

**James M. Arcadi. *Holiness: Divine and Human*. Fortress Academic Press, 2023. 192 pp. \$95 (hbk).**

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One might have claimed a few years ago that divine holiness was a neglected topic in both traditional systematic theology and its relatively newer cousins of analytic theology and philosophy of religion. With the recent publication of a spate of works in this field by Bernie A. Van De Walle (2017), Alan L. Mittleman (2018), Lenn E. Goodman (2019), and Mark C. Murphy (2021), that is no longer the case. The newest and perhaps most creative entry in this field is James M. Arcadi's *Holiness: Divine and Human*. Deploying Scripture, confessional material, interaction with diverse theologians across several traditions (Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant), and developments in analytic philosophy, Arcadi gets an astonishing amount of analysis done within this wide-ranging volume. He also does so with irenic yet clear interaction with his interlocutors, attempting to do as much constructive bridgebuilding as possible.

First, as opposed to Mark Murphy's "divergent" account of holiness, which gives one definition for uncreated and primary holiness and another for secondary and derivative holiness, Arcadi gives a "unitary" account of holiness (9)—that is to say, a definition of holiness that works for both God, the primary holy reality, and other derivatively holy entities (land, Temple, people, and so forth) (1, 14). Arcadi "sees holiness as describing a unique relation between God and holy entities, a relation of ownership. Simply put, to be holy is to be owned by God. This definition applies to God as well as non-divine entities" (1). The first chapter, or 'Prolegomena,' makes his basic case for this understanding, and then in the rest of the book, he sets about stress-testing his thesis by applying his model to various doctrinal loci, such as: the God-world relation, Christology, divine personality, worship, consecration, justification, atonement, indwelling of the Spirit, and liturgical invocation. (Part of the book's breadth, it seems, is due to the fact that many if not most of the chapters appeared as essays beforehand; nevertheless, Arcadi has managed to smooth the volume into a coherent whole.)

How does Arcadi arrive at this thesis of divine ownership, especially divine self-ownership, which seems to be a genuinely novel definition of holiness in the history of the discussion of the concept? In part he gets there simply by noting that much biblical scholarship has stated that holy objects are holy by way of devotion to the divine possession and that relation of ownership (11-12). Theologically, this account of holiness seems to present a solution to a problem generated by a trio of propositions that are commonly affirmed by theorists of divine holiness: "1. Holiness is an essential attribute of God," "2. Holiness is a relational attribute of God," and "3. Traditional Christian theism (including the propositions that God exists *a se* and that creation is from nothing)" (7). If holiness is taken to be God's transcendence or otherness or separateness, that would seem to render it a relational attribute that is conceptually dependent on the existence of creation—in which case one would need to jettison either its essentiality to God or the contingency of creation.

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Arcadi opts for a third way. Saying holiness is ‘ownership by God’ modifies proposition 2, while preserving some of what these kinds of transcendent-relational definitions are angling at, without the contradiction. Note well, Arcadi is careful here not to suggest that holiness means ‘self-ownership,’ but more specifically ‘to be owned by God.’ Not everything that possesses itself is thereby holy. For God to be holy means ‘God owns Godself,’ which can be taken as a functional equivalent for God’s aseity and independence but does not require creation or any other existing reality and so can be essential to God (10). Nor does this screen out the ‘moral’ pole of holiness, as some might worry. For human ethical holiness could be conceived as a form of agency that increasingly reflects one’s ownership by God—to act holy is to act in such a way that is consistent with one’s life belonging to God by imitating him (13). Indeed, this forms the foundation for an argument upwards from human ethical holiness towards the personhood and moral dimension to God’s own holiness by examining the human behavior that is reflective of the holy God (66-67).

