

Holiness in Islam: A Qur'anic Understanding of the Conceptions of Divine and Human Holiness

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Abstract: *Islam and Christianity share the language of holiness (the qds root), yet the conceptions of this holiness differ within each system. In this article we will explore references to holiness as they appear in the Qur'an, considering what the Qur'an means by holy. After I examine the qur'anic use of this language, I will compare that use to the biblical conception in order to expose the manner in which the shared language shared language obscures the differences between what each faith means by those words. Communicators of biblical truth among Muslims will benefit from recognizing the Islamic meaning that could distort apprehension of the biblical command to, "Be holy as I am holy."*

Key Words: *Bible, Christianity, comparative religion, holiness, Islam, Qur'an*

Islam is a monotheistic faith. The Islamic conception of God's oneness and transcendence is central to its teachings about God. Interestingly, the language of holiness—language central to the biblical conception of God and the expectations for God's people—is hardly present within the Qur'an. In fact, throughout the Qur'an, there are only ten occurrences of the root *qaf-dal-sin* (Hereafter *qds*), which is usually translated using various forms of the word "holy."¹

Since there are so few occurrences, we have the advantage of being able to consider the usage of this word within the horizons of the Qur'an's text exhaustively, seeking to understand its relationship to the apparent biblical counterpart.

Students of both faiths should compare the biblical and qur'anic use of *qds* because the Qur'an uses *qds* language in renarrating the story of Moses, the burning bush, and holy ground. In Exodus 3, Moses

approaches a bush that is burning but not consumed and is instructed to remove his sandals because he is standing on holy ground. The Arabic Bible uses *qds* to refer the ground as "holy." Likewise, the Qur'an reports this incident in two places referring to the valley in which it occurred as "holy" and connects the instructions to remove his sandals to this reason.

Given the presence of the same language in the Qur'an as is used in the Bible, are the qur'anic and biblical conceptions of holiness equivalent? As this essay will demonstrate, the conceptions diverge despite the common nomenclature.² Having seen the differences, then, it remains to consider the theological implications of differing understandings of holiness.

This essay will explore each of the occurrences of the *qds* word group in the Qur'an in an effort to locate their usage within the horizons of the Qur'an. We will first consider and compare the idea of divine holiness in the Qur'an and the Bible, and then we will turn our attention to the conception of holiness as it pertains to the created world with a special emphasis on human holiness. Finally, having observed the differences, this essay will present the theological impact of these differences along with suggesting missiological implications.

Qur'anic Conceptions of Divine Holiness

As noted in the introduction, one would be hard-pressed to find a religion in which the conception of god is more austere and transcendent than the god of Islam. As the Japanese scholar of Islam states in his book, *God and Man in the Qur'an*, "the world of the Qur'an is essentially theocentric."³ By this he means that the concept of Allah is inescapably at the center of the entire language and worldview promoted by the Qur'an. In fact, the Qur'an's use of Allah gives it a more central place than pre-Islamic Arabic afforded to this word and the concept it conveys.

If, then, Allah is at the center of the qur'anic worldview, we must consider how the concept of holiness relates to Allah. In fact, the Qur'an

² The Qur'an also includes instructions for pursuing purification and forgiveness that the Bible would connect to the pursuit of holiness. However, as they appear in the Qur'an, holiness is never connected to the processes nor is a follower instructed to pursue holiness. Perhaps another study might be done to understand the roles of purification and forgiveness as they appear in Islam. However, due to the disconnect demonstrated by this essay between such concepts and holiness, it will be sufficient for the purposes of this project to restrict our attention to the qur'anic use of *qds*.

³ Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur'an* (Lahore, Pakistan: Suhail Academy, 2002), 37.

¹ All ten of these references to the qur'anic use of this word group are listed in an appendix at the conclusion of this article, having been drawn from Kais Dukes, "Qur'an Dictionary—ق د س," *The Quranic Arabic Corpus*. <https://corpus.quran.com/qurandictionary.jsp?q=qds>.

does use *quds* to describe God in three specific places: Qur'an 2:30, 59:23, and 62:1. All of these locations use the adjectival form of the word with the attached definite article to refer to Allah as "The Holy (One)" in a sequence of appellatives such as the Sovereign, the Mighty, and the Wise. We will look at each of these briefly along with some Islamic commentary that sheds light on historical interpretation of these verses.

Qur'an 2:30

*(Remember) when your Lord said to the angels, "Surely I am placing on the earth a ruler." They said, 'Will you place on it someone who will foment corruption on it, and shed blood, while we glorify (You) with Your praise and call You holy?' He said, "Surely I know what you do not know."*⁴

In this passage, the angels are protesting God's intention to create and place a human ruler or *khalif* on the earth. Amid their protest, they contrast the likelihood of humans spoiling the creation by shedding blood with the honorable consistency of praise that the angelic host will render to God. This praise is coupled with the angelic recognition that God is to be called holy.

