

IS GOD HOLY?

The holiness of God as revealed in the Bible

It has been mentioned several times in this book that the author finds it helpful to consider the Old Testament as *the history of the promise* and the New Testament as *the promise fulfilled*, in the sense that the Old ultimately can be seen as God's dealings with the human race through His chosen and rebellious people (the Hebrews) under the old covenant, whilst the New deals with God's dealings with the human race through His new covenant made with all peoples, everywhere, who are in practice just as rebellious as the chosen people. Readers may again want to hold this thought of promise and fulfilment in mind as we look back once more into that Older Testament¹. We explored in chapter 2 some of the key *inherent attributes* of God and we noted that, amongst these, the attribute of holiness is a communicable attribute – in other words one that He can and will share with His children.

The word 'Holiness' and the adjective 'Holy' are found more than 900 times in the Bible. Precise definition of the

¹ The Word 'Testament' really means, and carries the idea, of a witness giving testimony. Hence the two halves of the Bible could equally be called the Old Witness and the New Witness.

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word is not altogether straightforward and there remains some divergence of view among theologians as to its exact meaning. The etymology of the Hebrew word *qadosh* is uncertain. It may come from a Hebrew root ‘to shine’, or from a Semitic/Arabic root ‘to cut or separate’. Both interpretations do seem to illustrate in a meaningful way what we understand of holiness at the most basic level. What is truly beautiful about God – His utter holiness, does seem to shine out like brilliant light into this all too often wicked and dark world. When found in the Old Testament the word ‘holy’ focuses on that idea of separation. We can say that at its most basic, holiness is (negatively) a cutting off or separation from that which is unclean and (positively) a consecration to that which is pure. In the Old Testament the word holiness signifies God’s transcendence over all that He has created, as well as the moral perfection of His character. God is holy in that He is totally different from all that He has created and yet still exercises power and sovereignty over it. The following verses help to illustrate the Old Testament view of the holiness of God:

God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne
(Psalm 47:8 NKJV).

I will make My holy name known in the midst of My people Israel, and I will not let them profane My holy name anymore. Then the nations shall know that I am the LORD, the Holy One in Israel. (Ezekiel 39:7 NKJV)

**For thus says the High and Lofty One
Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
“I dwell in the high and holy place,**

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**With him who has a contrite and humble spirit,
To revive the spirit of the humble,
And to revive the heart of the contrite ones.**

(Isaiah 57:15, NKJV).

**I am the LORD, your Holy One,
The Creator of Israel, your King.**

(Isaiah 43:15, NKJV)

**For our shield belongs to the LORD,
And our king to the Holy One of Israel.**

(Psalm 89:18, NKJV)

**Also the sons of those who afflicted you
Shall come bowing to you,
And all those who despised you shall fall prostrate at
the soles of your feet;
And they shall call you The City of the LORD,
Zion of the Holy One of Israel.**

(Isaiah 60:14 NKJV)

From the suffering, though faithful and morally upright biblical character Job, we encounter the following recognition of God's beautiful holiness as Job affirms that, in spite of all his underserved and inexplicable suffering: **. . . no matter how great my pain, I know that God is holy; I have never opposed what he commands.** (Job 6:10, GNB)

So in the Old Testament God's holiness, as a concept, helps us to understand that He is completely separated from all that is evil and defiled. God cannot do evil and His character really is the standard for moral perfection.

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It is again from the book of Job that we hear this clarion truth: . . . **listen to me, you men of understanding: Far be it from God to do wickedness, and from the Almighty to commit iniquity.** (Job 34:10, NKJV)

The NIV translation of Psalm 34:10 renders wickedness as ‘evil’ and iniquity as ‘wrong’ – but the essence of the verse in both translations is much the same. Far from being unjust, God will be praised for His standards of morality and justice: **But the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God who is holy shall be hallowed in righteousness.** (Isaiah 5:16).

