, mercy, and truth, but it comes in a unique way. God's holiness comes through the transformation of a sanctified life; a life that is being reconfigured to be what it is not naturally, but only what it can be under the direct influence of coming into the presence of God. It is an alien concept, except that it is most obviously God's plan for mankind.

That such holiness comes from God alone is seen from Scripture. Moses removes any doubt, when he records God's words in Lev. 21: 8, " I the LORD, who sanctify you, am holy." This clearly indicates the holiness of God, but also indicates that the process of becoming holy (sanctification) is God's work. Further indications from Scripture are seen in Geisler's observations:

God chose a holy people (Israel) (Deut. 7: 6; 14: 2, 21; 26: 19; 28: 9; Col. 1: 2; 1 Peter 2: 9).

He also picked special holy men (2 Kings 4: 9). He elected a holy church (1 Cor. 1: 2). He

set aside a holy land (Zech. 2: 12). God chose a holy city on earth

(Jerusalem) (Neh. 11: 1;

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Isa. 52: 1) God's holy city sits on a holy mountain (Ps. 15: 1; 48: 1; Dan. 9: 20). He also has a

Holy city in heaven (Rev. 21: 2, 10). God ordained holy priests (in Leviticus).

God even

designated a holy dumpsite (Jer. 31: 40), that is, a special place set apart to dispose of

things. God demands a holy tithe of His people (Lev. 27: 30). God had holy food (Lev. 21:

22). He expects us to live a holy life (Rom. 12: 1; 1 Thess. 4: 7).[23]

Clearly, Scripture is replete with these and numerous other references to God's holiness, and its connection to mankind. God's holiness is always demonstrated scripturally with the express purposes of revealing more of God to mankind, and of drawing mankind closer to God.

Interestingly, " God is seen in His holiness as a Law-giver. A holy God gave a law that was just and holy and good." [24] Holiness is an essential quality of God, both in a metaphysical sense, and in a moral, or ethical sense. This realization brings to bear another aspect of God's holiness as it is imparted to man. There is a moral or ethical component of God's holiness that bears upon man as he strives to come into the image of God. It is this conjunction of morality with holiness that defines the ethical component of God's nature. He is God because He is ethically (morally) superior to all else, and this is made known through His holiness. In fact, " The holiness of God in Scripture is never depicted apart from its moral and rational dimensions. A holy God is <https://assignbuster.com/the-holiness-of-god-the-fundamental-attribute-religion-essay/>

always moral, and he communicates in rational language.”[25]Coppedge notes that there are “ six key elements”[26]that comprise God’s moral holiness; “(1) righteousness and its corresponding standard of (2) moral purity. The (3) truth of God is reflected in both his speech and his faithfulness in personal relationships. The (4) grace of God involves both his favor and his self-giving, and stands in close relationship to both the (5) love and the (6) goodness of God, which round out his moral image.”[27]This moral component of God’s holiness is fundamental to the nature of God as He has made Himself known, but it goes far beyond just God’s self revelation. His holiness is also fundamental to mankind’s right understanding of truth. There is no truth that man may know apart from God’s truth, which is absolutely based upon His holiness and purity. This fact comprises the moral compass of man. In fact, Erikson says, “ God’s perfection is the standard for our moral character and the motivation for religious practice. The whole moral code follows from his holiness.”[28]Erickson’s idea is that apart from God’s purity (holiness), it is impossible to worship Him rightly, as well as impossible to live rightly before Him.

Without the ethical component of God’s holiness, humanity would be lost in a sea of relativity. Such is the danger of most of the heretical movements of religious history. “ We are living in a day of mental and moral and spiritual indolence, and therefore a time of superficial thinking in things relating to God and eternal matters.”[29]These modern day ‘ religious’ movements amount to little more than mankind’s attempt to subrogate God’s position as the ultimate authority over all creation. Almost without fail, every such attempt at heart is nothing more than a rejection of God’s holiness. The

result is an attempt to replace God's truth, which is absolute, with man's truth which is incomplete. Any such attempt can but fail because it is conceived in sin. "' Holiness' points to God's majestic purity... because God is morally pure, He cannot condone evil or have any relationship to it." [30] Apart from the ethical component of God's holiness, mankind can do little more than search in vain for truth.