This occurrence of *quds* is slightly different than the ones that follow in that it is set in the context of angelic dialogue. While the statement of God's holiness is made declaratively, its place in the context of angelic misunderstanding of God's plans gives it a unique dimension. It is not, however, the only place that the Qur'an affirms God as holy. The two other verses state it clearly and without ambiguity.

Qur'an 59:23

He is the God, the One who—(there is) no God but Him—is. The King, the Holy One, the Peace, the Faithful, the Preserver, the Mighty, the Sole Ruler, the Magnificent. Glory to God above what they associate!

In this passage there is some question as to whether *quds* (Here as *al-qudusu*) is to be taken independently or adjectivally with the preceding reference to the king (*al-malik*). This means that it could be read as recorded above—*The King, the Holy One*—or perhaps it could be read as *The Holy King*. Given the list of appellatives surrounding it, the more likely reading is the independent reading. The meaning, however, does not change dramatically one way or the other.

Here *quds* occurs in a sentence that clearly affirms the Islamic confession of faith that was eventually codified within Islamic history and

⁴ Unless otherwise stated, this and all translations of the Qur'an are taken from A. J. Droge, *The Qur'an: A New Annotated Translation* (Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2013), 380.

practice and is known as the Shahadah: There is no god but Allah (or "The God"). As is characteristic of qur'anic rhetoric, this exclamation is followed by a string of references to Allah's actions and aptitudes. Within this list we find *quds* as a reference to God. The definite article attached to this language sets God in a category unto himself as THE Holy One—in some sense, this functions as a superlative. This same language and rhetorical positioning is present in Qur'an 62:1.

Qur'an 62:1

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is upon the earth glorifies God, the King, the Holy One, the Mighty, the Wise.

Again, in this verse, the pairing of the word for king and *quds* (*al-malik al-qudusu*) provides some ambiguity as to how to understand the syntactical function of *al-qudusu*. But again, determining the precise function of the word is unnecessary for our purposes. In the context of this passage we see that God receives the praise of all that is in creation. He is recognized as the wise one—a character affirmation—as well as the King or the Sovereign—a status affirmation. In the midst of these two affirmations is the reference to God as the Holy One.

Early Muslim Commentators and God as The Holy One

For early Muslim theologians, these references to holiness are variously explained. For instance, the well-known commentator Jalalayn writes, "All that is the heavens and all that is in the earth glorifies God all proclaims His transcendence the *lām* of *li'Llāhi* is extra; *mā* is used instead of *min* in order to indicate the predominance of non-rational beings the King the Holy the One Who transcends what does not befit Him the Mighty the Wise in His kingdom and in His actions."⁵

Taking this explanation in a slightly different direction, Ibn 'Abbas explains that "the Holy One" refers to both God's purity and the fact that he has no son nor partner.⁶ This is the way that Ibn 'Abbas explains the

⁵ Al-Jalalayn, *Tafsir Jalalayn*, Feras Hamza, trans. Royal Aal Bayt Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=74&tSoraNo=62&tAyahNo=1&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>.

⁶ Ibn 'Abbas, *Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn 'Abbas*, Mokrane Guezou, trans. Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=73&tSoraNo=59&tAyahNo=23&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>. See the same language and explanation in Ibn

reference to God as “The Holy One” both in his comments on Qur’an 59:23 and also the occurrence in Qur’an 62:1.

Still another commentator, Jalalayn, writes that “The Holy [means] the One sanctified from what does not befit him.”⁷ While Ibn ‘Abbas seems to intentionally shape his understanding of holiness in anti-Christian terms, the others recognize a purity and perfection that would not be significantly different than a Christian understanding.

While the similarity in usage and understanding is demonstrated by such Muslim theologians, the two occurrences of this nomenclature in reference to God stand in stark contrast to the hundreds of occurrences in the biblical material. In fact, it is interesting that of the ten occurrences of the *quds* word group in the Qur’an, only three are used to describe God.

Again, we must consider how the Qur’an uses the *quds* word group to describe the created world and creatures. And what we will find is that there is a significant difference in the amount of usage compared to the biblical account, but there is also a profound omission in the usage as it pertains to human creatures especially.

Qur’anic Conceptions of Creaturely Holiness

The remaining seven occurrences of the *quds* word group are applied to aspects of the created order. They occur in reference to two specific things: the “holy spirit” and sacred space. For readers unfamiliar with the qur’anic character of the “holy spirit,” such mentions are not references to the third person of the Trinity. Rather, Islamic interpreters typically understand the Qur’an’s “holy spirit” to be a reference to the angel *Jabril* (trad. Gabriel). Thus, as with any other angel, it is proper from an Islamic point of view to treat the holy spirit as a part of the created order. As we proceed, it is helpful to consider both categories separately as we seek to further understand the concepts intended and expressed by this qur’anic language.

References to the “Holy Spirit” and ‘Isa

Of the four references to the “holy spirit”—or *ar-ruh al-qadus*—in the

⁷ Abbas’s comments on the other occurrence of “The Holy One,” in *Ibn ‘Abbas, Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn ‘Abbas*, 62.1, Mokrane Guezzou, trans. Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=73&tSoraNo=62&tAyahNo=1&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>.