How does this conception of holiness cash out across the rest of the volume? Some applications are more intuitive. With this understanding of holiness in play, Arcadi outlines an elegant theology of human worship drawing on Alexander Schmemmann, the idea of humanity as a Royal and Priestly Image (per Gen. 1:26-27), and the *exitus-reditus* theology of Proclus: in worship humans consciously render back to God what is his (83). Or again, utilizing William Alston’s articulation of speech-act theory to analyze the divine utterance “You shall be holy as I am holy” (Lev. 19:2), he argues that instead of reading the utterance merely as a divine command, it can be recognized to contain several illocutionary dimensions by way of the same sentential act. At one and the same time God is commanding Israel to be morally holy—to ethically reflect their metaphysical status as possessed by God—while committing himself to the task of possessing them, thereby making them holy (104). Drawing on Edward Schillebeeckx’s Eucharistic theology of ‘transignification’ and reflection on the social ontology of prosthesis—whereby someone incorporates a prosthetic limb such that it can be truly identified with the person through their unique mode of ownership, while at the same time recognizing its distinct integrity and non-overlapping characteristics—Arcadi argues that Christ makes the bread and the wine truly his own by an act of ‘deeming’ them his body and blood. They become prosthetics truly attached to and extending from himself. Arcadi then uses this to explain justification, arguing that Christ incorporates a person into his body by way of unique ownership, making them holy as extensions of his holy self that are nevertheless distinguishable from himself (116-118). Incidentally, for the Protestant, this has the happy effect of tightly linking justification and sanctification in union with Christ, while at the same time allowing for Martin Luther’s *simul-iustus* formulation.

As fruitful and generative as the work is, I want to spend time flagging some issues with a key early chapter that presents problems for his formulation of divine holiness overall. At the juncture of the God-world relationship Arcadi proposes that a “deflationary panentheism”—one that still affirms creation *ex nihilo*, the Trinity, Incarnation, etc. (26)—can offer a satisfying account of omnipresence that simultaneously accounts for the biblical data around God’s special presence at holy sites (the ark, the Temple, the Unburnt bush) from which the holy God seems to act uniquely (22-25), and a general phenomenology of religion that some places can be “holier” than others (18). For Arcadi, pantheism as such goes too far in collapsing God into the universe (27). Classical theism, though affirming omnipresence, has too thin of an account of it, since for someone like Anselm or Aquinas, God’s presence in a place is often reduced to his knowledge or activity in a location. This is because the classical theist wants to maintain the absence of a ‘real

relation' between God and creation. (Notably, no citation is provided for that claim). In which case, the immaterial God might be more properly said to be "literally no 'where' rather than every 'where'" and certainly not at specific sites like the Ark (28).

Deflationary pantheism sits somewhere between classical theism and hard pantheism, so that "God exists, the cosmos exists, and the relation between God and the cosmos is sufficiently intimate to warrant the attribute of 'in' of the cosmos to God" (25). There is a distinction between God and the world perhaps akin to "part and the whole" so that there is always a "remainder of God that exists independently and outside of the universe," yet there is a real relation between the two, with the universe identified with part of God, but not all of God (28). The universe as a whole becomes holy by way of this ownership/identification. Nevertheless, holy sites are related to God in such a way that his intensification of activity in that area serves to make that place holy with a sufficiently significant ontological tether between his being and that locale—it is an *increased* possession and ownership of the place, and hence it becomes *holier* (29).

Arcadi notes a potential problem here of unity that neither the classical theist (affirming immateriality, immutability, and simplicity) nor the pantheist has to deal with. For the classical theist the diversity of objects within the universe have no impact on the unity of God (per simplicity) and for the pantheist one could say "all that is necessarily is and God is simply identical with the totality of God" (29). Since Arcadi can say neither of these things, his solution is to draw on sacramental theology whereby a sacrament outwardly symbolizes an inward spiritual grace. Reflecting on the theology of holy places, holy objects point "not just to divine activity at a location, but to the remainder of God that goes above and beyond the spatiotemporal realm—objects owned point to an owner beyond" (30). God can be worshipped anywhere, but holy places make more sense (31). As the whole of which the universe is a part, God is inclusive of all without being reduced to creation. Creation as a whole points to God beyond creation, while particularly holy areas do the same thing. So there is no radical ontological distinction between holy and non-holy places, thereby securing a unified sacrament of the part for the whole (31).

At this point I want to register several issues. First, I am going to leave aside his solution to the unity problem for a minute simply to point out that his solution to the alleged problem of distance that the classical theist has seems to be one generated by an unargued assumption concerning classical theism. Taking Thomas Aquinas's account of omnipresence, it would be contrary to Aquinas's claim that God is everywhere by way of "essence, presence, and power" to say that this simply *reduces* to God's action at all locations (*ST* Ia.8).<sup>1</sup> Even thinking of God's presence by way of his continual divine causality, we cannot neglect the robust logic of simplicity at work. If God is present by his active power, per simplicity, he *is* present by his essence—absolutely, completely and undividedly—and arguably with a radical intimacy that easily grounds the idea of an intensification and concentration of activity or power that would fit with the biblical narratives describing God's special presence. Further, Arcadi's desire for a more robust sense of presence concomitant with the phenomenology of Abrahamic religions about God's 'being there,' seems to presuppose that something like an extensionist or even quasi-material understanding of substantial presence—involving 'contact of dimensive quantity'—alone counts as 'real' presence. This seems hard to square

