

A Quick Statement of the “Definition” of Holiness

Craig Keen

“Holiness” means, in the first place, what is peculiar to God. It is God’s separateness, difference, from the world. Insofar as it is a true otherness it is to be understood as God’s qualitative distinction from all that God is not. However, at the same time this otherness is “defined” by the narratives of scripture and the liturgy that constitutes the church. The Old Testament accounts of the holy God fall into four broad literary groupings: priestly, prophetic, wisdom, and apocalyptic. All of these texts clarify the way God is holy by speaking at once of God’s discontinuity from the world and of God’s gathering inherently unholy creatures into God’s holiness—particularly by God’s making them enter into the manifestation of God’s holiness in the world, i.e., they are glorified in the event of God’s act of glorification in the world. Thus one finds metaphors of “purity” (in complex ways setting certain things in the world apart from other things—stressing difference) and “justice” (clarifying the manner in which God’s holiness is made manifest—i.e., glorified—in the world, viz., by caring for the weak, the stranger, the poor) and “personal adjustment” to God (marked by a kind of wisdom and faithfulness to God, steadfastness especially in suffering) and expectancy of a coming future revolution (God’s inbreaking to make the world radically new). In the New Testament these themes are radicalized—not in total discontinuity with the OT, but in taking OT themes to extreme excesses. Thus God’s holiness is made manifest—glorified—in Jesus’ suffering, death, damnation, i.e., where the old order had maintained God could not be glorified. Thus God’s holiness is a freedom for what is far gone from holiness. This is an apocalyptic vision which is oriented to the inbreaking of a radical other and the outpouring in that event of God’s own life, it connects particularly with prophetic themes which call for a peculiar justice/righteousness, it is reminiscent of wisdom

literature's call to faithfulness especially despite apparently conflicting evidence, and it looks to a God who is separate and calls for separateness—but all of this is taken away over the top, to the extent that one adhering to the old order would be profoundly tempted to offense. The way of Jesus is the hallowing of life that is separated to a God who is love—and in loving the world calls upon the separate to be separated with God to the world. Thus the liturgy of the church is constantly moving eucharistically from the world to the exalted crucified Jesus and from this Jesus to the world. All of time is understood thereby to be redeemed as witness is borne to the manifestation of God's holiness in Jesus. And "witness" was understood to be as bodily as Christ's declaration of the coming of God's reign. Thus martyrdom emerges—and is practiced in the early church in expectation of the day in which the believer would be called to bear witness to Christ in actual death (e.g., before Roman spectators)—and is practiced as a dimension of eucharistic liturgy.

Paper Proposal

My proposal was to write an essay on the doctrine of the Trinity, showing how this is a doctrine of holiness. My essay contrasts the traditional Western theistic idea of God as "supreme being" with the doctrine of the Trinity. It argues, first, that "theism" holds God forever quarantined from the world. It argues, second, that the doctrine of the Trinity witnesses to a two-fold opening of a radically transcendent God: in the Son's abasement and in the Spirit's gathering of the world into the glory that breaks out in that event. "Trinity" is shown to be the occurrence of liberative freedom, a soteriology of our entry into the coming of God's holy love.