



HOLINESS FOR A 'RELIGIONLESS WORLD'

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ABSTRACT

This paper consists of a series of reflections on the urgent need to adopt a more realistic view of holiness, one which restores the process of sanctification to the individual within the context of the inception of a new dialogue with the Lord of all creation. This proposed restoration would involve dismissing both the God and the incarnation hypotheses. The author views this option as the only means by which humanity can extricate itself from the most critical predicaments of our times.

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Holiness for a 'religionless world'

Urgent need for a new context

The prime intent in the following paper is to offer a few reflections on the topic of holiness within the broader context which we have been trying to launch at the Metamode Institute for quite some time now; namely, the urgent need to establish a new dialogue with the Lord of all creation in our times. We believe that nothing less will do if we are to make any progress at extricating ourselves from the kind of pernicious socio-cultural programming which currently seems to dominate our every thought and action; and thusly for disentangling ourselves from the most critical predicaments of our times. For in the end, entering into a new dialogue with the Lord of all creation and our striving for completeness, to become holy, are existentially intertwined: one is the only sufficient condition for the other.

This cultural programming consists of sets of instructions created over the millennia by individuals and groups in positions of power and authority targeting all the domains of the human psyche from the subconscious to the highest levels

of conscious life. This same programming has resulted in the emergence of social, political and religious institutions, virtual hubs, through which and within which individuals are expected to live out their lives. It is through these hubs that the powerful are able to set the parameters for acceptable behaviours for the rest of society, including human criteria for what are appropriate ways of communicating with the Lord of all creation and for what constitutes holiness. Indeed, these hubs have become vetting machines, by which individuals are assigned a place in the universal scheme of things; purely human contrivances intended to fulfill solely the self-serving purposes of the power holders and devoid of actual links to any transcendent realities. If one considers political correctness to be a counter program, one can deduce that a relationship with the Lord of all creation is to be minimized, or at worst become unmentionable, even unrelated to the human spirit.

It is imperative that we strive to muster enough courage and resolve to see through and go beyond these contrivances which hold our mind sets and

spirits captive. If we do, we will discover that striving to become holy--being holy--is an integral part of the experience of being truly human, and as such not as unsoiled and uncomplicated as one would expect. We will discover that it is not alien or supernatural but is rather a natural dimension of what it means to be human, a vehicle through which and in which to explore, discover and realize the human potential, with its infinite possibilities for both good and evil.

Our recent history has amply demonstrated *our* tremendous potential for creating and for destroying. Indeed, during this past century it was the confluence and peaking of these seemingly diametrically opposing forces that boosted human consciousness to a new level of awareness about the urgent need to rethink our relationship with the Lord of all creation and the meaning of holiness.

Temporal glory and ignominy, and human potential for the divine

During this past century we advanced our scientific and technological knowledge at an exponential rate, and in the process, we made great strides in discovering more about ourselves. In fact, through our interaction with the different forms of artificial intelligence we have been able to create, and through the mastery we are gaining at the genetic level, we are coming face to face with the limitless, seemingly infinite possibilities inherent in our human potential. The infinity which some physicists are attributing to the physical universe appears to be simply a reflection of the unfathomable mystery of human existence and of its very own infinite dimension.

What is even more astounding is that this infinite latitude of human intelligence provides the basis for our very own ability to communicate among ourselves and between ourselves and any extraterrestrial intelligent entities we might encounter in the future. And it provides the foundation for our being able to communicate with the Lord of all creation at an instant, and even

to propose that this communication is reciprocal, even though what we are able to discern is at best incomplete and imperfect.

Furthermore, we believe that ever since the dawning of human consciousness we have had an inkling about a special kinship existing between us and our Creator. Not only that, but we have also secretly entertained the thought that our existential destiny is very much intertwined with His, and that all of our human striving, consciously or unwittingly, intentionally or fortuitously is aimed toward a fuller exploration and realization of this kinship in our life. This primal spiritual inkling has kept us moving forward, luring us toward an ostensibly unending search for what and who we are as human beings.