⁷ Al-Jalalayn, *Tafsir Jalalayn, Feras Hamza*, trans. Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=74&tSoraNo=59&tAyahNo=23&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>.

Qur’an, three of them explicitly discuss how ‘Isa—often understood as the qur’anic Jesus character—received revelation.

Qur’an 2:87

Certainly We gave Moses the Book, and followed up after him with the messengers, and We gave Jesus, son of Mary, the clear signs, and supported him with the holy spirit. (But) whenever a messenger brought you what you yourselves did not desire, did you become arrogant, and some you called liars and some you killed?

Qur’an 2:253

Those are the messengers—We have favored some of them over others. (There were) some of them to whom God spoke, and some of them He raised in rank. And We have Jesus, son of Mary, the clear signs, and supported him with the holy spirit. If God has (so) pleased, those who (came) after them would not have fought each other, after the clear signs had come to them. But they differed, and (there were) some of them who believed and some of them who disbelieved. If God had (so) pleased, they would not have fought each other. But God does whatever He wills.

Qur’an 5:110

(Remember) when God said, “Jesus, son of Mary! Remember My blessing on you and on your mother when I supported you with the holy spirit, (and) you spoke to the people (while you were still) in the cradle, and in adulthood. And when I taught you the Book and the wisdom, and the Torah and the Gospel. And when you created the form of a bird from clay by My permission, and you breathed into it, and it became a bird by My permission, and you healed the blind and the leper by My permission. And when you brought forth the dead by My permission, and when I restrained the Sons of Israel from (violence against) you. When you brought them the clear signs, those among them who had disbelieved said, ‘This is nothing but clear magic.’”

Reference to the “Holy Spirit” without reference to ‘Isa

While these three references to the holy spirit are tied to divine empowerment of ‘Isa, there is yet one other occasion in which the Qur’an appeals to the holy spirit without explicit mention of ‘Isa. This occurs in Qur’an 16:102, and it seems to envision the holy spirit’s involvement in bringing down revelation beyond the occasions pertaining to ‘Isa.

Qur’an 16:102

Say: “The holy spirit has brought it down from your Lord in truth, to make firm those who believe, and as a guidance and good news for those who submit.”

Observations Regarding the Holy Spirit in the Qur'an

In looking at early Muslim commentary on these passages, one notes a great deal of attention given to clarifying the phrase “holy spirit” in the Qur'an by distinguishing it from the biblical concept depicting the third person of the Trinity.

For example, Jalalayn comments on Qur'an 2:87, writing,

We strengthened him, with the Holy Spirit (the expression rūh al-quḍus is an example of annexing [in a genitive construction] the noun described to the adjective [qualifying it], in other words, al-rūh al-muqaddasa), that is, Gabriel, [so described] on account of his [Jesus's] sanctity; he would accompany him [Jesus] wherever he went.⁸

Along with Jalalayn, Ibn Abbas also espouses the common understanding that the *ruh al-quḍus* refers to Jibril who was given to 'Isa as an aid in receiving the divine revelation.⁹

In addition to the majority view that Jibril is the intended referent for *ruh al-quḍus*, Mawdudi offers two additional options, writing, “The ‘spirit of holiness’ signifies the knowledge derived through revelation. It also signifies the angel Gabriel who brought this revelation. It also denotes the holy spirit of Jesus, the spirit which God had endowed with angelic character.”¹⁰ Thus, some viewed the Qur'an itself as the referent to which *ruh al-quḍus* is intended to point. Others identified it with 'Isa's pure spirit and virtuous nature.

Although most commentators assume the association of *ruh al-quḍus* with Jibril, Maududi provides some further explanation as he comments on Qur'an 16:102. He writes,

The Holy Spirit: Gibril. Instead of using the name of the angel who brought revelation, his title has been deliberately mentioned to warn the disbelievers that the Holy Spirit who brought

⁸ Al-Jalalayn, *Tafsir Jalalayn*, Feras Hamza, trans. *Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought*, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=74&tSoraNo=2&tAyahNo=87&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>.

⁹ Ibn Abbas, *Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn Abbas*, Mokrane Guezou, trans. *Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought*, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=73&tSoraNo=2&tAyahNo=87&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>.

¹⁰ Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an*, Zafar Ishaq Ansari, trans. and ed. *The Islamic Foundation UK* (2019), <https://www.islamicstudies.info/tafheem.php?sura=2&verse=89&to=90>.

revelation is free from human frailties. He is neither dishonest that he should add something to or take away something from the message he brought, nor is he a liar and forger that he should invent and state something in the name of Allah. Nor does he suffer from any human lust that he should practice a deceit. He is wholly pure and holy and conveys the Word of Allah intact.”¹¹

While this explanation still assumes that *ruh al-quḍus* refers to Jibril, it serves to correlate the idea of holiness with uprightness and integrity. Further, Maududi explains that the title should reinforce Muslim confidence that the Qur'an has not been altered in its transmission from the Mother of the Book (*'um al-Kitab*) through Jibril and to Muhammad.

