

RELATIONAL HOLINESS: CORE AND CONTRIBUTING NOTIONS

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The classical terms of holiness – “Christian Perfection,” “Entire Sanctification,” “The Second Blessing,” and “Baptism of the Holy Spirit” – no longer seize the imaginations of many people. Evidence of this is found chiefly in the fact that Christian leaders both inside and outside the holiness tradition rarely use these terms today. Lay people use them even less. Perhaps we in the holiness tradition are becoming like the Myanmar pygmies.

At the turn of the 21st century, conservationist Alan Rabinowitz set out to explore the remote mountain regions of Myanmar. Prior to 1989, this relatively unexplored nation was known as Burma. Rabinowitz wanted to document species of indigenous animals largely unknown to the outside world. Myanmar officials supported the venture, because they knew little about the plants, animals, and even some people living in the isolated mountain areas.

Prior to setting out on the excursion, Rabinowitz happened across long forgotten reports on the region written in the late 1950s and early 60s. These reports mentioned a tribe of approximately one hundred pygmies living in the Myanmar mountains. This tribe apparently contained the world’s only pygmies of Asian ancestry. Rabinowitz realized that since the writing of these reports nearly four decades earlier, no one from outside the region had documented the state of this hidden and peculiar tribe.

After searching the deep mountain valleys for some time, Rabinowitz found the pygmy people. He regretted to discover, however, that only about a dozen of these dwarfish humans still existed. The genetic lineage of only three remained pure, and these three had decided not to marry. This peculiar race was within a few years of extinction.

Rabinowitz spoke with the youngest remaining pygmy, a thirty-nine year-old bachelor named Dawi. He asked Dawi why the pygmies were nearing total disappearance. In his response, the pygmy male noted the high infant mortality rate and increased probability of mental illness that typically accompany inbreeding. But he also told Rabinowitz that his people had consciously chosen not to reproduce to continue their lineage. Or, as Rabinowitz put it, these “people had become active participants in their own extinction.”

The pygmies of Myanmar could have chosen to reinvigorate their disappearing race. Their genetic relatives lived not far away in China. Although the Chinese relatives were not pygmies, their genetic lineage could have continued through intermarriage with these next of kin. The pygmies also could have intermarried with non-pygmies of their native mountain region. These matrimonyes could have been orchestrated so that the pygmies would not have lost their cultural and social identity, despite relinquishing their genetic purity.

The Myanmar pygmies, however, chose neither to retain their identity as a people nor to adapt to their changing environment. A vision for a prosperous future failed to seize their imaginations. And without such a vision, this unique people literally perished.

Perhaps the fundamental identity of the holiness movement – its theological distinctive – is also becoming extinct. Perhaps it is only the organizational machinery that keeps the tradition alive, while its theology no longer exerts influence.

Like the pygmies, Christians attending holiness churches have felt the negative influence of forces beyond their control. But the way that Christians understand holiness – or perhaps their general *lack* of understanding – has likely been the most important factor in their failure of imagination. That factor *is* within their control. Could it be that holiness people are passive participants – and at times even active participants – in the looming extinction of their own theological heritage?

Today, both those inside and outside the holiness movement get the impression that holiness has become an irrelevant or extra dimension to contemporary Christian life. As one young man put it, “Why worry about being holy or about entire sanctifi . . . er, what did you call that? . . . when what the world really needs is Jesus? Besides, I don’t recall Jesus using those terms.”

Many of the most passionate holiness advocates from yesteryear would not be surprised that many today regard holiness as passé. Early holiness leaders worried about what future generations would do with what these leaders considered the distinctive doctrine of their faith.

Today, students raised in the holiness tradition arrive at colleges and universities having heard little if anything about holiness and sanctification. And those who have heard the terms typically identify them with some negative aspect of religion they want to avoid. Holiness seems no longer to be a central concern for younger generations.

At least in America, those denominations with ties to the holiness tradition are in danger of becoming theologically unrecognizable from the evangelical Christian mainstream. To be sure, some in holiness circles have treated what are actually theological molehills like mountains. And this practice has unnecessarily divided holiness advocates from the broader evangelical community.

Even so, it now seems as important as ever to clarify what if anything distinguishes holiness Christians from others. Unless distinctions that identify real differences are named, the denominations that comprise the holiness tradition may as well fade into mainstream evangelicalism. They may as well allow the holiness story to become a curious historical footnote . . . like the Myanmar pygmies.

