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# Holiness, by John Webster

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## Peer Reviewed

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rary Athonite monk. Thereupon, L. returns to the historical and literary sources, exploring their teaching on the practice of inner calm. In the process, he searches for answers to the struggle for inner peace in the face of the anxiety and confusion of today's world.

The book considers the wisdom of the Desert Fathers (especially of Arsenius the Great), the philosophy of Evagrius Ponticus (who systematized monastic thought), the example of John Cassian (who translated for the West the ways of the Egyptian desert), the importance of spiritual direction and of apophatic theology, as well as the power of the Name in prayer and contemplation. The opening chapter about Father Seraphim is complemented by the chapter about *The Way of the Pilgrim*, a classic text by an anonymous Russian author who has influenced numerous people across diverse cultures since the end of the 19th century in the use of the Jesus Prayer.

Two chapters are strikingly distinctive in content. Chapter 7 examines the invocation of the divine Name in three great spiritual traditions—Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism, although the latter two are treated more briefly than the first. The closing chapter creatively develops the concept of “purification of the senses.”

In all, this book provides an engaging reading of the ancient contemplative path and a fresh appreciation of the Eastern Orthodox spiritual way.

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HOLINESS. By John Webster. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. Pp. vii + 116. \$18.

Written in the spirit of John Calvin and Karl Barth, this clear and concise treatment of Christian holiness issues a clarion call to *sola fides, sola gratia, sola scriptura*. In four chapters, Webster examines the holiness of theology, of God, of the Church, and of the Christian. He underlines the radical ways in which divine holiness—a movement or event in

which God relates to creation—is the cause of all other holiness. To talk about God's attributes is not primarily to categorize them (humans do not name God) but to confess them in a cry of praise.

Judging that developments in 20th-century theology (postmodernism; turns to subject, history, language, and interdisciplinarity) have caused theology to lose its way, W. offers a “Christian dogmatics of holiness” that he distinguishes from metaphysics, mysticism, and moralism. The two main tasks of this “onto-theology” are exegesis and dogmatics. The theologian probes the reality of a trinitarian God in order to become holy and edify the Church.

Themes of evangelical theology are prominent: priority is given to revelation as the primary context in which theology must be done; theological freedom means being under the tutelage, authority, and protection of the Church; talk of “participation” tends to slight the free majesty of God; election is the correct way to name the divine-human relationship.

W. understands a theology of holiness as the exercise of “holy reason,” which stands under, and is accountable to, God's sanctifying work. Holy reason has nothing to do with poetics, which W. sees as idolatrous, but with receptivity to God. Holy reason's primary act is prayer for the Spirit's assistance; reason's setting is the communion of saints; its manner is fear of the holy God; and its end is the sanctification of God's holy name (21). Since the Bible is sufficient, reason is exercised with an acute consciousness of limitation.

For those looking to correct anthropocentric strains in theology, *Holiness* provides a reorientation toward God's sovereignty. But it will not appeal to theologians who have a more positive assessment of theology's engagement with contemporary thought. W.'s utter confidence in his ability to distinguish the true God from “the God of human invention” (9) belies theology's mandate to take seriously the complexity and pluralism of the human encounter with God.

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