Liturgy, Justice, and Holiness

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Back and forth in the Christian liturgy echoes the language of holiness. Already by the fourth century the Sanctus had been introduced into the eucharistic prayer. The people, in response to the recalling of God’s nature and the narrative of God’s actions, are invited to join their voices with those of the hosts of heaven in the words:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Sabaoth; heavenly and earth are full of his glory.

The acclamation derives, of course, from the ecstatic song of the hosts of heaven which Isaiah heard when standing in the Temple (Is. 6:3):

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
heaven and earth are full of his glory.

The song was heard again by John of Patmos in one of his visions:

Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty;
who art and is, and evermore.

In the Orthodox liturgy of John Chrysostom, the priest responds to the people’s acclamation of the saints with the words: “Holy and most holy art thou, and excellent is thy glory, who so loved thy world that thou didst give thee only-begotten Son, that whatsoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” In the liturgy of Basil the Great, the liturgy used in the Orthodox church on more occasions in the year, when the liturgy of John Chrysostom is not used, the response of the priest to the “Thrice-holy” similarly picks up the theme of holiness: “Holy and most holy art thou, and no bounds are there to the majesty of thy holiness: and just are they in all their works, for in righteousness and true judgment hast thou ordered all things for us.

The theme of God’s holiness is struck much earlier in the Church’s worship, however, than in the liturgy of the Mass. Indeed, the theme pervades the Orthodox liturgy more so than it does any other liturgy of Christendom. Before the reading of scripture the priest says:

Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Sabaoth; heavenly and earth are full of his glory.

And there is a response by the people:

Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Sabaoth; heavenly and earth are full of his glory.

In this response, instead of the so-called Praise of Israel:

Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Sabaoth; heavenly and earth are full of his glory.

We read:

Hymn, that is, the “thrice-holy” hymn. Three times they sing:

Holy God,
Holy and mighty,
Holy and immortal one.

Then they proceed with the words:

Glory to the Father, and to the Son,
and to the Holy Spirit,
now and ever and for evermore. Amen.

Holy immortal one, have mercy on us.
Holy God, have mercy.
Holy and mighty, have mercy on us.

The theme of holiness does not surface in liturgies only in the form of acclamations and ascriptions addressed to God. For example, in the liturgies of both John Chrysostom and Basil the Great we find the following dialogue between priest and people, occurring just before communion as the priest lifts up the sanctified bread:

Have mercy upon us.

Your hands have taken, O Christ, the bread to feed the Father, Amen.

There is a variety of earlier versions of this same dialogue. For example, in the liturgy of Saints Basil and Mary, coming to us from Rome, the dialogue takes this form:

For the sake of thy mercy, have mercy on us.

Your hands have taken, O Christ, the bread to feed the Father, Amen.

In this liturgy the dialogue continues:

Holy God, holy in truth, holy in might; holy in thy power, holy in thy glory.

There is another version of this dialogue in the liturgy of the Greek Church, dating back before Constantine the Great, and another version which is found in the liturgy of Cyril of Alexandria, as well:

Hymn, that is, the “thrice-holy” hymn. Three times they sing:

Holy God, holy in truth, holy in might; holy in thy power, holy in thy glory.

The theme of holiness is also evident in the terminology with which God is addressed in liturgical language. Theologians still speak of the “Regnans Hic Homo” hymn, “Thrice-holy, Thrice-holy, Most Mighty One” set in the Kyrie eleison of the Mass. Prescriptions concerning the celebration of the Eucharist still use the words “benediction of the Most Holy.”
Many of us feel that when it comes to holiness we have left behind such earthly, horizontal concerns as justice and entered a higher realm, the realm of the transcendent, of the divine.

We can begin by noticing that the acknowledgment of God's holiness is inseparable from the recognition of an imperative for our holiness. This is suggested by the remnant, occurring several times in the Old Testament and picked up in the New, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:1 Pet. 1:14). It is likewise suggested by the inclusion in the eucharistic prayer of the classic Christian liturgies. Let me cite just a contemporary example, from the Presbyterian Church USA:

We give you thanks of God,The Father and of the Son and make holy this Spirit,The eucharist, your gifts of bread and wine,The cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ,The ascension of the Lord and Lord's gift of the Holy Spirit,The crucifixion and Lord's Prayer of Thanksgiving.

In its constitution in the Sacramental Liturgy, Vatican II goes further and says that the liturgy as a whole is for the sanctification, as well as for the glorification of God.