Applied to the spirit (*ruh*), *quḍs* appears to connote a divinely ensured integrity in a messenger. As seen above, this messenger was identified with Jesus and the Qur'an, but is most often understood to be Jibril. It appears to be a property that is bestowed upon the messenger by God for the purpose of transmitting his message. The *quḍs* word group is also applied to the non-human creation as it is used in several places to discuss space.

Holiness as Applied to Space in the Qur'an

In addition to the “holy spirit,” the Qur'an also refers to a particular space as holy. Namely, this space seems to refer to the valley where Moses encountered the burning bush along with the holy land apparently corresponding to Canaan. The following three passages use *quḍs* in this way.

Qur'an 5:20–21 – The Holy Land

(Remember) when Moses said to this people, “My people! Remember the blessing of God My people! Enter the Holy Land which God has prescribed for you, and do not turn your backs, or you will turn out (to be) losers.”

Here, the reader is instructed to remember Moses's words of encouragement to the people to take the Land given to them. Thus, the verse as it is written is a record of Moses's speech to the Israelites. As *quḍs* is used here in reference to the land about which Moses is speaking it seems to correspond to the more common biblical conception of a promised land, though being set apart and thereby made holy is not an unknown category within the host of biblical references to Canaan.

Ibn 'Abbas confirms this association in his commentary by directly

¹¹ Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an*, Zafar Ishaq Ansari, trans. and ed. *The Islamic Foundation UK* (2019), <https://www.islamicstudies.info/tafheem.php?sura=16&verse=101&to=110>.

connecting it with Damascus, Palestine, and parts of Jordan.¹² Likewise, Mawdudi writes, “[Holy Land] signifies Palestine which had been the homeland of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. After their exodus from Egypt, God ordered the Israelites to go forth to Egypt and conquer it.”¹³ It seems as though the Qur’an uses *quds* here as an equivalent with the concept of promise, set apart, or purified as it refers to the land of Canaan. Finally, one other region is also identified as *quds* in two places: the area of the burning bush.

Qur’an 20:9–12 – The Holy Valley

Has the story of Moses come to you? When he saw a fire, he said to his family, “Stay (here). Surely I perceive a fire. Perhaps I shall bring you a flaming torch from it, or I shall find at the fire guidance.” But when he came to it, he was called: “Moses! Surely I am your Lord, so take off your shoes. Surely you are in the holy wadi [valley] of Tuwa.”

Qur’an 79:15–17 – The Holy Valley

Has the story of Moses come to you? When his Lord called to him in the holy wadi [valley] of Tuwa: “Go to Pharaoh! Surely he has transgressed insolently.”

In both passages above, the space where God spoke to Moses was said to be *quds*. To determine what makes this space *quds*, it is helpful to consider the commentary of early Islamic exegetes.

Early Muslim Commentators and Holiness Applied to Creation

It is interesting to consult the early Muslim commentators to consider their reflections on the use of “holy” language to refer to the creation. Most focused on the blessedness of the space, others focused on the meaning of the elusive word “*Tuwa*.” For instance, Ibn ‘Abbas comments, “(How his Lord called him in the holy vale of Tuwa) the name of the valley; it was called so because it was traversed by so many prophets; it is also said: tread (Ta’), O Moses, with your feet on this valley because of its

¹² Ibn ‘Abbas, *Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn ‘Abbas*, Mokrane Guezzou, trans. Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafsir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=73&tSoraNo=5&tAyahNo=21&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>.

¹³ Sayyid Abul A’la Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding the Qur’an*, Zafar Ishaq Ansari, trans. and ed. *The Islamic Foundation UK* (2019), <https://www.islamicstudies.info/tafheem.php?sura=5&verse=20&to=26>.

goodness and grace.”¹⁴

Giving further insight into the various understandings of these passages about land described with *quds*, Mawdudi comments,

According to general opinion among the commentators the sacred valley of Tuwa means the sacred valley which was named Tuwa. But, besides this, two other meanings of it also have been given:

(1) The valley that was blessed and made sacred twice, for it was first made sacred when Allah spoke to Moses (peace be upon him) in it for the first time, and it was blessed and made sacred for the second time when the Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) led the children of Israel out of Egypt and brought them into it.

(2) Called out to him in the sacred valley in the night, and this is according to the meaning of *tuwa* in the Arabic idiom.¹⁵

In other words, there was difference of opinion as to whether *Tuwa* was to be taken adjectivally or nominally. But those cited above represent what seems to be a broad consensus over the fact that the land was made sacred or holy as a result of events involving prophets and divine revelation.

Theological Implications of Qur’anic Holiness

As demonstrated above, the Qur’an uses *quds* sparingly in comparison to the Bible. The Qur’an also assumes an understanding of what *quds* means because none of the occurrences supply an immediate definition or explanation.

