Holy Cow! The Etymology, Definitions, and Uses of the Word “Holy”

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Holy Cow! The Etymological History of the Word “Holy”
By: Korynn Wible ~ G301 History of the English Language

**ABSTRACT**
How did the religious term *holy* evolve into common expressions like “holy cow?” This linguistics research project expounds upon the origin, definition, and various uses of the word *holy*.

**DEFINITION**
*Oxford English Dictionary*
“consecrated, dedicated, sacred”

**ETYMOLOGY**
*Oxford English Dictionary*
*Old English: halig or hailo*
*likely to mean “inviolate, whole”*
*uncertain of pre-Christian definition*
*cannot prove to be related to the Latin term sanctus*

**HOMONYMS**
Two words that sound the same but have different definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Holy</th>
<th>sacred</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holey</td>
<td>state of having holes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**USES**
Holy is used in excited exclamations, such as “holy cow”

Two Possible Origins for Holy Mackerel
- Catholic euphemism for “Holy Mary” since Catholics eat fish on Fridays
- selling fish on Sundays in the 17th century, so mackerel was humorously considered “holy”

**PURPOSE**
I completed my research for the word *holy* in Dr. Fleming’s linguistics class. The objective was to study the etymology, definition(s), and usage of our chosen word.

**OVERUSE**
Overuse diminishes intensity

Other words that have lost intensity

- *awesome*: profoundly reverential
- *terrific*: causing terror, terrifying

**CONCLUSION**
Through my research, I have learned that the word *holy* most likely derives from the Old English words *halig* or *hailo*. The definition has a religious meaning and *holy* is frequently confused with its homonym *holey*. Overuse of the word *holy* has weakened its intensity and *holy* has been used in common exclamations such as “holy mackerel” for centuries.

**USES**
Holmoly!