If one liturgy, and especially from the Eucharist, one cannot do without it, from the mountain, and the thanksgiving to Christ in the glorification of God, in the liturgy, the Church is directed to the person of the Lord. This is maximum effort.

Many of the other traditions of Christendom than A Course in Miracles, have, or hesitate over, one another part of this sentence. What almost no one will dispute is that the liturgy is for making us holy.

Again, one can argue that there is an imperative in the Old Testament and the New Testament, not only for acknowledging God in response to our recognition, but for doing something for making us holy, and for making us holy, not yet in our sanctification, but in the making of holiness and the very meaning of the sentence. We shall explore it as we do it for nothing in the language of liturgy and devotion is more alien to our contemporary secular mentality than speech about holiness. Once upon a time the concept of holiness was fundamental to the way in which human beings thought about reality and experience. That time—for us at least—is past.

A good way to set out is to consider what Jonathan Edwards, that great theologian of holiness, says on the matter. In his well-known "Religious Affections," Edwards distinguishes between what he calls the natural attributes of God and the moral attributes. By "God's natural attributes," Edwards has in mind those attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, etc., that constitute the greatness of God... (p. 258). And then Edwards goes on to say that the

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It is not the beauty of holiness, but the beauty of God’s holiness that is all beauty—no terror. Edwards speaks repeatedly of the beauty and the sweetness of holiness, but recalls once again the visionary experience of God in the temple. Isaiah’s response upon hearing the Seraphims hymn of the host of heaven was to recoil and to burst out with the well-known words, “Woe is me! For 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 Lord, the King of hosts!” (Isa. 6:5). We need not deny that Isaiah felt something of the attraction of which Edwards makes so much, but predominantly he felt fright, terror, awe. It is of course this peculiar paradoxical experience of street terror, of attraction to what frightens one, that Rudolf Otto placed at the center of his phenomenology of the holy in his famous book The Idea of the Holy. Edwards grants, of course, that we may be struck with terrifying awe before the face of God. But he suggests that it is our awareness of God’s natural excellencies that produces this experience, and those natural excellencies are perceived without a similar perception of God’s moral excellencies—that is, his holiness. Holiness, on Edwards’ account, is all beauty—no terror.

Karl Barth, in his discussion of God’s holiness, enables us to take a necessary step beyond Edwards. Rather than seeing God’s holiness as the totality of his moral excellencies, Barth sees God’s holiness as a facet of God’s grace and God’s grace as the totality of the excellencies. Barth sees God’s holiness as a facet of God’s grace and God’s grace as the totality of the excellencies. One of Barth’s concerns is to avoid the picture, with which Edwards presents, of holiness as one among other excellencies of God. In Barth’s view holiness is, as it were, an inalienable qualification of God’s love—God loves in a trustworthiness and holiness is a trustworthiness in God. The grace of God—a grace in and through and for holiness; the grace of God esse is the grace of holiness.

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Thus it is, says Edwards, that

one way in which must begin with a delight in his excellencies, and not even a delight in any other excellencies, for any other excellency is truly lovely without this, and to be known to be truly lovely according to our way of conceiving it. It is still more delightful to picture to ourselves the excellencies of God’s holiness, for other excellencies, to this and therefore this is more lovely that other excellencies should appear lovely in their own nature, till this is seen, and it is impossible now the excellency of the divine nature should appear lovely in their own nature. If we have the love of God’s holiness, the love of holiness, the love of all the excellencies of God’s holiness.

In Edwards’ account there is a very strong antithesis between holiness and justice—or more precisely between holiness and the virtue of justice. In both God and man, holiness is the virtue of justice is one of the main excellencies of holiness. For justice is one of the main excellencies which a man can make the holiness of his excellencies. For it is one of the main excellencies which a man can make the holiness of his excellencies. We are not, but in any case to God and God’s holiness, to have the love of God’s holiness in Christ. In love the love of God’s holiness is a trustworthiness in God. The grace of God—a grace in and through and for holiness; the grace of God esse is the grace of holiness.