Although the paucity of appearances allowed us to exhaustively consider the uses of “holiness” language in the Qur’an, the ubiquity of holiness in the Bible does not afford us such an opportunity given the constraints of this essay. Across the various books of the Old and New Testaments, the Bible is concerned to reinforce the holiness of God and holiness is explained with much greater detail than it is in the Qur’an. Not only is holiness more prolific in the Bible, but it is often connected to relational proximity between God and humanity.

For instance, one of the examples of divine holiness and relational—and physical—proximity can be seen in Lev 9 and 10. At the conclusion

¹⁴ Ibn ‘Abbas, *Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn ‘Abbas*, 79.15, <https://quranx.com/Tafsirs/79.15>.

¹⁵ Sayyid Abul A’la Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding the Qur’an*, Zafar Ishaq Ansari, trans. and ed. *The Islamic Foundation UK* (2019), <https://islamicstudies.info/tafheem.php?sura=79&verse=1&to=26>.

of Lev 9, Aaron and Moses offer the first sacrifice to YHWH according to the pattern shown to them on the mountain. Among the instructions for this ritual, Aaron and Moses are told to “draw near” in the process of making atonement for themselves and for the people (Lev 9:7). This sacrificial ritual is necessary because of God’s intention to dwell among his sin-stained and guilty people as a holy and righteous God (Exod 28:42–43; 29:42–46). Sacrifice and the attendant rituals are presented as the means by which to draw near and to be in a relationship with YHWH.

Following the successful acceptance of this first sacrifice (Lev 9:22–24), Lev 10 proceeds to recount a disastrous event involving Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu. These two sons of Aaron attempt to approach YHWH in an unprescribed fashion and are consumed by fire that bursts forth from the tent of meeting as a consequence. This is followed by YHWH’s declaration, “Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified” (Lev 10:3). In his commentary on Leviticus, Jay Sklar notes that a few chapters later, Leviticus 16—the chapter detailing the prescriptions for the Day of Atonement—begins with a reminder of the fate of Nadab and Abihu connected with the instructions to Aaron that he not approach whenever and however he chooses.¹⁶ Commenting on the Day of Atonement as described in Lev 16, then, Sklar notes that the rituals for making atonement are intended to cleanse from defilement, forgive rebellion, and to restore covenant relationship as the priest intercedes for the nation in the Holy of Holies—the place where God has acutely manifested his presence.¹⁷

Importantly for Christians, these images are repeated in the New Testament and applied to Christ’s crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension as the completion of the sacrificial imagery and logic. The author of Hebrews makes this point explicit as the description of Jesus as the once and for all atoning sacrifice (Heb 10:10) has also entered into the heavenly tabernacle in order to serve as an eternal high priest on behalf of his own (Heb 7:23–28; 9:11–24).¹⁸

Thus, in the New Testament, the problem of divine holiness and human sinfulness has once and for all been resolved in the gospel. By Christ’s atonement, God’s purpose to be with his people can be realized without the destructive results visited on Nadab and Abihu. God can remain holy and just, and in Christ, humans can be made holy and able to withstand divine approach. Holiness, then, in biblical consideration, is at

¹⁶ Jay Sklar, *Leviticus*, TOTC, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 156–57.

¹⁷ Sklar, *Leviticus*, 215.

¹⁸ See the brief note included in Sklar, *Leviticus*, 216. See also Matthew Bennett, *Narratives in Conflict* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019), 77–95.

the intersection of divine intention and human inability. It is both demanded of humanity everywhere, and also made available to humanity only in Christ. This presents a very different conception of holiness in the Bible than the one envisioned by holiness in the Qur’an.

It is important to catch a glimpse of just how this holiness concept features differently in the Bible. Since we are unable to exhaustively study the biblical occurrences, it will suffice to consider the parallel passages the Qur’an appears to reference. Most specifically, the interaction between God and Moses at the burning bush will help to illustrate the distance between biblical holiness and the qur’anic use of *quds*.

Exodus 3: Moses and the Burning Bush

In the examples of *quds* referenced above from the Qur’an, we saw that the valley in which God spoke to Moses was “holy.” Early commentators reasoned that the valley was holy on the basis of having played host to prophets and God’s communication with them. Holiness, then, meant that this place was afforded a special status or a sacredness on the basis of being a place of religious historical importance.

In Exodus 3, Moses likewise indicates that the ground is holy. In fact, this is the first use of the adjective “holy” in the Pentateuch.¹⁹ As God addresses him from the burning bush, God speaks, saying, “Do not come closer ... remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”²⁰ The immediate text does not explain exactly what causes the ground on which Moses stood to be holy. However, Moses immediately hides his face out of an attempt to avoid looking at God. This detail about Moses hiding his face inclines the reader inclines the reader to see that God was not merely speaking through the bush, but that he had drawn near and was in some way present in the bush. This proximity provides at least some initial insight into what made the ground holy: the presence of God.