God’s holiness – His purity of character and His transcendent majesty are wonderfully balanced in Psalm 99. To modern readers the language may seem extravagant, but we need to understand that this is the outpouring of a heart melted into the love of a totally good, a totally dependable and a totally holy God, Who has proved His faithfulness to previous generations:

**The LORD reigns;
Let the peoples tremble!
He dwells between the cherubim;
Let the earth be moved!
The LORD *is* great in Zion,
And He *is* high above all the peoples.
Let them praise Your great and awesome name—
He is holy.
The King’s strength also loves justice;
You have established equity;
You have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.
Exalt the LORD our God,
And worship at His footstool—
He is holy.
Moses and Aaron were among His priests,**

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**And Samuel was among those who called upon His
name;
They called upon the LORD, and He answered them
He spoke to them in the cloudy pillar;
They kept His testimonies and the ordinance He gave
them.**

**You answered them, O LORD our God;
You were to them God-Who-Forgives,
Though You took vengeance on their deeds.
Exalt the LORD our God,
And worship at His holy hill;
For the LORD our God is holy.**

(Psalm 99 NKJV)

The Old Testament also demonstrates to us the inner, moral and spiritual dimensions of God's holiness. Human beings, men and women, have been created in the image of God (Genesis 1: 26) and are called to cultivate the holiness of God's character in their own lives. **"Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy"** (Leviticus 19:2). God wants and expects us to be holy, for only in that way can we ultimately have communion with Him. Recognising that we are by our own rebellious nature unholy, God has made it His business to provide a pathway for us to become like Himself. Psalm 15 looks at the ethical implications of God's demand that we should be holy. So the psalmist asks:

**LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle?
Who may dwell in Your holy hill?
He who walks uprightly,
And works righteousness,
And speaks the truth in his heart;
He who does not backbite with his tongue,
Nor does evil to his neighbor,**

**Nor does he take up a reproach against his friend;
In whose eyes a vile person is despised,
But he honors those who fear the LORD;
He who swears to his own hurt and does not change;
He who does not put out his money at usury,
Nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.
He who does these things shall never be moved.**

(Psalm 15, NKJV)

When we decide to follow God, our lives will display real evidence of that decision. In much the same way, the prophet Isaiah characterizes God's ransomed community as **the Holy People, the Redeemed of the LORD** (Isaiah 62:12). Through the Lord Jesus a new covenant is established with a new *redeemed people* — those who have put their faith in God through Jesus. So in the New Testament in the letter to the Hebrews we read: **He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.** (Hebrews 9:15, NKJV).

We will leave for the time being this concept of the Lord Jesus as mediator of a new covenant because we are entering into some deep theological areas that will be explored more fully in chapter 10. For now it is sufficient simply to note that a holy God would be expected to have a holy Son. Everything that we encounter in the Old Testament points, ultimately, towards the world's need for a Saviour (or a Messiah), and He is precisely the person God sends to the world according to the New Testament.

Holiness is regarded by many as a moral attribute of God as it shows us *positively* His purity and *negatively*, His complete freedom from sin. Holiness, then, is a general term for the moral excellence of God as well as His freedom from

all moral limitations in His moral perfection. As the prophet Habakkuk reveals: **You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness** (Habakkuk 1:13, NKJV). This is a clear declaration expressing the moral sensitiveness of God, Who shrinks from all evil and sin. He shrinks from it not because He is afraid of it, but because He is holy and sin is deeply offensive to Him. Hopefully by now we are getting a sense of what the holiness of God is, but what we have explored so far is rather more negative than positive.

We gain a fresh insight into God's holiness as we consider that holiness is the summation of all those characteristics that theologians generally call the attributes of God, some of which we looked at in chapter 2. Holiness can be thought of as the *whole* of which other attributes are a *part*. Holiness might then be thought of as the Divine nature in which all His attributes subsist, or as 'the attribute of attributes'. Some have suggested that holiness is a *transcendent attribute* that runs through all the other attributes and casts glory upon each of them. Jonathan Edwards,² with his classic Christian insight, wrote: 'The holiness of His nature is the cause and reason of holy determination ... the foundation of all His will, purpose and decrees'. He said it was 'the beauty of God's moral attributes', and that 'no other attribute is truly lovely without this, and no otherwise than it derives its loveliness from this.'³

Another great theologian, Professor R.A. Finlayson,

² Jonathan Edwards (October 5, 1703 – March 22, 1758) – Eighteenth century colonial American preacher and one of the greatest and most profound American evangelical theologians. His sermons and writings stimulated a period of renewed interest in Christianity in America.