Evidently, then, the holiness of God’s grace is a grace in and through and for holiness; the grace of God esse is the grace of holiness.
The bond between the concepts of grace and holiness consists, in the fact that both point to God’s transcendence over the resistance which His being and action encounters from the opposite side. When we speak of grace, we think of the fact that His favourable inclination towards the creature does not allow itself to be soured and frustrated by the resistance of the latter. When we speak of holiness, we think, on the other hand, of the fact that His favourable inclination overcomes and destroys this resistance. To say grace is to say the forgiveness of sins; to say holiness, judgment upon sins. But since both reflect the love of God, how can there be the one without the other, forgiveness without judgment or judgment without forgiveness? (P. 390)

Barth’s first step, in comparison with Edwards, is to sharpen Edwards’ reference to the moral excellencies of God. Those moral excellencies are all seen by Barth as located in God’s love; they are the perfections of the divine loving. Barth’s next step is to say that this loving has the quality of grace—that is, of forgiveness. But there cannot be forgiveness, he argues, without judgment. And it is this loving character of God’s love, implicit in its forgiving character, that grounds his holiness.

As Barth himself goes on to remark, this account wins at once the immediate connection in the Scriptures between the recognition of God’s holiness and our feelings of awe—a connection which we found missing in Edwards’ account. We no longer fall upon hearing of his ways alone, into phrases like “the fear of the Lord,” or “the fear of Heaven.”

As Douglas remarks, the climax of this section is the recognition that the grace which we find in the Scriptures is a grace which restricts. This is because the grace which restricts. It is not a grace which simply forgives sins; it is a grace which also judges sins. And this is important because it means that we cannot simply talk about grace without talking about judgment. For grace, unlike our own mercy, is not simply a matter of forgiving sins. It is also a matter of judging sins. And this is why we find the connection between grace and holiness in the Scriptures. It is a connection which shows us that the grace of God is not simply a matter of forgiving sins. It is also a matter of judging sins. And this is why we find the connection between grace and holiness in the Scriptures. It is a connection which shows us that the grace of God is not simply a matter of forgiving sins. It is also a matter of judging sins. And this is why we find the connection between grace and holiness in the Scriptures.
ture were incompatible with the principles of patterning on which they were constructing their universe; others were compatible. (p. 43)

It is, then, the pattern of cosmic and social order reflected in Israel's regulations concerning defilement that Douglas tries to discern. Before she does so, however, she notes a remarkable feature of the way in which these regulations are presented in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy. In both cases they are the elements of a holiness code. God's declares himself to be holy, this holiness connected with God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt—a continuation, apparently, of Barth's understanding of holiness. And God then calls Israel to be holy as God is holy. It is so as to reflect God's holiness that Israel is called to observe, among other things, the cleanliness regulations. In Leviticus 11:44-45, we read this:

For I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls upon the earth. For I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.

Israel is called to an intuizione throughout its daily existence. Be holy as I am holy. And to be holy one must avoid defilement. This remarkable connection between holiness and cleanliness suggests that we can discern the pattern of the cleanliness regulations of old Israel. We will also have discerned the lineaments of their understanding of holiness.

Before we set out on the attempt to discern this pattern, one more point must be introduced. Over and over it is said that blessing will come to Israel if it keeps itself clean. Israel will be cursed if it defiles itself. And this parallels Douglas's view about the regularities that

reserving them draws down prosperity, appropriating them draws disaster. We are thus entitled to treat them in the same way as we treat other ritual sanctions whose breach unleashes danger to men. The precautions and ceremonies that are focused on the idea of the holiness of God which men must create in their lives. So this is a universe in which men prosper by conforming to holiness and perish when they deviate from it. (p. 51)

Douglas concludes, says Douglas, that cleanliness means, not anything, in part. This seems, in fact, to do no sense. But this doesn't tell us much. Get apart with respect to what? "Grunted," says Douglas, "that its root means separation, the next idea that emerges is that as wholeness and completeness" (p. 51). Correspondingly, then, suggests Douglas, the law in the holiness code is its concern with wholeness and completeness, and we should be interested in both as well, and in the whole context.

As we move toward uncovering the pattern which underlies the inter-relations which, truly speaking, is the root idea of the moment. The interplay of the cleanliness regulations "was brought then to pitch of greatest intensity when they prayed and when they fought. The army could not win without the blessing and to keep the blessing in the camp the camp was to be preserved from defilement like the temple" (p. 53). Consider, then, these instructions which the officers were to issue to the men in camp:

Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying, "What man is there that has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it. And what man is there that has planted a vineyard and has not enjoyed its fruit? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man enjoy its fruit. And what man is there that has betrothed a wife and has not taken her? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man take her." (Deut. 20:5-7)

The pattern seems clear. Those with significant projects which are incomplete, unfinished, are not to fight Israel's battles.