Furthermore, the ensuing dialogue between God and Moses reveals two important aspects regarding the importance of this encounter. First, at the burning bush, God reveals to Moses his covenant name—YHWH—by which he says he will be remembered in every generation. This event in which YHWH draws near is made even more intimate in that it combines spatial and relational proximity. Second, in Exod 3:12 YHWH reveals his intention to remain proximate to Moses, assuring him, “I will certainly be with you, and this will be the sign to you that I am the

¹⁹ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 26.

²⁰ All English Bible quotations are taken from the CSB, unless noted otherwise.

one who sent you: when you bring the people out of Egypt, you will all worship God at this mountain.”

This proximity of holy presence will be presented as both a blessing and a danger as holiness is further defined in Exodus and especially in Leviticus. In his commentary on Exodus, Alan Cole writes,

Since God is “holy”, since he is so “different”, then anything associated with him, or devoted to his service, partakes of this characteristic. If an inanimate object (such as oil for anointing), this may mean only that it is forbidden for common use (Exod. 30:32). It may even connote the idea of some mysterious danger on manual contact (Exod. 19:12, 13). But since God’s holiness is defined as being moral, to be a “holy people” (as Israel was called to be, Exod. 19:6) meant that stern moral demands are made of her.... Therefore, holiness is, in the deepest sense, a definition of God’s nature as he expects to find it reflected in his children. It is this concept of God’s holiness which, in turn, is mirrored and portrayed in the very construction of the meeting-tent, with its “holiest place of all” far within, and with metals and materials in gradually lessening degrees of preciousness as they are further from this centre. If the law was a verbal expression of God’s holiness, the Tent was a visible parable of it, and the nation of Israel was intended to be a walking illustration of it. It would perhaps be true to say that the whole concept of sin-offering (Exod. 29:14), so basic to Israel’s religious practice, springs from this concept of the holiness of God, understood in moral, not merely ritual terms.²¹

Thus, the context of the Exodus account wherein the ground is identified as “holy,” the biblical account is also concerned to highlight the holy God’s intention to relate to his people intimately and immediately in drawing near and revealing himself.

This observable, relational component of divine holiness is highlighted by Christian theologians such as John Webster, who writes in his book *Holiness*, “The determining context for talk of God’s holiness is the examination of the ‘economy of God’s works.’”²² Webster goes on to quote Herman Bavinck, writing, “‘God’s holiness,’ wrote Bavinck, ‘is revealed in his entire revelation to his people, in election, in the covenant, in his special revelation, in his dwelling among them.’”²³ Thus, Webster

²¹ Cole, *Exodus*, 16–17.

²² John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 39–40.

²³ Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1991), 205 (cited in Webster, *Holiness*, 41).

concludes,

Talk of God’s holiness denotes the majesty and singular purity which the triune God is in himself and with which he acts towards and in the lives of his creatures, opposing that which is itself opposed to his purpose as creator, reconciler, and perfecter, and bringing that purpose to its completion in the fellowship of the saints. Holiness, because it is the holiness of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ now present in the Spirit’s power, is pure majesty in relation.²⁴

In other words, what we see beginning in the burning bush interaction is the drawing near of the holy one to disclose himself to his creatures and so to instantiate a covenantal relationship. Such a relational understanding of holiness is far removed from the typical Islamic priority placed upon divine transcendence.²⁵

Human Holiness Demanded

Furthermore, biblical holiness is not something constrained to God’s nature, activity, and relationships. It is also something demanded of those with whom God relates. Over and over throughout the Old Testament God instructs his people to, “Be my holy people,” as in Exod 22:31, and “to be holy as I am holy,” as in Lev 19:1. Leviticus 20:26 reiterates the command of the previous chapter but with even more emphasis, saying, “You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be mine.”

The New Testament reiterates this demand for human holiness in places like 1 Pet 1:15–16, which states, “But as the one who called you is holy, you also are to be holy in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’” The rationale for this demand for human holiness is connected to the divine intentions of relationship and proximity.

The book of Exodus again reinforces these themes while also highlighting the danger posed to unconsecrated, unholy creatures that approach the presence of the holy God. Moses is warned of this danger as he is beckoned before God’s presence on Mount Sinai. While Moses appears to be given a special mercy by the Lord to serve as a proto-priest invited up onto the mountain to commune with God, the people in their unclean and unholy state are warned to stay back from the mountain made holy by YHWH’s presence. Later in the Pentateuch, Lev 10 presents a

²⁴ Webster, *Holiness*, 41.

²⁵ See Mark Anderson, *The Qur’an in Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 63–69.

visceral depiction of the danger posed by improper approach of the holy presence. Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron who had heard the instructions given for approaching the presence of God, dare to come before YHWH with “unauthorized or strange fire,” and they are consumed as a result of their improper approach.