³ *Works*, vol. II, p. 143.

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made the similar point⁴ — that Holiness is more than a mere attribute of God — rather it is in a very real sense the sum of all His attributes, the outshining of all that God is. Finlayson used the simile that just as the sun's rays containing all the colours of the spectrum come together and blend into light, so all the attributes of God come together in His self-manifestation and blend into holiness. To conceive of God's being and character as merely a synthesis of abstract perfections would be, said Finlayson, to deprive God of all reality. In the God of the Bible these perfections live: they function, they operate, they burn — in holiness! Our God is a consuming fire! If we consider holiness, then, as the overall expression of the Divine perfection, we will begin to grasp why God's holiness and His glory are so frequently associated in Scripture, as the One who is 'glorious in holiness, fearful in praises', and as the One who 'swears' by His holiness, as though it were the fullest expression of Himself. It is not surprising, therefore, that holiness is expressly linked in Scripture to each Person in the Trinity, not only to the Father, but also to the Son and the Spirit, as the highest expression of divinity, and claiming for them the excellence of the Divine nature.

Because God is holy He cannot be indifferent to sin. He cannot ignore it, for example by the mere exercise of His clemency. God will never wink at our sin and 'make everything all right in the end'. It must be added, because God is holy He cannot be appeased by the sinner's own effort to 'make-up' for his wrongdoing. In all other religions, notes Finlayson, salvation is sought by self-effort, because God is not conceived to be absolutely holy.

⁴ In a June 1955 lecture to Westminster Chapel in London on the holiness of God. Interested readers will find this full lecture available on the internet.

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‘There are but two religions in the world: salvation by grace and salvation by works. Salvation by works is based on too low a view of the holiness of God. There is so much aesthetic religion which is nothing else than bringing man’s artistically conceived religion to God in an attempt to know and please Him. True religion consists in the sinner coming into the presence of God that he may get Divine religion. The one makes religion his god, the other makes God his religion.’⁵ The author suggests that readers may want to re-read Finlayson’s comment immediately above several times as it is really quite profound and speaks directly into the Godist philosophy with its overarching desire to create a synthesis of religions.

The holiness of God revealed through Christ

As we intend to return to this subject later in chapter 10 we simply need to note here that in Christ’s redemptive work we see an amazing manifestation of God’s holiness. We see a vindication of God’s right to give (or more correctly, using two theological technical terms, to *impute* and to *impart*) holiness to human beings who are, both in state and condition, unholy. He is holy, yet he gives holiness to those who are unholy. In the atoning work of Jesus Christ we have an act of God which removes all that hinders our participation in His holiness. The Bible summarises the overall problem in these words: **For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.** (2 Corinthians 5:21, NKJV). In the Lord Jesus we find holiness manifested and holiness vindicated: the Cross in practice reconciles

⁵ Professor R.A. Finlayson — The Campbell Morgan Memorial Bible Lectureship — 22nd June 1955, Westminster Chapel, Buckingham Gate, London

holiness and love. It was common during the twentieth century to regard love as the overriding feature of the Divine character, and indeed in much of contemporary Christianity Divine holiness is unhealthily subordinated to Divine love, with the dangerous side effect of distorting both holiness and love. So today in much of Christianity Divine holiness is compromised and Divine love has been transmuted into something that is too often little more than sheer sentimentality.