We can move next to the regulations concerning blemishes and unblemished individuals. The animals offered in sacrifice must be perfect, unblemished specimens; and the priests offering the sacrifices must likewise be unblemished. We read that "no man of the descendants of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord's offerings by fire" (Lev. 21:17). So also lepers were unclean; and priests might come into contact with death only when their close relatives died.

Next, if we think of the human body as a sort of container, we can understand why bodily issues were regarded as making one unclean. "When any man has a discharge from his body, his discharge is unclean," we read in Leviticus (15:2). And likewise, "When a woman has a discharge of blood which is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening" (15:19). The special importance of temple and army camp made it especially important that the regulations concerning bodily issues be honored in these precincts. In Deuteronomy, we read that:

When you go into a town among the Canaanites, and among them, you shall not seek their gods, nor worship their images, nor sacrifice to their gods. (Deut. 7:26)

The pattern which Douglas suggests—of wholeness, completeness, perfection, unity, integrity—does indeed seem clear in all these particulars. But what, finally, about the distinction between human and animal animals? Douglas's suggestion is that the Israelites saw a certain unity and on the other as embedded in creation. Core animals are essentially the same, animal ones, in so much as something that one eats, must die. Though not so similar to humans of their kind.
their very kind has a certain imperfection about it. Their very kind represents a violation of the proper boundaries. Their very kind is malformed. Specifically, Israel always worked with that distinction between the skies, the earth, and the water; and it had notions as to the proper form of locomotion in these. Those animals that violated the right form of locomotion for animals of their element were unclean. Thus worms and snakes are unclean because instead of walking or hopping on earth they crawl; eels are unclean because they move in water without fins; and birds with no wings, or inadequate wings, are unclean because they cannot fly.

Along the same lines we can now interpret the distinction between those animals which are clean to eat and those which, if eaten, will defile one. Douglas reminds us that the Israelites, as an agricultural people, would have given pride of place, in their thought about animals fit to eat, to their own domesticated animals. When they asked what it was that differentiated these from others, they noticed that these animals both chewed their cud and had cloven hooves. This then defined them for the boundary between those animals fit for eating and those which would defile one. We can conclude, once again, “that holiness is exemplified by completeness. Holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused” (p. 53). And so, says Douglas,

If the proposed interpretation of the forbidden animals is correct, the dietary laws would have been like signs which at every turn inspired meditation on the oneness, purity and completeness of God. By rules of avoidance holiness was given a physical expression in every encounter with the animal kingdom and at every meal. Observance of the dietary rules would thus have been a meaningful part of the great liturgical act of recognition and worship which culminated in the sacrifice in the Temple. (P. 57)

But where is justice in all this? Right at hand. Thrown right into the middle of the regulations concerning the clean and the unclean, the complete and the incomplete, the blemished and the unblemished, are regulations concerning justice. Where you and I would see a sharp distinction, no distinction is drawn. Near the beginning of Deuteronomy 4, for example, we read: “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth.” This is followed immediately by the instruction, “You shall not eat any abominable thing.” What follows is a list of unclean animals. But shortly the list is broken off and some of the Jubilee regulations are introduced: for example, “At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release. And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, because the Lord’s release has been proclaimed” (15:1-2). Then certain regulations are introduced concerning what we would regard as the cult proper. And these, in turn, are followed by an injunction to pursue justice, concluding thus: “Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land which the Lord your God gives you.” In short, the pursuit or justice is treated as part of the pursuit of holiness. A failure to be holy as God is holy, we must pursue justice as a mode of desecration.

What is the connection? It’s not explicitly stated, but then not much here is said explicitly. We have to try to spy the pattern. Part of the connection seems to be that a just judgment rendered in cases of conflict requires rectitude (Deut. 16:18-19); and as Douglas remarks about the list of actions found in Leviticus 19,

Developing the idea of holiness as order, not isolation, this list upholds rectitude and straight-dealing is held not only as a virtue, but as a virtue. Theft, lying, false witness, cheating in weights and measures, all kinds of dissembling such as seeking a hire to deal (and presumably, speaking evil of one’s brother in your heart (while presumably speaking evil of him to him), these are clearly contradictions between what seems and what is. (Pp. 53-58)