The problem of divine holiness, biblically speaking, is connected directly to both the divine intention of proximity and the demand for human holiness. God intends to draw near and dwell among his people, yet their unholiness results in their destruction in God’s holy presence.²⁶ Sacrifice, then, provides the means by which to both remove human impurity and forgive human guilt so as to provide atonement that can restore the divine-human relationship and allow for divine proximity.²⁷

For Christians who do not practice animal sacrifice, it can be a temptation to think that sacrifice and priesthood are simply former covenant realities. However, Christians are equally dependent upon intercession, sacrifice, and priesthood. As noted above, the author of Hebrews explains exactly how Christ’s gospel is the substance of which the Levitical system of sacrifice and atonement was but a shadow. Those who have placed their faith in Christ are just as much a people of priesthood and sacrifice as ancient Israel was insofar as our faith is made reality through the completed and eternal work of Christ’s sacrifice and priestly intercession. The Christian gospel, then, retains the expectation of holiness for those who would approach the divine presence. The difference is that the gospel has accomplished this holiness, sanctifying and restoring believers to a condition whereby “we have boldness to enter the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus...[to] draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water” (Heb 10:19–22). Holiness is not an Old Testament demand. Holiness is a biblical demand. Exclusively in Christ, holiness has been provided once and for all who would receive it by faith.

Conclusion: Missiological Implications of Holiness

Although *quds* appears in both the Arabic Bible and the Qur’an, it has been the burden of this essay to demonstrate that the Qur’an means something different than the Arabic Bible when it uses the words related

²⁶ See the work of Jay Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015), 182.

²⁷ For a more robust treatment of these ideas as they compare to qur’anic conceptions of sacrifice, see Bennett, *Narratives in Conflict*.

to *quds*. Having considered the ten occurrences of this word group in the Qur’an, the reader has seen the way that holiness language is applied to God, applied to a figure referred to a *ruh al-qudus*, and to sacred territory. Although this terminology is not defined in the Qur’an, it appears to be a quality or characteristic of God that can extend to the created world by means of its use as an instrument of divine revelation.

Despite the fact that there are clearly parallels with the biblical ideas that affirm God’s otherness and transcendence by affirming his holiness, there are significant divergences by means of omission. Most glaringly, the Qur’an contains no summons to humans to pursue holiness. God as “the Holy One” of the Qur’an never calls his people to “Be holy as I am holy” nor does he provide a means by which humanity is instructed to pursue such holiness. Even in common Islamic parlance, those who would obtain a status that might be described as “sainthood” in English are referred to as *wali* rather than the term *qaddis* as used by Arabic speaking Christians to refer to their saints and the idea of sainthood.²⁸

There may be multiple reasons that the Qur’an would not demand that humans be holy. However, the lack of attention given to the expectation that the divine presence would dwell with humanity provides a likely reason that the Qur’an does not need to make such a demand. If the holiness of God is ever-remote in Islam, it does not pose a danger to the unholy human in the same way that it does throughout the biblical testimony. Therefore, the ritual of sacrifice can be merely performative piety and need not effect atonement for the participant. Given the assumption of divine transcendence, the expectation of human holiness remains a logically appropriate omission in Islam. While the Islamic conception of divine holiness as transcendence may satisfy the logical demands of a system wherein God’s holiness is not relational, a missionary might capitalize on the fact that an existence separate from the divine fails to satisfy.

A fully articulated proposal for how to leverage the different conceptions of holiness in evangelistic encounters with Muslims would be ambitious, given the scope of this essay. However, I will offer some initial lines of potentially fruitful engagement. Admittedly, these are drawn

²⁸ See the fascinating comparison of “holiness and sainthood” between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities in Linda Jones, “Holiness, Saints, and Sanctity in Islam,” *Saints and Sanctity in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Striving for Remembrance*, ed. Alexandre Coello de la Rosa and Linda Jones (New York: Routledge, 2020), 65. Jones identifies the word *wali* as indicative of an intimate familiarity and proximity to God—however, given predominant Islamic theology about the transcendence of God, this should not be taken as literal proximity, but as the proximity of one who has found favor in following God’s ways closely.

from more personal, anecdotal accounts. However, they allow the Christian to draw in on the differences between Islamic holiness and biblical holiness as discussed above. The first approach is conversational in nature. The second is textual. The third is existential.

A Conversational Approach

First, a brief treatment of an apologetic approach. One of the central contentions of Islamic theology is that God is independent of all that is not God. In other words, generally speaking, divine aseity is affirmed by both Christians and Muslims alike.

If this is true, then God has created without anything compelling him to do so. It is certainly possible that God intends to remain ever-remote from his creation, simply dispassionately observing the activities from a distance. If God remains remote from his creation, then holiness need not be demanded of what he has created. Yet such a proposal presents a God who appears uninvolved in the creation that he has brought existence. It would seem that an Islamic conception of creation is an act in search of a purpose.

Thus, in conversation with Muslim friends, one might explore the question, "Why do you think that God created anything at all?" If your Muslim friend provides an answer that does not involve the dwelling of God among his people, you might press them to consider whether or not that answer makes much sense of God's unimpelled decision to create. If God does not intend to be involved and to relate to his creation, why would he create anything at all? This leads then to the second approach.