However, during this seemingly long journey, we have made the equally awesome discovery that we are endowed with the gift of freedom, the ability to make our very own choices in engaging with the world, the people around us and God. Most importantly we have come to know that we do have a choice between nurturing our relationship

with the Lord of all creation and pursuing our own path.

Following our own path

Biological evolution and advanced progress in science and technology are no guarantee of a corresponding leap in the moral and spiritual domain. Human freedom is a 'two-edged sword', equally adept at both helping us champion the most noble causes and taking the most gigantic scientific and technological leaps, and at assisting us to perpetrate the most cruel and lethal acts. Over the millennia we have amply demonstrated that we can swing this 'two-edged sword' in either direction with great ease.

During the 20th century, we clearly established beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are incapable of making any moral progress as a species. The vicious, brutal, evil behaviours and actions we displayed during, and in between, two world wars, left an indelible mark on the human spirit. We slaughtered millions of our fellow human beings with impunity and under the guise of political legitimacy and economic necessity.* Subsequent

generations have been often tempted to downplay the repugnant legacy by showcasing the scientific and technological achievements of this most iniquitous epoch. And sadly, a great number of people still do, simply engaging, we believe, in avoidance/denial behaviours, forever trying to shield themselves from the vilest and most deplorable acts ever carried out by human beings upon their fellows.

The evil deeds of this past century shatter or suspend indefinitely any hope in the redemptibility of the human condition, let alone in the existence of any kind of special kinship with the Lord of all creation for millions upon millions of individuals who lived through these horrific times. Indeed, it caused many of these same millions of individuals to abandon any notion of God as someone they could rely on during times of crisis and human tragedy. His apparent refusal to intervene during those dire times, confirmed for them what science was already stating; namely, that the existence of God could not be supported by scientific evidence. Intense feelings of *ennui*, *angst*, and *alienation* infused the human condition

for at least several subsequent generations, transforming themselves in our own times into feelings of *indifference* and *apathy* toward any transcendent dimension of human existence.

Recalling his own personal experience of Auschwitz and the unimaginable human suffering he witnessed and endured in that Nazi concentration camp, survivor Elie Wiesel, in his book *Night*, expresses the following thoughts about what he felt, and what thousands of other detainees thought as they proceeded to celebrate their last Rosh Hashanah just prior to their liberation at the end of World War II:

“What are you, my God? I thought angrily. How do you compare to this stricken mass gathered to affirm to you their faith, their anger, their defiance? What does your grandeur mean, Master of the Universe, in the face of all this cowardice, this decay, and this misery? Why do you go on troubling these poor people’s wounded minds, their ailing bodies?”

“Blessed be God’s name?

“Why, but why would I bless Him? Every fiber in me rebelled. Because He caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves? Because He caused six crematoria working day and night, including Sabbath and the Holy Days? Because in His great might, He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many other factories of death? How could I say to Him: Blessed be Thou, Almighty, Master of the Universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end up in the furnaces? Praise be Thy Holy Name, for having chosen us to be slaughtered on Thine altar....” (6, 66-67)

Thereafter, how could anyone ever expect the Lord of all creation to intervene in any kind of personal or collective human crisis? How could anyone entertain any conception of God as a benevolent and just Being to whom an individual or humanity could turn to in times of dire need and despair?

Heretofore, how could any religious institution or movement and their representatives have the nerve to continue their work with any kind of honesty and credibility knowing very well that their theological constructs and tenets were vacuous and groundless in the face of such vileness?

On a purely human level, how could any human being even dare to hold his or her head high from then on knowing full well that millions upon millions of human beings from several ethno-cultural groups had suffered the cruellest death at the hands of their fellows with impunity and with the most horrific intentions?

