

God's holiness

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [October 20, 1999](#) issue

The rabbi put the question to my friend directly: "Do Christians believe that God is holy?" My friend was initially taken aback; she thought of the popularity of the hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy," and of her love of passages in Exodus, Isaiah and Revelation that emphasize the holiness of God. She recalled the passage in the Lord's Prayer where we indicate that God's name is hallowed. "What is the rabbi really asking?" she wondered to herself.

The rabbi continued, "When I ask Jews to identify one word that comes to mind when they think of God, they typically answer 'holy.' But when I ask Christians, the consistent answer is 'love.' So I began to wonder, what do Christians think about God's holiness?"

My friend got to thinking about whether contemporary Christians have an appropriate sense of the holiness of God. She asked me whether I, as a United Methodist, thought that heirs of the Wesleyan tradition emphasized God's holiness more than other traditions did. A bit chagrined, I replied that I thought most United Methodists would refer to God as love, as friend or parent, or even as judge, before referring to God as holy.

Why this aversion to referring to God's holiness? Does it affect the way we understand God, worship God, pray to God? Often we appeal to God as love, friend or parent as a way of emphasizing God's approachability and desire for relationship with us. The God of Jesus Christ, we stress to ourselves and others, is not a cold, impersonal deity far removed from the concerns of humanity.

Furthermore, we emphasize God's love as a counterbalance to images that many people have of an excessively austere, judging, wrathful God. We want to know that God ultimately loves us, redeems us, forgives us; we want to know that mercy does indeed triumph over judgment.

But in the process, have we domesticated God? Have we lost sight of God's majestic holiness? Has our emphasis on God's love turned too much attention to our

subjectivity in prayer, rather than to the hallowed character of God's name?

In his classic book, *Beginning to Pray*, Anthony Bloom begins by asking us to reflect on what it means to desire to be in God's presence: "When we read the gospel and the image of Christ becomes compelling, glorious, when we pray and we become aware of the greatness, the holiness of God, do we ever say, 'I am unworthy that he should come near me?' Not to speak of all the occasions when we should be aware that he cannot come to us because we are not there to receive him. We want something *from* him, not *him* at all. Is that a relationship?"

To be sure, there are distorted conceptions of human unworthiness that have wreaked havoc in congregations and in lives. Such conceptions have been grounded in views of God's judgment and wrath that have typically ignored God's mercy and love. But perhaps the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction. Too often we proclaim, at least implicitly if not explicitly, an always accessible, nice God who has few if any standards.

Bloom's point is that if we want to be in genuine relationship with God, we need to ponder more fully God's character—including God's holiness. God should not be simply the unknown object of sentimental devotion, or the one who endorses insatiable human desires. Rather, we should get to know and love the God who has been revealed to humanity—in fear of God's holiness, as well as in profound gratitude for God's extravagant mercy.

This suggests that we need to prepare ourselves for prayer; we need to prepare ourselves for relationship with the God whose forgiveness makes it possible for us to turn to God.

Bloom notes:

What we must start with, if we wish to pray, is the certainty that we are sinners in need of salvation, that we are cut off from God and that we cannot live without him and that all we can offer God is our desperate longing to be made such that God will receive us, receive us in repentance, receive us with mercy and with love. And so, from the outset, prayer is really our humble ascent towards God, a moment when we turn Godwards, shy of coming near, knowing that if we meet him too soon, before his grace has had time to help us to be capable of meeting him, it

will be judgment. And all we can do is to turn to him with all the reverence, all the veneration, the worshipful adoration, the fear of God of which we are capable, with all the attention and earnestness which we may possess, and ask him to do something with us that will make us capable of meeting him face to face, not for judgment, nor for condemnation, but for eternal life.

We can only understand and faithfully live in relationship to God's holiness if we prepare ourselves to receive God's extravagant mercy. Perhaps our unwillingness to think about God in terms of holiness is because we have so trivialized and sentimentalized our understandings of what it means to think of God in terms of love, friendship or forgiveness. After all, authentically Christian versions of love, friendship and forgiveness are all closely linked with a call to become holy.

Could it be that the rabbi rather innocently exposed a weakness in contemporary Christianity's understanding and worship of God? We must include God's holiness in our identification of God's love if we are to faithfully address the God of Exodus, Isaiah and Revelation.