Without the Cross, love and holiness are often considered to be rival attributes, in some way negating or cancelling each other, either holiness overruling love, or love obscuring holiness. But in the Cross of Christ Divine love and Divine holiness combine perfectly to create a unique relationship with mankind. The necessity of the atoning sacrifice (of Jesus taking our place on the cross) arises from God's holy character — the principle simultaneously of His love and righteousness. The difficulty of how to reconcile the reality of God's holiness with Divine justice in relation to sin, receives its answer in the Cross of Christ. There holiness is not only vindicated but made available to humans. The problem of how God could hate and condemn the sin and yet love and save that same sinner has found its solution in the death of Jesus Christ His Son.

Can the Godists' 'god' claim holiness?

The author once engaged in a debate with an older (and wiser!) Christian about the interpretation of Genesis chapter 1. Without a clear recollection of the debate and precisely what was said, the author recalls well that the wiser Christian gently rebuked him with the comment, which he made with a slight and patient smile. Extending his Bible in his hands he said: "So you think that God has given us a pack

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of lies to believe, do you?” He had made a telling point: it is difficult and dangerous to ‘write off’ anything in the Holy Bible or to say that what is written needs to be reinterpreted in the light of modern circumstances. Reverting to the Godists’ core beliefs, we need to measure these against the standard of holiness we have begun to explore in this chapter and to challenge whether their understanding of ‘god’ can match the requirement of moral perfection that is encompassed in holiness. We remind ourselves at this point, that Godists variously believe that:

- God has revealed Himself in many different ways, especially in the so-called ‘higher religions’;
- God has revealed Himself in ways that are (or may very easily be considered to be) contradictory;
- The various scriptures of the various religions have been tampered with and/or misinterpreted by humans (implication: God has not troubled Himself to procure for us dependable holy writings, nor has He procured for us trustworthy religious teachers, howsoever known);
- There are many paths to God and no one religion holds all the answers.

Godism, we discovered, shares and borrows beliefs selectively from other philosophies: a Godist would share with a Deist the view that God can be discovered through reason, although the Godist would add that this is not the sole means of an authentic encounter with the Eternal. In chapter 5 we discovered that Monism is the philosophical idea that there is unity in any given field of inquiry, even where this is not to be expected. Some Monist philosophers hold that there is one god, with many manifestations in different religions. *Deism* is both a religious and philosophical belief that a supreme ‘god’ exists which created the physical universe and that religious truths can

be arrived at by the application of reason and observation of the natural world. *Theism*, a philosophical position not to be identified with any particular religion, believes in the existence of God/gods and that this God or ‘gods’ reveals Himself to His creatures. Godists do not believe in the total veracity of any of the ‘scriptures’, all of which they believe have been corrupted by humans, so Godists have ‘seen’ a greater truth than that acknowledged by singular adherents of *the religions*.

We noted in chapter 5 that Godism shares or borrows beliefs of all the major religious philosophies. It is God-centric, to the extent that it believes in a deity or deities which have an ‘emotional’ interest in the mortal. Some Godists are indeed adherents of particular religions but they are all *religion-negative* to the extent that where a religion’s teachings get in the way of the overall thrust of Godism then the Godist is happy to bypass or trample the religion, which is not allowed to stand in the way of the overall belief. Godism seeks to draw out and amplify a theme that is seen to run through all the (higher) religions — that of compassion. A Godist generally believes that God has established religions to help humans to encounter ‘him’ or ‘it’. All religions contain good and all contain bad: it is up to the individual to discern what is good and to ‘follow’ that. Godists hold their ‘god’ culpable and answerable for the sins and woes of this world, even if ‘he’ or ‘it’ in turn has the power and the authority also to hold us responsible. Godist belief is therefore a sort of mutual moral accountability but where ‘god’ will have the final say. Godists hold the slightly arrogant view that they can ‘see’ more perceptively than those of no faith (agnostics or atheists) as well as more clearly than those of *the religions*, who are limited to perceiving the ‘truths’ only within their own dogma.