In light of the wickedness and brutality shown by human beings to each other during this past century, it was and remains sheer hypocrisy to proffer any religious explanation or express any moral sentiments through any of our existing lexicons in an effort to understand our present human condition. *The holocausts of this past century provide a sufficient cause to justify sealing forever all the religious texts that have been passed*

on to us from aeons past and their associated institutions.

This year will mark the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I. A great majority of human beings have accepted their fate of having to live in a world without God and have hardened their hearts to any talk about the human potential for achieving moral and spiritual growth. They can also plainly observe, in real time, through the electronic media, that men and women throughout the world, and especially the power holders, have not changed. They are still very much driven by greed and corruption, and that evil remains a most powerful force to be reckoned with in the world. While most people feel secure in saying, that, left to themselves the majority of human kind is good and kind, they secretly harbour much suspicion about the ability of a small minority of crafty and evil men and women to instigate and cause much horror and devastation upon an unwary world.

Being holy is and has always been a worldly and secular affair

The historical background described above offers modern men and women with a different perspective for looking at their struggle to become more complete, and thus to become holy. It is a bold and more realistic outlook devoid of using God as a crutch, or as an explanation of convenience for our woes, or as a theological or philosophical construct for operationalizing our imperfect grasp of either visible or invisible realities. It is a view of holiness that does not rely on any form of priestly mediation. It excludes all the countless trappings and rituals of organized religion, means developed from time immemorial to exercise control over the thoughts and behaviour of members.

The new perspective on holiness calls for a fresh and deeply personal response to that existential invitation which can be heard pulsating, in varying decibels, at the very core of our being, to approach God and to start reasoning with Him. This vantage point refers to a real locus in space and time, to actual circumstances and situations wherein

human beings are engaged in the perennial struggle of life, striving to make sense of their circumstances and their inherent demands—a purely secular domain wherein the possibility of communing with the Lord of all creation forever remains a real option, an added value to our existence.

Though new to the modern mind, the existential context described above has always been available as an option since the very dawning of human conscious existence, from the very moment human beings first began to reason. The human mind has always wrestled with this option throughout its relatively short history resulting in the emergence of numerous streams of religious thinking and movements. In fact, it was through one of these religious streams that a rippling and explicit invitation could be heard beckoning human beings, humanity, to reason with the Lord of all creation.

This invitation was discussed in another paper entitled, “‘Come now, let us reason together....’ *The true genius of the Jewish mind,*” which we prepared several years ago. In that paper we allude

to what, we believe, is the highest expectation God has of us creatures, namely: to become holy as He is holy; to become complete as He is complete; to realize the divine nature with which we are endowed. (3, 3f) This expectation is recorded in Leviticus where the Lord God instructs Moses to tell his people to be holy: “You shall be holy; for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” (Lev. 19:1) This injunction is subsequently echoed by Jesus of Nazareth, who, as reported in Matthew 5:48, exhorts his disciples to strive to, “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”. *And being complete (holy) involves nothing more than striving to become the best we can be in our daily life.*

Thus, holiness does not involve striving after something outside of ourselves, as though holiness were some extraneous object to be acquired. There are no performance criteria or benchmarks that are set for us which we could employ in order to gauge the degree of holiness we have been able to achieve. It is an on-going process whereby we strive to discover what we are made of in terms of assets and aptitudes, and to do our very best to

realize these gifts in the existential circumstances in which we find ourselves, for our own benefit and for the well-being of the community in which we live.

As far as we have been able to determine, we had no choice in being born and in the shaping of the existential situation into which we were thrust at birth. And being holy begins with the humble acceptance of these existential givens and to move forward responsibly.