A Textual Approach

As noted above, the Qur'an presents God's act of creation as a sovereign act of will, but it does not provide clear rationale for why God created. It also persists in depicting God in his transcendence, but never alludes to any intention of immanence. Thus, the issue of divine holiness does not pose the same problem for Muslims as it does for Christians who are called to be holy as God is holy because he intends to draw near.

However, if God created with the stated intention, purpose, and desire that he draw near to his creatures within his creation, holiness is indeed a problem and a condition that must be demanded of his creatures in order that they may bear his approach. Sin and impurity cannot simply be overlooked or dismissed. These conditions must be eradicated completely to allow for the divine and the human to enjoy a proximate relationship.

More than mere theory, however, the manifold declarations of the Bible that God intends to be with us provide a direct confrontation to the

Qur'anic vision of God's unapproachable transcendence. Thus, by presenting God's own words declaring his intention to be among his people, the Bible itself presents the quandary of how humans might remove sin and impurity from themselves in order to withstand the presence of God in their midst. Among the several passages suggested above, Rev 21:1–6 would be a good passage to read with a Muslim friend. Having seen that God declares that eternity will be characterized by the immediate presence of the triune God dwelling amidst his people in the new creation, you might ask, "What must happen to sin and its effects for this vision of the future to be a reality?" In short, the biblical answer is that humans must obtain a holiness that would allow them to abide in God's presence. Islam has no means of conferring such holiness on creatures. The gospel, in contrast, is the means by which this is possible.

An Existential Approach

Finally, the Bible teaches that humanity has been created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27) and with eternity in their hearts (Ecc 3:11). As such, yearning for the transcendent and eternal one whose image we bear is an experience common to humanity. Most Muslims, while acknowledging the human duty to obey God as master, do not have a category for the intimate relationship of adopted sons and daughters with their heavenly Father.

In keeping with the expectation that God will remain ever transcendent, eternity is characterized by many varieties of pleasures and delights, but not the immediate and familiar relationship with God that is promised by Rev 21. Yet, in my experiences with Muslim friends, it has been fruitful to suggest that an eternity characterized by separation between humanity and God would be unsatisfying. Again, once the longing for relationship with God is established, the problem of divine holiness and human sinfulness is again present to us. The biblical gospel is the means by which to resolve the problem, but Islam is left without resources to establish human holiness.

In conclusion, though biblical holiness may appear to find a corollary concept in the Qur'an by the use of the *quds* word group, the missionary cannot assume common conceptual understanding despite common vocabulary. The holiness of the God of the Bible and the necessity for humans to acquire holiness in order to commune with God stands in dramatic contrast with the Qur'anic assumptions regarding holiness as a quality unavailable and unnecessary for a human. Yet the proximate relationship that God intends to have with his image-bearing creatures requires that they be made holy. The Christian gospel alone provides the resolution to this existential desire and the theological problem of sinful

humans and a God that would draw near.

Appendix

Occurrence of *qaf dal sin* in the Qur'an

Verb (form II) - to sanctify		
(2:30:21) wanuqaddisu	and we sanctify	وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ
Noun		
(2:87:16) l-qudusi	the Holy Spirit	وَأَتَيْنَا عِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ
الْبَيِّنَاتِ وَأَيُّنَاهُ بِرُوحِ الْقُدُسِ		
(2:253:21) l-qudusi	[the] Holy	وَأَتَيْنَا عِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ
الْبَيِّنَاتِ وَأَيُّنَاهُ بِرُوحِ الْقُدُسِ		
(5:110:15) l-qudusi	the Holy	إِذْ أَيْدِنَاكَ بِرُوحِ الْقُدُسِ تُكَلِّمُ
النَّاسَ فِي الْمَهْدِ وَكَهْلًا		
(16:102:4) l-qudusi	the Holy Spirit	قُلْ نَزَّلَهُ رُوحُ الْقُدُسِ مِنْ
رَبِّكَ بِالْحَقِّ		
Adjective		
(59:23:9) l-qudusu	the Holy One	هُوَ اللَّهُ الَّذِي لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا
هُوَ الْمَلِكُ الْقُدُّوسُ		
(62:1:10) l-qudusi	the Holy	بِهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ
وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ الْمَلِكُ الْقُدُّوسُ		
Passive participle (form II)		
(20:12:8) l-muqadasi	the sacred	إِنِّي أَنَا رَبُّكَ فَاخْلَعْ نَعْلَيْكَ
إِنَّكَ بِالْوَادِ الْمُقَدَّسِ طَوًى		
(79:16:5) l-muqadasi	the sacred	إِذْ نَادَاهُ رَبُّهُ بِالْوَادِ
الْمُقَدَّسِ طَوًى		
Passive participle (form II)		
(5:21:4) l-muqadasata	the Holy	يَا قَوْمِ ادْخُلُوا الْأَرْضَ
الْمُقَدَّسَةَ الَّتِي كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ		
Kais Dukes, "Qur'an Dictionary - ق د س" <i>The Quranic Arabic Corpus</i> , https://corpus.quran.com/qurandictionary.jsp?q=qds .		