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Having looked briefly at the holiness of God as revealed from the pages of the Bible and reminded ourselves of the basic beliefs of Godism, we must once again challenge whether this Godist ‘god’ has any right to be considered holy — certainly by the standards of the Holy Bible. A few key observations should make this point for us: **I will make My holy name known in the midst of My people Israel, and I will not let them profane My holy name anymore. Then the nations shall know that I am the LORD, the Holy One in Israel.** (Ezekiel 39:7, NKJV)

God’s name is holy, yet Godists say ‘god’ has allowed his name to be used in a multiplicity of conflicting ways. They think some humans are allowed to know god as a single divine person and others are allowed to see god in a multiplicity of guises; that for some there will be a single death and judgement to be faced, yet for others there will be a constant reincarnation until (perhaps) they reach an exalted state by their own good efforts. For Christians there is an understanding that by their own efforts they can never be found right with God and must accept the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. But for Muslims the cross is a fiction (‘the cruci-fiction’) and Jesus cheated the executioner. Can a ‘god’ who supposedly reveals ‘himself’ or ‘itself’ in such diverse ways be called morally pure, especially when it leads to a lifetime of confusion between ‘his’ religions?

Therefore listen to me, you men of understanding: far be it from God to do wickedness, and from the Almighty to commit iniquity. (Job 34:10, NKJV)

Far be it from God to do wrong, stated Job, emphatically. Yet the Godist accuses god of telling the Christians that there is one path to God (Matthew 7:13 — **small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life**), yet to Hindus that there are thousands! Is this good or evil? God presents His Son

as a prince of peace, yet the godists tell us sent Muhammad who led the Battles of Badr, Uhud, Dumatul, Banu, Ahzab, Khibar, Mutah, Hunain, Taif, and Tabuk. Are these two revelations compatible? If not, but if both come from ‘god’, then surely ‘god’ cannot be holy? To the Christians, the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross of crucifixion is the locus of history: **And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit.** (Matthew 27:50, NKJV). But to Muslims this is a lie: ‘They uttered against Mary a grave false charge; they said (in boast), we killed Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah; but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them’ (Q4: 156-158). If ‘god’ has revealed these two diametrically opposed statements, then ‘god’ is not committed to truth. If ‘god’ is not committed to truth, then ‘god’ is not holy. It really is for the Godists to justify their position. As the author’s wise Christian mentor challenged so many years ago, the author repeats the simple question to people who consider themselves to be Christians who also hold Godist beliefs: ‘So you think that God has given us a pack of lies to believe, do you?’

But the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God who is holy shall be hallowed in righteousness. (Isaiah 5:16, NKJV.) Righteousness and justice flows like a mighty river from the God of the Bible. Readers may want to access a good Bible encyclopedia and follow the concept of righteousness in detail. In this chapter we simply pose the question again to the Godist: how can a ‘god’ be considered to be righteous when ‘he’ or ‘it’, tells Jews through the old covenant (fulfilled in the new covenant) and repeats in the New Testament, that they must not worship idols (e.g. Isaiah 44; Jeremiah 10:2–5; Psalm 115:2–8; Zechariah 10:2; Isaiah 45:16 and 20; Isaiah 46; Psalm 40:4;

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Acts 17:29–30, as just a few references) and yet that same ‘god’ allows other religions, Hinduism and Buddhism in particular, to worship idols? Apart from being inconsistent, could this be considered a remotely ‘righteous’ action on the part of God? How does such a confused revelation from this ‘god’ square with the attributes of Truthfulness, Wisdom, Holiness, and Love that we began to explore in chapter 2? We are bound to repeat, in the context of holiness which we have begun to explore in this chapter, can the Godists’ ‘god’ be called holy? **“You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy”** (Leviticus 19:2, NKJV). When God made this command, had He forgotten that in the past and in the future He would also reveal Himself in ways that He had already pronounced as unholy?