For these reasons, being holy, striving to do the best we can is an individual and highly personal affair. From the mentally/physically/intellectually/psychologically challenged to the highly gifted person, striving to achieve completeness, in whatever way the individual discerns it to be, the act of becoming holy is fraught with all the vicissitudes of human existence. And regardless of where we are situated along this human continuum, none of us can escape the difficulties, the failings and stresses, the ups and downs, the uncertainties and thus the unpredictable outcomes of life. Thus, this striving toward completeness is a worldly affair, not some activity

lived out and/or through intellectual constructs or via the virtual realities formed, in many a case with good and noble intentions of the highest order, by religious institutions or movements and faith communities.

We believe that common, ordinary men and women throughout the ages have always known these views to be true, if not in their minds, certainly in their hearts as they went along their daily lives striving to do the best they could for their loved ones and community. *Their holiness consisted in these humble efforts to act responsibly in the brute face of challenging and at times harsh realities of human existence.* Striving to become holy transcends and, in many a case, defies religious categories; for the latter tend to constrain rather than facilitate the sanctification of the human spirit, whose transformation and refinement can only be achieved in the burning kilns of everyday life as experienced by the common man.

Echoes from the dungeons of Buchenwald and from the hangman`s noose at Flossenburg

The above views echo to some extent the ideas that were lived out and expressed by Lutheran German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945). He was well known in the academic circles of his time for his views on the need for the practice of a “religionless Christianity”. He was an opponent of the Hitler regime for which he was imprisoned in 1943 in Buchenwald and hanged in Flossenburg in 1945. Had he been a Catholic, we suspect he would not have had any difficulty being canonized by now for his courage and witness to his faith—a modern day martyr. We are also confident in stating that he would be the first one, were he able to let us know, to flatly refuse this worldly honour.

Bonhoeffer`s views are best summarized in the following passages taken from his letters dated July 16th and July 18th, 1944, respectively:

“So, our coming of age forces us to a true recognition of our situation *vis-à-vis* God. God is teaching us that we must live

as men who can get along very well without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15.34). The God who makes us live in this world without using him as a working hypothesis is the God before whom we are ever standing. Before God and with him we live without God. God allows himself to be edged out of the world and on to the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us. Matthew 8.17 makes it crystal clear that it is not by his omnipotence that Christ helps us, but by his weakness and suffering.... (1, 122)

“...Man [through the Christian story] is challenged to participate in the suffering of God at the hands of a godless world.

“He must therefore plunge himself into the life of a godless world, without attempting to gloss over its ungodliness with a veneer of religion or trying to

transfigure it. He must live a 'Worldly' life and so participate in the suffering of God. He *may* live a worldly life as one emancipated from all false religions and obligations. To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some particular form of asceticism (as a sinner, penitent or a saint), but to be a man. It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world. (1, 122-123)

"...Jesus does not call men to a new religion, but to life...." (1, 123f)

We concur with Bonhoeffer that our modern age has made it perfectly clear that God as a working hypothesis is not necessary on purely scientific grounds. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines a hypothesis as "an idea or suggestion that is based on known facts and is used as a basis for reasoning or further investigation". The hypothesis has been used for reasoning *ad infinitum* thus permitting individuals to reach conclusions which only raise

further questions or settle on a mix of beliefs which can only be maintained through faith or an amalgam of doctrines and theologies which can *then* only be sustained through the authority of religious institutions. As depicted earlier, the God hypothesis refers to a conception of Him “as a crutch, or as an explanation of convenience for our woes, or as a theological or philosophical construct for operationalizing our imperfect grasp of either visible or invisible realities”. Science has stopped trying to confirm this hypothesis for quite some time now; albeit current theories of the nature and origins of the cosmos seem to beg for the revisiting of the hypothesis.

One can dismiss this hypothesis on the grounds that we are free agents. We were created free and have been left floundering with only our own devices enabling us to problem solve in this world and on the basis of the acquired knowledge to make our own choices. Any kind of intervention on God’s part would nullify this fundamental endowment which defines us as truly human, for better or for worse. Thus, in light of our existential status as free, the hypothesis becomes super-

fluous. And yet, as Bonhoeffer might interject, God remains an overwhelming presence in everything we do through His absence.