14 Having established holiness as a fundamental attribute of God; a driving force behind His being as we know it, the question remains as to why this is important. There are two relational aspects of God's holiness that must be understood. First, one must realize how God's holiness affects His relationship with man as His creation, and conversely how mankind is to rightly respond to God because of His holiness. Only then may one understand how God's holiness impacts a right relationship between man and men. These are sometimes referred to as vertical (God to man, and man to God), and horizontal (man to man) relationships. In each case, the success of this effort depends upon the holiness of God as it is imparted unto the believer. Humanity cannot please God apart from reflecting His holiness back to Him, and this is done through the proper relationships of love for God and for fellowman.

Relationally speaking, there are considerations of God's holiness, as a communicated attribute, that have implications for mankind as well. " There is a display of Divine holiness in redemption. His holy nature will not allow Him to look upon sin with the least degree of allowance. Salvation is not at the expense of His holiness. The Redeemer must bear the wrath due the sinner, for wrath is the exercise of His holiness. God's hatred of sin was as <https://assignbuster.com/the-holiness-of-god-the-fundamental-attribute-religion-essay/>

much manifested in redemption as it will be in judgment.”[31]Understanding that God’s holiness is directed towards humanity for the purpose of glorifying Him through a right relationship is imperative for the development of the child of God. It is also foundational to the proper perspective of the creature, as he relates to the Creator, that man recognizes that the goal of the process of sanctification is the ultimate glorification to be found in the presence of God because of the work of Christ. Ryle states that, “ A man may go great lengths, and yet never reach true holiness.”[32]It is this work of God in man’s life that makes him right before God, resulting in a desire to please God through the obedient life. Augustine said, “ When we praise God directly, we do it as we celebrate His Holiness.”[33]In keeping with this thought, Martin Luther said, “ We should not be holy in order to earn or prevent something. For people who do this are hirelings, servants, and day laborers. They are not willing children and heirs who are holy for the sake of holiness that is, for the sake of God alone; for God Himself is Righteousness, Truth, Goodness, Wisdom, and Holiness.”[34]

16 Finally, because God is supremely holy, He is deserving of mankind’s total adoration, love, respect, and worship. To know God aright, one must recognize above all else that He is different because of His holiness. It is this difference that at once sets Him apart, and at the same, time draws us to Him. This difference is predicated upon His absolute holiness. God’s holiness establishes His uniqueness, and not just His magnificence or grandeur. God demonstrates the vastness of the differences between His holiness and man’s. Mankind is instructed to long for God’s holiness in such a way as to cause obedience and surrender in his life, yet to recognize the

incomparability of God's fire of a fierce divine love that will not rest content until God has redeemed all in a renewed heaven and a renewed earth that has become God's dwelling place (Rev. 21-22). " When our salvation is consummated we will be restored to the holiness of God. We will not have His power, nor His wisdom, but we will have His holiness." [35]

In conclusion, one must deduce that God's holiness is perhaps His greatest gift to mankind, other than salvation. All His other gifts are predicated upon His holiness. God's Holiness is foundational and all other actions emanate from His holiness. His righteousness, justice, love, grace, mercy and truth are what they are because He is holy. God is transcendent because of His holiness, yet even the desire to have a relationship with humanity is predicated upon God's holiness. Like Isaiah, when confronted with the presence (His holiness) of Almighty God, all any man may say is " Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isa. 6: 5). " It is because of his holiness, that God is a consuming fire." [36] There is no right reaction apart from falling on one's face in utter humility and worship when confronted with this divine presence. However, because of the work of Christ for salvation, and the work of the Holy Spirit for glorification through sanctification, man may respond with great relief to God's presence; because through these works, God has imparted a measure of His holiness to humanity, until the day comes when we stand