A General Superintendent in the Church of the Nazarene summed up well the state of affairs in America's largest holiness denomination. Apparently speaking for other leaders in the movement, the superintendent said at an early 21st century global theology conference, "We believe that our denomination is currently in a theological crisis." An important book about the holiness movement published at about that same time concluded that "the question in the last decades of the 20th century was whether or not the Church of the Nazarene had a coherent and cogent doctrine of holiness at all."

Several analysts offer explanations for the diminishing interest in holiness. Some say that heirs of the holiness tradition have become preoccupied with fitting into the Christian mainstream, a stream that itself reserves little place for holiness language. Others suggest that being holy requires being out of step with society, and holiness people have become more interested in appearing reputable. Some say that church growth models undermine the theological focus on holiness. Some argue that holiness – understood as perfection, sanctification, etc. – is not now and has never been an adequate basis to establish an entire Christian theological trajectory. Additional reasons have been proposed.

These and other explanations may have a degree of validity. Our thesis, however, is that the *main* reason many lack interest in the doctrine of holiness has to do with the interplay between theological assumptions and contemporary worldviews.

The truth is that people today view their world in radically different ways than did people one hundred, fifty, or even twenty years ago. A worldview change has occurred. It has become vogue to label this shift "postmodernism." Although understandings of postmodernism vary, the belief that people view the world differently than their predecessors unites these varying understandings.

This shift in worldview means that even if the forbearers of holiness spoke with one voice about what it meant to sanctified, we would still need a fresh proposal for how holiness might best be understood today. It is futile simply to recycle holiness sermons and literature from yesteryear in hopes that the old-style holiness movement might revive.

We intend to return holiness to its place of chief importance, while presenting its core meaning in an understandable and biblically faithful way. Because societies around the world change, the core Christian message – holiness – must be presented in new ways and with new language so as to seize our hearts and imaginations. The Christian gospel must be contextualized for the present age without compromising its core. We believe that we must reassert the theological importance of holiness. To do this, we offer a holiness vision to seize hearts and imaginations for what can be a prosperous future.

A Relational Worldview

If we could choose one word to summarize how many people view their world today – the postmodern world – that word would be "relational." Even visions of postmodernism that largely oppose each other share this emphasis upon relationality.

Before further explaining what a relational worldview entails, we should lay to rest a few common misconceptions about relational ways of thinking. When we talk about possessing a relational

worldview, we are not talking about being sociable or friendly. To see the world in relational terms does not necessarily have to do with caring, congeniality, or getting along with others – although the world would surely be a better place if we expressed such prosocial behavior.

We see elements of the relational worldview in diverse domains. It prevails in the sciences, for instance, from physics to biology to psychology to political science and various disciplines in between. In these and other domains, it is becoming common to talk about our world as composed of entities or subjects that exist in mutual relations – whether we're thinking of a tree or a whale or a person or a star or a proton or anything else. Many understand meaning itself as having to do with identifying the relations between one thing and another.

A relational worldview considers things and persons as deeply interconnected. To “be” is to be in relation. An individual's relations with others largely decide what that individual is. To say it another way, it belongs to the nature of everything that exists – indeed, of *existence itself* – to be related and for those relations to affect the fundamental nature of existing things.

Even with this short description of a relational worldview, one can guess that it greatly affects how we understand what it means to be a person. Many contemporary people understand personhood to be the history of the interactions and the choices that individuals make. This is a relational understanding of personhood.

The relations that an individual has with his or her environment – social, familial, political, physical, natural, religious, mental, and so on – largely shape that individual's being and character. Some describe humans today with phrases such as “persons-in-community,” “individuals-in-relation,” or even “community-created-persons.” These descriptions are an attempt to capture the fundamental importance of our relatedness to others.

Of course, individuals are not wholly determined by the relations they have with their others or their environments. We all exercise at least some degree of agency with limited freedom in response to others. But powerful environmental factors determine the range of choices we entertain at any given time. How we respond to these factors and relations influences who we become.

We believe that Christians should find relational postmodernism particularly helpful for talking about our relation to God. Christians can agree wholeheartedly with the postmodern view that persons become who they are out of decisions made in response to their relational environments. Believers argue, however, that our environment includes a Presence not acknowledged by unbelievers.

It certainly fits with this postmodern emphasis upon relations for Christians to contend that God acts as an ever-present, divine influence – a necessary cause – in everyone's relational environment. Just as people affect others through relations, God as the Maker and Sustainer of all things also affects all things, all people, all the time, everywhere. There is no environment in which God is not related to others as a present, active, and loving agent.