As believers, we can argue with Bonhoeffer that by becoming totally man, in all respects except sin, God does manage to share in our humanity and through it demonstrate to us how best to realize our full potential: to become holy as He is holy. Thus, becoming holy becomes an act of living out our existence in the best possible way depending on the circumstances in which we find ourselves. In the core teachings and actions of Jesus of Nazareth, God shows us the way, the truth, and the kind of life that we should be striving to realize in order to become responsible creatures.

If we were to suspend our belief in the Christian story, however, we could say that what Bonhoeffer did was simply substitute one God hypothesis for another. Or better, it was his way of reintroducing the God hypothesis through a back door via the incarnation hypothesis. By the incarnation hypothesis, we are referring to the notion that God became man in the person of Jesus Christ and to

all the sets of beliefs associated with this purported event.

This suspension of belief does not necessarily invalidate our interpretation of what it means to be a Christian. What it does do is tell us that becoming holy is simply a matter of living out our life as best as we can as human beings without relying on any religious props and extraneous expectations. The incarnation hypothesis permits us as believers to live out our life without God and yet to feel, more than ever, His all-embracing presence in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

How is it possible to experience the all-embracing presence and love of God without having to postulate His existence? For us as believers it is possible because, as Bonhoeffer reminded us in a passage quoted earlier, "...Jesus does not call men to a new religion, but to life..." (1, 123f). What kind of life? He calls men and women, as Bonhoeffer tells us, to a life in which we must strive to exist for others, regardless of the suffering and ultimate sacrifice that this call might entail. Likewise, a community of believers must be driven by this same call at all times, a call not originating outside

of human existence, but one which originates with the human existence of Jesus of Nazareth (1, 166), *who is one of us even unto death*. And it is in the life and love radiating through the example of a community of such believers that we can begin to feel God's presence and love among us and for us.

However, we believe that in order to attenuate the suspicion that the incarnation hypothesis is merely a backdoor way of accessing the God hypothesis, we must suspend our belief in it and simply regard it as an option that we can exercise in our efforts to resolve the ego-centric predicament of our human existence: to act responsibly or irresponsibly; to constantly strive to optimize the quality of our choices or to remain content with mediocrity or worse allow ourselves to become indifferent to the consequences of our decisions and behaviour; and to use our freedom for good or for evil. Otherwise, we run the risk of getting trapped in the incarnation hypothesis with all of its associated sets of doctrines. *In the process, we also run the risk of blocking the call from ever reaching us: the call to exist for others, the only key we will*

ever need to open the door leading to the transcendent elements of our human existence.

That is why a God hypothesis, an incarnation hypothesis and their associated theologies and doctrines are to no avail and meaningless in a world in which men and women do not trust each other, conspire against each other, calumniate each other, put each other down, and thus demonstrate very little love for each other. How honest is it to claim that we love and have faith in God whom we cannot see, and at the same time not trust and love our fellows whom we do see on a daily basis? How sincere is it to claim that we believe in Jesus and love him with all our strength and yet distrust and hate our fellow human beings whom we see all around us? How truthful are we to this and future generations by leading them to believe that these hypotheses do make a difference in the kind of moral choices we make when in fact a documentation of the atrocities of this past century and the wickedness we continue to demonstrate in our own times prove otherwise?

In order to bring about a new dialogue with the Lord of all creation and in the process ground

holiness in the actual daily existence of human beings, in their struggle to live out their life responsibly and with dignity we must dismiss the God and incarnation hypotheses. In this early dawn of the 21st century we must learn to live without God or without His alleged incarnation. Paradoxically it is only by putting these hypotheses aside will we able to feel more than ever, as Bonhoeffer might put it, God's all-embracing presence and love, and experience even more deeply the presence and efficacious love demonstrated for us by Jesus of Nazareth. In turn, through our free and unencumbered choices and example we might be able to effect the same outcomes for each other and for a world on the verge of hurling itself over a precipice of greed, powerlessness and helplessness.