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Turretin (1992, 3.IX.viii, p. 198) also holds against the Socinians that God is present by essence and repletively not by way of multiplication, extension, or physical contact but "in the simplicity and to us incomprehensible infinity of the divine essence, which is so intimately present with all things that it is both everywhere in the world and yet it is included in the world."

with his part-whole understanding of God and creation. If that is what's required, we're left with odd questions about the 'part' of God that doesn't overlap with creation. What does the 'thereness' of this 'part' consist of if it does not have some dimensive quality? The entire discussion would be aided by a clarification of the relation between the 'relative' attribute of omnipresence and the 'absolute' notion of immensity or infinity with regard to space.

Internal to Arcadi's model, there is a potential conflict with the notion of holiness as 'ownership by God,' given his affirmation of a 'real relation.' To clarify, rejecting a 'real relation' does not mean rejecting an actual ontological connection, but rather is an affirmation of the causal asymmetry of the relation whereby there is no creaturely feedback up into the divine being, as it were. But this is no rejection of intimate closeness or presence to the creature—it specifies the kind of relation, a 'mixed' one whereby God and creation are not reciprocally patients of one another on the same order of being.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, it has historically been closely tied to the affirmation of aseity and immutability and creation *ex nihilo*. If *this* is what is being rejected, then it contains the possibility of the creature or the universe bringing about a change in God and threatening his existence as being entirely *a se*, insofar as aseity is supported by or logically implies his immutability and impassibility. For a creature to bring about a change in God could imply that God's being, knowledge, or will is in that regard dependent upon the creature. While he does not reduce holiness to aseity, again, we saw that for Arcadi there is a close, implied relationship between God's ownership and his underived, independent *a se* nature. In which case, affirming a real relation—one in which God is potentially reciprocally acted upon—as a part of your panentheism threatens God's aseity and his perfect self-ownership, self-possession, and independence and thereby his holiness.

Part of the problem is that Arcadi's 'deflationary' panentheism threatens to be so deflationary that it is semantically flat, devoid of content. Arcadi wants to say the universe is really related to God by being 'in' God (28), but to keep it sufficiently flexible for use by folks with differing convictions around aseity and immutability and thereby 'deflationary,' he does not clarify the metaphysical reciprocity of that relation (26).<sup>3</sup> Without that clarification, the material, metaphysical content of divine holiness as God's ownership of God cannot be squared with this deflationary panentheism including its real relation between God and the world. Indeed, for Arcadi's panentheism it to be consistent, it seems one would have to scrap it as almost indistinct from standard classical theism on this point.<sup>4</sup>

Return now to the problem of unity Arcadi flagged. For anybody who has independent reasons for affirming simplicity, Arcadi's panentheistic proposal is a non-starter, since divine simplicity precludes God from having parts.

Additionally, Arcadi's account of divine holiness as being owned by God faces a biblical problem. The Bible makes distinctions between what is common and what is holy, pure and impure, but ownership by God does not seem to be the basic distinction. It is a *particular* or *special* kind of ownership and relation ordered to a distinct purpose that renders something holy. In Exod. 19:4-6, God tells Israel that he owns all the nations of the world, but Israel is to be his special, treasured possession intended to be priests and kings. That is what makes them holy, whereas the nations are his common possessions. Israel is not just *more* holy by

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., John Webster (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Arcadi's account of a 'real relation' is underdefined, which contributes to the ambiguity.

<sup>4</sup> One more puzzle is that this panentheism seems to sit at odds with what is articulated earlier in Arcadi (2018, 96-101), which seemed to follow Thomas and a more classical theist model explicitly. It is still not entirely clear to me that this panentheism is Arcadi's own new stated view, or is operating as an analytic theological thought experiment of the sort done by Oliver Crisp (2014) in several chapters.

way of *more* ownership, but it is holy in an absolute way that the nations are not even though both are owned by God. More needs to be done here, but it seems once you start getting the necessary specificity for created holy items, you are verging into the territory of a divergent account.

More can and should be said here about the abundance of unique proposals in this book—panpsychist Christology, impanation theories, mind-sharing with the Holy Spirit—and none of what has been said should be misconstrued as anything less than appreciative engagement with a very stimulating, generous, and generative volume. Arcadi has asked penetrating and necessary questions, and provided answers that anybody thinking about divine holiness will have to engage from here on out.

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