

“Does Holiness Theology Have a Future?”
Henry Spaulding

Response

Giving under Obligation
by

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I begin this response with a question implicit in Dr. Spaulding’s presentation: If holiness is a gift, does the gift belong to God or to us? Is God holy, or are Christians holy? This is the starting point for the question of holiness in Immanuel Kant, for whom holiness is perfect obedience to a moral imperative that creatures can not quite achieve, but only approximate. Creature can only be made holy by the act of a nominalist God, who sees the eternal striving and names it “perfect,” though in no circumscribable shape is it ever such. It is certainly not difficult to hear this echoed in those renderings of holiness that encourage valiant attempts at obedience, without any hope of achieving perfection.

But even among orthodox theologians of Reformed and concurrent Catholic theology, perfection is often rendered problematic. Under a particular emphasis of the late medieval and early modern era, creation came to be seen as over-against God, closed in on itself, and shut off from any participation in the divine being. Under the condition of “total depravity” — a homiletical device for the Reformers, and only ontologized with Kant’s doctrine of “radical evil” — creation is seen as “running” itself in an utterly Godless space and time. Thus, creation is established as a being alongside, and absolutely separated from, God. Into such an enclosed space, divine revelation can only occur, if at all, as violence: the intrusion of a foreign power onto native soil. Even in Calvin and Luther, who insist so much more clearly than Kant on the transcendence of God, God’s holiness “crowds out” the possibility of creaturely deification, as if the two were competing for the same prize. For the Reformers holiness takes the form of an armistice; “gifts” of the Spirit become a legal contract; human agents retreat the required distance to allow God more “space,” and are under obligation, so far as contractually mandated, to be holy as God is holy. Whether the creature retreats only partially (as in Kant), or into self-annihilation (as in Calvin), holiness is a violent transaction; and the gift cannot be given.

However, as is often the case, a reactionary account remains within the paradigm: Kant is still audible in Spaulding’s framing a central question: “Is the one forgiven obligated to be holy?” Well . . . is she? If the answer is yes, we are told, then “holiness theology’s future is in doubt.” But is the answer no? What is “the opening of one’s life to the triune life of God,” if not an obligation, “‘my’ moment, or a decision ‘I’ made”? (And again, what if “the future of holiness [is] dependent upon our capacity to understand it within an ontology shaped by the triune life of God”? Is *this* good news?)

What Spaulding’s hesitation reveals, I suggest, is simply that a traditional Reformed option — either God’s act or my act, either God’s space or my space — breaks down under a Wesleyan insistence on perfection. Fortunately, history and church politics allow us to trace another lineage, one that draws more centrally, through Anglicanism, from Orthodox and

Catholic theologies, in which the equivocality between God and creation is wholly unknown. Here, without compromising the infinite non-quantifiable difference between God and the world, it is yet maintained that all being is derived from a single source, and only “is” by its participation in that source. Sinful creation is not at rest in an ontological dungeon, but *falling*, within the greater structure of participation in God. And although God is infinitely transcendent, it is revealed to the converted that they were never truly “outside” of God’s being. As even Karl Barth says, God is *not* wholly other, in any unqualified sense of the phrase.¹

Like Spaulding, the Fathers understood the articulation of holiness to depend on our refusal of “ontological purchase to any realm other than the one that Genesis calls finished.” Within this structure of participation, holiness is irreducibly analogical. For God’s holiness is in his absolute uniqueness, in the lack of any rival to the Creator of all that is; the holiness of creation begins only in worship of God as holy, and in the acknowledgment of the dependence of all things on God. Holiness is a single discourse with two ascriptive subjects: We say it of God, and in saying it of God, we ourselves begin to embody the form. Thus, calling God “holy” is not a matter of abstract logic, but a performative enterprise: Saint Antony’s linguistic insistence on the divinity of the Word is incarnated in the beauty of his body, and the peace and justice of his desert community. Rather than asking whether or not the gift can be given, Athanasius begins with the assumption that it is: We *are* being made holy — What does this signify about God? Or, as Gregory Nazianzen asked, “If [the Spirit] is not to be worshiped, how can he deify me in baptism? But if he is to be worshiped, surely he is an object of adoration, and if an object of adoration, he must be God.”² Holiness is occurring in and around the church, as God is worshiped as holy.

What, then, of the gift? From whom does it come, and to whom does it go? Is holiness a gift contained within the Trinitarian processions, or does it describe creaturely existence, praxis, and narratives? Read under an ontology ordered by participation in God, it must be said that if it is one, it is also the other. As both Augustine and Aquinas say, *donum*, the most proper name of the Spirit, already implies a kind of willed excess of divinity, a kind of “wanting-to-be-given.” So the gift-giving within the Trinity creates an image of itself in a reciprocal economy of exchange called “the church.” Like the Spirit given from Father to Son in the Incarnation, and from Son to Father on Golgotha, and back to the Son on Easter, the gifts of the holy community cannot possibly reduce to investments; they circulate, differentiate, and return, in a kind of ecclesial perichoresis.

Is this gift-giving an obligation? Well, it is not “perfect” resignation to a lusterless command. But in the presence of the beloved, the lover is obligated to become aroused. Such an “obligation” transcends the banal options of stiff determinism and disinterested free-will; creatures are moved toward holiness because God’s movement beyond isolated divinity is analogically repeated by creaturely movement beyond finite humanity. The church is perfected to the extent that it, through baptism *qua* adoption into the Incarnate Sonship of the Word, crosses its own boundary, and tends ecstatically into the life of God.

¹ *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, trans. Ian W. Robertson (London: SCM Press LTD, 1960), p. 29.

² *The Fifth Theological Oration—On the Holy Spirit* 28, LCC VII, p. 211.