Concluding reflections

Over the millennia the power holders have been quite successful in drawing a plethora of constructs through which they have operationalized, idealized, and thus mythologized Jesus and other religious figures to serve their own political ends. We use the term *power holders* here as we

have employed it throughout this paper in its generic sense to mean any one holding a position of power and/or authority, including leaders of religious institutions. While the memberships of religious and political institutions and movements have increased significantly over the millennia, primarily on account of demographic factors, proselytizing, and military exploits carried out in their name, the human condition has experienced very little improvement on the moral plane and, as underscored earlier, in the 20th century exhibited signs of unmitigated savagery and depravation. Such religious institutions and movements have been and remain close-ended social and political inventions which for all intents and purposes exercise very little impact on the amelioration of the human condition.

In this paper we are advocating that holiness be thrust into the existential matrix from which it naturally springs: human existence with all its challenges and vicissitudes. Within this matrix of human existence, holiness becomes a natural trait shared by every human being who is demonstrating due diligence in trying to live a good and

honourable life, a goal which a great number of human beings are already achieving in varying degrees without knowing it and despite the odds.

Thus, holiness is removed from the category of the extraordinary and transferred to the category of the ordinary: to the realm of the commons. Everyone, regardless of his or her station in life, is called upon to become holy, complete; that is, is called upon to consider each and every thought, choice, behaviour and action as steps in the process of becoming more complete: to become holy as He is holy; to become divine as He is divine. *For in the end to be holy is simply to become whole, as much as abilities and life circumstances permit; to create communities and societies that are striving to achieve this same wholeness at the collective level; and build a global civilization that is whole, undergirding and providing the cultural and social tools to its parts to make holiness its existential hallmark.* Within this context, holiness remains an ideal, but one that originates and culminates in the workings and efforts made daily by real individuals in their journey through life.

The inception of a new dialogue with the Lord of all creation resulting in the new context for holiness—for our pursuit of a more complete life—will enable us to personally tap the transcendent elements of our human existence, identify or reaffirm the core values we share and need as human beings, and acquire the spiritual resources to be able to actualize these values for the improvement of the human condition.

What we are proposing is not a quick fix for all the corruption and evil that permeates the human condition in our times. Elements of corruption and evil will always be with us. There will always be individuals whose choices are driven by greed and whose corrupt ways will stop at nothing in order to attain their egotistical ends. It is our hope that what we are proposing will help militate against the evil machinations of which such individuals are capable, and in the process, help lessen the dreadful consequences of their wickedness if not for this generation, perhaps for some future generation.

In closing, we would like to say that the Lord of all creation has no vested interest in religious hypotheses and their associated doctrines,

theologies, and moralities. They are mere human constructs. The Lord of all creation does have a vested interest in our personal holiness, in our personal striving to become more complete as He is. In other words, he does have a vested interest in the kinds of personal choices we make in our lives. He is forever hoping that they are the right ones

As members of the numerous civil societies which we erected all over the world, we truly hit rock bottom in the 20th century. Judging from the numerous conflicts that still exist and of our unwillingness to resolve them, we still have a long way to go before we can develop the moral courage and resolve required in order to pick ourselves up and start building true and just civil societies.

God is most patient with us; He has all the time in the world. I suspect that we too have an eternity to get it right. However, the same cannot be said for each generation that has to go through the vicious cycles of evil, crime and corruption that previous generations have failed to mitigate and manage. It is incumbent upon each generation to

make some progress at improving the human condition. In the end, it is through such efforts that that we become holy as individuals and help the communities in which we live, and the world become more whole and thus more ordered and peaceful.

*A relatively recent documentation of this wickedness can be found in Timothy Snyder, *The Bloodlands. Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, New York: Basic Books, 2010. The book is replete with copious notes and a rich bibliography.

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