I think it is plausible, however, to see justice and holiness as connected by more than rectitude. An important clue to the contour of justice as understood in the Bible is the repetitious reference to the three social classes of widows, orphans, and aliens. If justice is to be just, such people as these must be rightly treated. The refrain is to be found not only in the prophets and Psalms but here in Deuteronomy. The Lord says to Moses in his great farewell speech to his people: “execute justice for the fatherless and the orphan, and love the sojourner, giving him food and clothing” (Deut. 10:18). What, in particular, does the repetitious reference to widows, orphans, and aliens suggest? Is it to the biblical understanding of the contours of justice? It seems quite clear: the widows, the orphans, and the aliens were the marginal ones in old Israelite society. They were the ones who had little or no voice in the society, and whose claim on the goods of society was, accordingly, fragile and precarious. If the society is to be a just community, there must be social arrangements and practices which assure to such people as those a voice in society and a fair share in its goods—whatever those

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goods may be. At the most fundamental level, those goods are the goods of sustenance. But as we learn from the Sabbath regulations, all the members of society also have a claim to a fair share in the Sabbath rest of the community—in its refreshment. We could cite other goods as well.

In short, what we find in Deuteronomy is that haunting biblical theme of God searching for the hundredth one, of leaving the ninety-and-nine to search for the one who is not yet incorporated into God’s shalom, and asking us to accompany God on that search. A dimension of this is what nowadays is called “the preferential option for the poor.”

With this understanding in mind of the contours of justice, it is not at all difficult to see why justice is treated as a manifestation of holiness. The unjust society is a society in which wholeness and integrity are lacking. For it is a society in which people exist on the margins, on the periphery, hanging on rather than being authentically incorporated into the life and welfare of the community. Such a society fails to mirror the wholeness of God. And when we as Christians recall that this God whose holiness we are called to reflect in our lives and our societies is himself a unitarian community, then it is obvious that the unjust society is an unholy society. It does not mirror God’s communitarian wholeness.

One more important issue must be considered before we close our discussion. But before we explore that issue, let us stand back for a moment to reflect on what we have learned. Fundamental to the Old Testament understanding of holiness is the contrast between God’s wholeness, on the one hand, and on the other, the brokenness of self and society and creation as a whole. The Torah throws up before us a tremendous variety of modes of brokenness. And what the Torah asked of old Israel is that it reflect the holiness of God by avoiding, in various ways, the broken things of our creaturely existence, and by pursuing wholeness. The conclusion is indeed compelling that God’s holiness is his wholeness. Barth saw God’s holiness as confronting us in our sin. Our own reflections lead to the conclusion that that is not the whole of the picture. God’s holiness confronts us in the totality of our brokenness. And that confrontation will not always be in the form of judgment. Sometimes it will be in the form of lament. Of course it’s true that sin is also a form of brokenness. So the right way to make the point is this: God confronts us not only in our ethical brokenness but in our brokenness as a whole. It is in that confrontation that we discern both holiness, God’s wholeness. What Isaiah heard hymned by the hosts of heaven, as he stood in the temple, was there a ruse some wholeness of God. And what he so poignantly felt in himself by contrast with that holiness was brokenness, and the brokenness of the world with which he came into contact.

You and I, as modern Western men and women, have different notions of brokenness from those found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Though justice is still for us a mode of brokenness, we do not see as vividly as examples of brokenness. For us it is quite all right if some of earth’s animals crawl rather than walk upright. The assumptions concerning detestation within the moral and Israel’s holiness code have become alien to us. But for us who are Christians there is a second way in which we find ourselves distanced from the holiness code of old Israel. The words and actions of Jesus meant for us that instead of avoiding, in one way or another, the broken people of this world, we are to embrace them.

Let us develop this final theme by calling attention to the central argument in a recent book by Marcus J. Borg, Conflict, Holiness & Politics in the Teaching of Jesus. Borg, I might add, is a participant in what some have begun to call the third quest for the historical Jesus. To read the New Testament after the Old is to be struck by the fact that the New Testament, and in particular the Gospels, speaks very little of holiness. In principle that might be an insignificant silence. Borg contends that it is significant.

Earlier I quoted the passage from Deuteronomy in which the leader of the army is told to dismiss from the camp all those who have significant incomplete projects. With that passage in mind, consider Jesus’ parable of the Great Feast, found both in Matthew 22:1ff and Luke 14:16ff. Let me quote the passage as it occurs in Luke:

A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many, and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, “Come: for all is now ready.” But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, “I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it.” And another said, “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them.” And another said, “I have a wife and therefore I cannot come.” So the servant came and reported this to his master. Then the householdier in anger said to his servant, “Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame... For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.”

