

The Experience of the Holy
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Thanksgiving is Thursday. It is followed by Hanukkah. Next we celebrate the winter solstice; in the Northern Hemisphere, the shortest period of daylight of the year. Next will come Christmas and then many African Americans will celebrate Kwanzaa, a seven-day festival that begins on December 26. And on January first we celebrate the new year, 2008.

Starting with Thanksgiving we enter a time of year that we call the holidays, a word that is derived from the word Holy days. We are entering into a time of year we call the holy days.

What do we mean by the word holy?

We can use the word holy as an adjective or an adverb to make something sound more important, more significant. So we have Holy Mother, Holy Father, Holy Spirit, Holy Order, Holy Church, and Holy Mooly which literally means sacred grave.

Some churches have special water they call holy water. There's a joke about a man who came into the church on crutches. He stopped in front of the holy water, put the holy water on both legs, and then threw away his crutches. An altar boy witnessed the scene and then ran to tell the cleric what he'd just seen.

"Son, you've just witnessed a miracle!" the cleric said. "Tell me where is this man now?"

The boy said "he is flat on his butt over by the holy water!"

While I do not believe in miracles, I do not believe in magic, and I do not believe in the supernatural, I still find the word holy useful in describing a certain kind of experience that I have in my life. But what do we mean by the word holy? There are several definitions.

Holiness to the ancient Jews was a clear idea. To be holy meant to be ritually pure. To be holy meant to be someone committed to doing nothing that the pagans did. If the Philistines wore red cloaks, ate shellfish and ate meals of pig, then to be holy the Jews must refrain from wearing red, and eating clams and pork. This notion of purity is also found in the Muslim traditions regarding fasting, the Christian practice of celibacy, and in the traditional Hindu dietary and social taboos.

In our modern life this definition of holiness as purity finds most obvious expression in our division between the holy space inside the church and the profane space of the outside world. "When I enter this room," says one member of this church, "I feel the power of the space. It is somehow different from the street outside. Here my child was dedicated, my daughter was married, and my husband's memorial service was held. An uncommon feeling stirs within me. The church is a holy place." Emphasis on purity is one definition of the word holy.

A second answer to the question, "What is holy?" is an ethical one. Over the centuries different religions have called special persons holy because of their great courage in living moral and ethical lives. In a sermon entitled "Be Holy," one minister said:

I remember going to see the movie "Gandhi" when it first came out. It was the usual noisy, restless Saturday night crowd as people sat there waiting for the lights to dim with their popcorn and soda pop, girlfriends and boyfriends with legs draped over the backs of empty seats. But by the time the movie came to a close with the flames of Gandhi's funeral pyre filling the entire screen, there wasn't a sound or a movement in that whole theater, and people filed out of there —teenagers and senior citizens, blacks and

whites, swingers and squares—in a deep and telling silence. . . . Who wants to be Holy? The very word has fallen into disrepute —holier than thou, holy joe, holy mess. Yet people tasted something that at least for a few moments that Saturday night made every other kind of life seem empty.

To live an ethical life. To show moral courage. This is a second definition of the word holy.

A third answer to the question of what is holy is a carefully constructed theological answer concerning the encounter of the divine and transcendent. In the year 1910 a German philosopher named Rudolf Otto took leave from his teaching and set out on a long journey. He visited North Africa, Egypt, Palestine, India, China, Japan and the United States. In these visits Otto deepened his understanding of the religions of the world. Although Otto himself was a German Lutheran, he wanted to broaden his religious experience beyond Christianity. He was searching for the common denominator of religion. He was looking for what is universal to all religions.

In the years after he returned to Germany, Otto wrote a book. He gave it a carefully worded title the way serious German philosophers are inclined to do. He called the book *The Idea of The Holy: An Inquiry into the Nonrational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*. Published in 1917, the book became a theological bestseller. The events of the First World War had shattered many assumptions of the inevitability of human progress and turned many people to a renewed quest for religious values.

In his book Otto attempted to describe what he believed is the distinctive element found in all religious experience. He called this distinctive element "the holy."

Otto suggested that a religiously satisfying response to the question of whether we can have knowledge of the holy is likely to be a deeply emotional response and not a rational one. Otto tried to elicit an appreciation of the holy by describing various people's intense experiences. However, he believed that there is no demonstration by argument, no example, can substitute for the experience of the holy itself. He wrote:

The reader is invited to direct his mind to a moment of deeply-felt religious experience, as little as possible qualified by other forms of consciousness. Whoever cannot do this, whoever knows no such moments in his experience, is requested to read no farther; for it is not easy to discuss questions of religious psychology with one who . . . cannot recall any intrinsically religious feelings.