The Holy Spirit

Many good books have been written about the Holy Spirit, so what follows here need only be a brief summary. But in the context of a Holy God we must consider the Holy Spirit and the normative Christian view of that Spirit. He is the third person of the Trinity: the Hebrew word *ruah* and the Greek word *pneuma* are the words used from earliest times to explain and describe the experience of Godly power working in, upon and around humans, and understood by those humans as the power of God. The Bible reveals to us the Spirit as truly God, a personal being and not merely a power for good. Everything said of God can be said of the Holy Spirit and we should speak of Him with reverence, and indeed approach the whole subject with the utmost reverence. Since the Holy One does what is holy, we are to beware of any idea that He might command us to do something that is unholy. Things that are said of a person are said of the Spirit in the Bible, as well as things that could

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only be said of a divine being, as this quick Bible search may help us to see:

Matthew 28:19

2 Corinthians 13:14

Luke 1:35

Psalms 139:7–10

Matthew 12:31

John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13–14

Acts 5:3

Romans 8:26–27

Galatians 4:6

Ephesians 4:30

Hebrews 9:14

1 John 4:1–3

In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit came upon particular men and women for special tasks, but a future outpouring was promised — another case, if you like, of the promise (Old Testament) and the fulfilment (New Testament). In the Old Testament the Spirit was not given to God's people in general, as He has been since Pentecost (Acts chapter 2). He is the spiritual presence of Christ with His people:

Matthew 1:18; 3:11; 10:20

Luke 1:15; 2:25–27; 3:16, 22; 4:1

Luke 11:13

John 3:5, 6, 8

John 7:39; 14:17; 16:7–8; 20:22

John 14:16–18, 26; 15:26

At Pentecost a new day dawned. The Holy Spirit became a free gift of grace available to all who believe:

Acts 1:4, 8; 2:1–7

Acts 2:18, 38; 4:8, 31; 7:55; 8:18–22

Acts 10:44–45; 13:2, 4; 19:2

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The Bible distinguishes between *having* the Spirit and being *filled* with that Spirit. The ultimate command for Christians remains: be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). In the life of a Christian believer, in greater or lesser measure, we will expect to see the fruit of the Spirit in evidence. Like fruits on a tree this will ‘grow’ naturally and will be the natural outcome of a life spent as a disciple of Jesus. That fruit, set out in Galatians 5:22–26 is: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility (or gentleness) and self control. Where these things are absent in the life of a believer, or where there is a preponderance of unholy fruit (probably the opposite of each of those mentioned above) then we may have to doubt the reality of any profession of faith in Jesus. So, for all those Godists who try to claim that ‘Christians’ get involved in brutal religious wars (something we explored in chapter 5) then we have to point out that, not only is such temporal warfare condemned by Christ, but those who prosecute such warfare are unlikely to be evidencing all that fruit in their lives. No matter what an IRA⁶ terrorist may say or think, he cannot be cited as a disciple of Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit! But the Bible goes further: not only are there natural fruits that will be evidenced in the lives of all true followers of Jesus, there are also special gifts, given to His disciples in order to carry out whatever ministry Jesus has planned for them. These gifts are listed in 1 Corinthians 12:4–11 and 28. They are: the message of wisdom; the message of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, different kinds of tongues, interpretation of tongues — and, finally, the gift of administration.

⁶ Irish Republican Army

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The challenge goes back to the Godist who insists that ‘god’ is revealed in different ways through different ‘faith systems’: can a God who promises to lavish all this good fruit and good gifts to one set of followers, and provide to Christians fruit and gifts that are *prima facie* so much better and so much more sublime than the gifts and fruits evidenced in *the religions*,⁷ be considered to deal with followers on a fair and equitable basis? Godists need to tell us what are the counterpoint/compensatory ‘gifts’ and ‘fruit’ evidenced in their other religions. Surely we would expect to find at least as many? If ‘god’ gives special gifts only to a favoured set of believers, then surely this is unfair to the followers of his (its) other religions? If the Godists’ ‘god’ is unfair, as we have just explored, then surely at the end of the day ‘he’ or ‘it’ must fail the test of holiness? It seems to be an open and shut case: the Godists’ ‘god’ is unholy.

⁷ See chapter 11