Though the allusion to the Deuteronomy passage seems unmistakable, the point of Deuteronomy has been
inverted. Where in Deuteronomy the army officer orders those with incomplete projects to leave the camp, here in Luke the host erupts in anger when those with incomplete projects beg off attending his dinner. And yet more remarkable, the host expresses his anger by inviting to the banquet those very ones whose blemishes would be seen by the writers of Deuteronomy as making them unsatisfactory for reflecting the holiness of God: the maimed and the blind and the lame.

Borg's thesis helps us to understand these astonishing reversals. The thesis goes like this: When Rome occupied Jerusalem and the temple in 63 B.C. and made Palestine part of the Roman empire, "Religious Jews were faced with the question, 'What did it mean in these circumstances to be loyal to Yahweh?' The answer provided by the postexilic development was clear: be holy." What arose in Israel was a cluster of movements dedicated to the pursuit of holiness. These movements were at one and the same time movements of renewal within Israel and movements of resistance to Rome.

As to how to be holy, different movements had different views. Common to all was the conviction that holiness entailed separation from those who were unclean and the careful observance of Torah, especially its Sabbath and cultic regulations and its regulations concerning defilement. The Essenes, so as to pursue a separated Torah, withdrew to the desert and set up a separated community. The Pharisees, by contrast, tried to practice holiness within general society—and the holiness they tried to practice was not just the holiness Torah prescribed for Israelites in general but that which it prescribed for priests. "For the Pharisees, Israel was to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, following the same laws of purify that normally applied only to priests in the Temple" (p. 58). The project of the Pharisees was to make the home a little temple, with its paterfamilias a little priest.

The effect of these various holiness movements, dedicated both to internal renewal and resistance to Rome, was sharp internal divisions within the Jewish people. Not only were the various movements in conflict with each other; division was heightened between those within such movements and those on the outside. From their desert fastness the Essenes launched sharp attacks on the temple priesthood. And the Pharisees sharply separated themselves not only from Gentiles but from those called "sinners" in the New Testament—those engaged in unsavory and unacceptable occupations. These were counted by the Pharisees as Gentiles, no longer members of the holy people. To a greater or lesser extent the Pharisees also separated themselves from those of the common people who did not follow their own stringent purity regulations.

Within this maelstrom of holiness movements, aimed at renewal and resistance, Jesus initiated another renewal movement. But the essence of the Jesus movement, on Borg's interpretation, was a new and innovative vision of what Israel was to be—a new paradigm, not just a new strategy for attaining the old. Jesus, says Borg, "challenged the quest for holiness by replacing it with an alternative vision" (p. 128). Whereas those who pursued holiness were concerned to separate themselves from external sources of defilement, by contrast, "There is nothing outside a man that by going into him can defile him" (p. 128).

What is it that Jesus meant by mercy? The clues to be found in the passage immediately following Luke's report of Jesus' injunction, "as your Father is merciful," There what makes his sun rise on the evil and sends rain on the just and the unjust? Is it clear: The mercy of God is an inclusive mercy, the evil and unjust along with the good and merciful.

Borg proceeds, within this general idea, to interpret a good many of the incidents in Jesus' life as evidence of God's inclusive mercy. "The ordination of Jesus as a priest, for example, the ordination of his disciples, the ordination of the Samaritans, the ordination of all who seek to follow him..." (p. 130). The ordination of Jesus as a priest, for example, the ordination of his disciples, the ordination of the Samaritans, the ordination of all who seek to follow him..." (p. 130). The ordination of Jesus as a priest, for example, the ordination of his disciples, the ordination of the Samaritans, the ordination of all who seek to follow him..." (p. 130).