Otto is contending that, if we have not had the experience, then we cannot understand the discussion. Only when we have had the experience, can we understand what is meant by the holy.

Otto defined the experience of the holy as having three elements:

First, the awareness of a mystery.

Second, a feeling of awe-inspiring power, before which we tremble.

And third, a feeling of fascination, such that we are drawn to, attracted to the mystery.

In other words, Rudolf Otto described the holy as a blend of fear and fascination before the mystery of the divine. He said this experience is universal for all religions.

When I think about trembling and fascination and mystery, I remember visiting California two weeks after an earthquake in 1989. I arrived at a point when people who lived in the area were tired of hearing other people tell the story of where they had been when the earthquake struck. However, they were not tired of telling their story of where they had been when the earthquake struck. I was an eager listener. One fact stood out to me: the weekend after the earthquake the synagogues and churches were packed with people. There were more folks attending religious services that weekend than anyone could remember. It was like Christmas eve and Yom Kipper combined, only bigger.

What was going on? Perhaps when the earth shook people were experiencing a need for what Rudolf Otto was speaking about. First, they felt an awareness of a mystery. Second, they felt a feeling of awe-inspiring power, before which they trembled. And third, they felt a feeling of fascination, such that we are drawn to, attracted to the mystery.

This is a third definition of the holy. The holy is a blend of fear and fascination before the mystery of the divine.

A fourth definition of the word holy is found in the book *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. In this morning's reading an illiterate preacher tells how he discovered his meaning for the word "Holy."

There was the hills, an' there was me, an' we wasn't separate no more. We was one thing. An' that one thing was holy . . . An' I got thinkin', on'y it wasn't thinkin' it was deeper down than thinkin'. I got thinkin' how we was holy when we was one thing, an' mankin' was holy when it was one thing.

For the preacher in Steinbeck's story the holy is an awareness of a cosmic unity.

These then are four interrelated definitions of the word holy. Each has merit.

First, to be holy can mean to be ritually pure. This is what I mean when I say that this church is a holy place, separated from the profane world outside.

Second, to be holy can mean to show moral and ethical courage, such as Jesus or Gandhi.

Third, to be holy can mean to encounter the mystery. This is what Rudolf Otto was thinking of when he called the holy the awareness of a mystery, a feeling of awe-inspiring power, before which we tremble and feel fascination, such that we are drawn to, attracted to the mystery.

Fourth, to be holy can mean to experience the unity in all life and in the pulse of the cosmos. This was what John Steinbeck meant when he wrote "There was the hills, an' there was me, an' we wasn't separate no more."

I do not believe in speaking in tongues, or channeling spirits, or pyramid power. However, I do experience the holy. It is present in those moments when all forms of life, including those very different from me, become my kin, when the birds and trees become an expression of the same life force that flows through my veins . . . I experience the holy in moments when a sense of the unity of all things wraps around me.

It starts with a personal feeling of distance. I feel the separate nature of my existence. I feel isolated, detached. I experience myself as alienated and estranged from other people and the earth.

Then, I gradually become aware of being connected to a greater reality. It is a process of the dissolving of defenses that stand in the way of my being separate. As I become aware of being connected, I feel within me an awe and a fascination, a tie to a larger realm of experience. It is like being held by an ocean and knowing that when I move the ripples I make will move out beyond me to the edge of the ocean and beyond. And that the ripples others make will move and touch me.

Finally, I am aware of a great unity. As distinctions disappear, I become a part of the vast, ongoing process of life. I am tied to a greater energy. I am linked to nature. I am bound to everything. This is the holy.

At thanksgiving I give thanks for the experience of the holy, those brief moments when I feel part of the vast on going process of life. In the few days I have:

Looked in the night sky for the light of a comet.
Watched the deer and the squirrels outside my office window.
Looked at an old photo of my grandfather sent to me by a distant relative.
Enjoyed the sounds of a cello concerto.

Watched a high school play.

Watched my children laugh together.

In these brief moments I feel connected to something larger than myself. I experience the holy. On the holy day of thanksgiving I invite you to join me in giving thanks for such brief experiences of the holy.