

Christian and Secular images of Holiness in the 21st century:

Towards a *holiness of the secular*

Some *methodological* and *theological* pre-conditions

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Abstract

“Don’t call me a saint; I don’t want to be dismissed that easily”!

Living at the beginning of the new millenium, humanity all over the globe is confronted with a desperate situation. Religious but also political, national, ideological and many other kinds of divides and forms of fanaticism occupy a central place in the daily news reports. In addition, neo-liberal economic orthodoxies, the increasing environmental and immigrant crisis, social, gender or racial inequality, a strong tendency towards populism in politics or a crisis of liberal democracies, render any discussion about holiness to sound at least as paradox if not dated. At the same time it appears that the major Churches have been stuck on traditional theological discourse about their glorious medieval and patristic past and sainthood, the latter mostly officially canonized, referring to extra-ordinary figures, like super-heroes, who lived in medieval times, establishing thus a pattern or rather a stereotype of holiness that primarily fits to another and certainly not to this side of the world. The formal ecclesiastical process of canonization, not without exceptions, deals with saints, the life of whom has been written as though they were belonging to another state of humanity, to an elite group, namely the ascetics of the desert, or members of the higher or lower clergy; mainly male figures; seldom married and always members of a certain ecclesial community; figures that embodied holiness in a way impossible for the most of the ordinary people, who live today in the midst of the so to say immoral dark of our *secular age*. There is then an evident “crisis of sanctity” in our time that

against the bold *return of religion* in the public sphere and the general *spiritual* renaissance, urgently calls for a radical re-envisioning or re-contextualization of the meaning of holiness and sainthood from a Christian theological point of view, that goes beyond the religious standards of canonization or any stereotypes to consider holiness as a boldly escapist or exclusivist ideal, by conceiving it rather, as a gift given to all human beings, as a “universal call” beyond ecclesial or denominational boundaries, a call for an inclusive, new *world* sainthood.

In this introductory in nature paper an attempt is made to reflect on the way, or rather on the prerequisites upon which a new understanding of holiness should be formulated in our secular setting and in view of the further challenges posed by religious pluralism and modernity. By firstly describing our methodological starting point, a general overview of the context within which such a discussion is situated will be offered. I intend then to briefly define the anthropological type relevant to our discussion so as to finally provide the necessary theological prerequisites of how one could define holiness in our present era.