Borg summarizes his argument as follows: Jesus' understanding of God as merciful and inclusive for Israel's development as a moral force against the opposition to the quest for holiness. The ethical paradigm was directly responsible for...two main shifts: the central importance of love, the acceptance of the outcasts, and of love of enemies. The first was possible because God was merciful—that is, forgiving, accepting, nourishing of righteous and sinner alike because God accepted such as these. God's children—Israel—were to do so as well. For Israel's internal life, this understanding pointed toward greater inclusiveness, toward an overcoming of the "intra-cultural segregation" which increasingly marked her life. The second was possible and necessary for the same reason, but with primary implications for Israel's "external" life, her relationship to...
But is it true that we find in Jesus “opposition to the quest for holiness”? Granted that Jesus was opposed to the Pharisee’s search for holiness. And granted that he speaks hardly at all of God’s holiness, speaking instead of God’s mercy and love and compassion. Nonetheless, it would be extraordinary if he who taught us to pray, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,” meant to repudiate all concern with holiness. Furthermore, what Jesus over and over insists on in his polemics with the Pharisees is not that we repudiate the Torah but that we rightly appropriate it. A right appropriation requires penetrating to its essence. But it would be remarkable if Jesus thought that the Torah, in its essence, had nothing to do with the holiness of God. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” Jesus is recorded in Matthew (23:23) as saying, “for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith” (cf. Luke 11:42). Borg’s comment on this passage seems to me entirely correct:

To the extent that the imitation of God as holy led to this meticulous concern to the neglect of the weightier matters of Torah, holiness was inappropriate as the dominant model for Israel’s self-understanding and understanding of God. Instead such emphasis was subordinated to a concern pointing to the different dominant paradigm designated by the terms justice, mercy, and faithfulness. These, like holiness, were all characteristics of God and should on an imitatio dei model be characteristic of the community which would be faithful to Yahweh. (P. 102)

What we find in Jesus, so it seems to me, is not the repudiation of holiness but a radically new understanding of how we are to reflect God’s holiness. In Jesus we find, if you will, a new hermeneutic of Torah’s concern with holiness. The holiness of the community is not to be located in which animals it eats and avoids eating, in whether it does or does not tolerate incomplete projects in its army camps, in how it handles those who have bodily issues, in how it classifies the plant and animal kingdoms. The holiness of a community resides centrally in how it treats human beings, both those who are members of the community and those outside, even those outside who are “enemies.” And specifically, the holiness of a community consists not in its whole members avoiding contact with those who are shunned and diseased and broken and wayward. There are none who are truly whole. It consists in the members of the community embracing the broken ones, and working and praying for their healing. It consists in having dinner with prostitutes and traitors and paupers. It consists in healing the blind and lame and lepers. We learn from Jesus that the community which shuns the broken ones can never be a whole community—that is, can never be a holy community. The holy community is the merciful community, the just community.

The Pharisees understood their table to be a little temple. But perhaps Jesus understood their table fellowship in the same way. Of course, Jesus understood a radically different kind of fellowship that is a radically inclusive one, an accepting of the broken, a rejecting of the rejecting one, a fellowship of justice and mercy. Jesus understood differently how we are to appropriate the holiness and the justice and the love and the mercy of God. He used the temple metaphor in his midrashic retelling of the wedding at Cana and in his parables and parables and parables and parables and parables. He is a master of the temple metaphor in which the temple is understood to be the community which is the temple of God. He uses the temple metaphor in all of his teaching, he uses the temple metaphor in all of his prayer, he uses the temple metaphor in all of his teaching and all of his prayer. In Ephesians 2:19-22. Especially the latter, especial the latter, the theme of inclusiveness:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

“Holy things for the holy,” says the Levitical law as he raises the bread before the people, and the prophet answer, “One only is holy, one only is the Lord’s.” Christ, to the glory of God the Father, repudiates such language. Instead he speaks in the language of justice and mercy and faithfulness and love. And he asks us to understand how we are to respond to the holiness and how we are to reflect it.

God’s holiness is God’s wholeness. We are some wholeness. Face to face with that we feel acutely our own sinfulness and brokenness. God is me! For I am lost! For I am a person whose face is deeply unloved. And I dwell in the midst of a people of whom my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. In the tension of the contrast between God’s awe-inspiring holiness and our own tragic brokenness, we find the basis of forgiving judgment and God’s lament. And a vision of cringing in terror, we in thankful contemplation in the heavenly hymn, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts.”

But God asks us for more than liturgy, more than acknowledgment of God’s holiness. God’s asks that in our communities, reflect God holiness. God is Jesus, the Son of the Father. He showed us what it means to be holy. He is the one that it is to befriend the broken ones and not to work on their healing. To do that one must struggle for justice—for the day when all those on the margins have been given place and voice in the community and when the enemy has been befriended.

Holiness joins liturgy and justice. In the liturgy we reflect God’s holiness. In lives of justice and mercy we reflect God’s holiness. In the liturgy we voice our acknowledgment of God’s holiness. In the struggle to justice we embody that acknowledgment.