To think about God in this way is to believe that God is the most important actor in everyone's environment. God affects *all* others, and does so in every moment. This is a significant part of what Wesley and others have called “prevenient grace.” This grace, which is none other than God, surrounds and sustains every one of us, all the time (cf. Acts 17:28). And by this relational grace all things exist.

Many postmodernists reject the claim that we can know our world solely from what we learn from taste, touch, sight, smell, and hearing. They talk about the importance of intuition – also known as tacit or personal knowledge – to supplement and enrich the knowledge gained from our five senses. Some postmodernists even speak of nonsensory perception to account for this knowledge, and this perceptive activity is perhaps exemplified best by the perceiving we do with our minds. When we remember the past, we perceive something real without using our five senses.

This postmodern way of talking about how we come to know our world fits nicely with Christian traditions that speak of the Holy Spirit communicating with our spirits. The intuitive communication of postmodernism seems identical at least in technique with the biblical accounts of human interaction with the God who cannot be seen, touched, tasted, smelled, or audibly heard. For God is spirit (Jn. 4:24).

The postmodern idea of a moment-by-moment relational existence provides the key to a contemporary Christian conception of life. According to this idea, each moment of life begins by being

influenced by the past. History -- both what occurred the previous moment and what occurred in the distant past -- influences the present.

Each person in each moment chooses among a variety of options and alternatives based upon his or her relations with the past. The choice one makes in any particular moment is a response to what is immediately possible given that person's environment. That choice contributes to the becoming of that person, and also contributes to that person's relations in the future.

In this way of looking at things, persons are relational through and through. They are related to others and to what has come before as the past impinges upon them. They are related to others in the present. Those who will come after them will relate to them as influences upon their own future personhood.

In the midst of it all, God is also present and acting relationally. No one, including God, is wholly independent or isolated from others. God is not entirely independent, because God is love and love is expressed in relationships. Relationships require a kind of dependence if they are true relationships.

To exist, of course, God does not depend upon creatures. God was not born and will not die; God does not depend upon others in order to be. Rather, to say that God is dependent is to affirm the relational dependence that love requires. To rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn requires an experiential dependence. A God of love desires and seeks this kind of dependent relation.

God is open to and affected by others, because the Creator and the creatures enjoy mutual relations. To say that these relations are mutual is to say that God interacts with us and we interact with God. Mutuality is not the same as equality, however. God is not another mortal; there are numerous differences between the Creator and the creatures. But the wonder of it all is that the God of the universe enjoys give-and-take relations with every creature who lives.

Our descriptions of God will not and cannot be exhaustive. While Christians believe that some important things can be said about their Maker and Savior, they typically don't claim to have given a full explanation of what divinity entails. Nevertheless, more and more people believe that the description of God as relational resides at the heart of how best to describe the Lover of us all. And they believe that this description can be enormously helpful in teaching us what it might mean to love one another.

Perhaps we can begin to see that this relational worldview will affect how we understand some of the most basic issues of our existence. And if holiness belongs among the most basic issues, it seems likely that a relational view of holiness – *relational* holiness – might affect the way we think, talk, and act as Christians in a postmodern world.

Core and Contributing Notions

There is another factor that contributes to the inability of holiness to seize contemporary imaginations. It is that diverse concepts of holiness exist. It is not uncommon for a person to grow up in the holiness tradition, attend a college or university, and proceed even to seminary all the while finding that theologians in the holiness tradition have come to differing conclusions about what holiness means. We will see in the following chapter that one reason for this plurality is the diversity of the Bible itself. At present, we need acknowledge only that leaders within the holiness tradition offer significantly different understandings of holiness.

The holiness movement needs an interpretative framework that will order the chaos of meanings and make the heart of holiness understandable. This interpretative framework should be grounded primarily in Scripture. But it will also incorporate reason, Christian tradition, and contemporary experiences.

We suggest a way of understanding holiness that integrates diverse notions of holiness. We call the concept that integrates the other meanings of holiness, "the core notion of holiness." While the other meanings of holiness are important, they represent contributing notions rather than the core.

Perhaps an analogy will help us understand the relation between the core notion and the contributing notions that it encompasses. Nearly three thousand years ago, the earliest Western philosophers wondered what the most fundamental unit of existence might be. Thales, perhaps the earliest philosopher, thought that water was the most fundamental. It appeared to him that all of life depends

upon water, and water can be found in almost everything. Therefore, he surmised, the most basic element of existence must be water.

Anaximenes started a speculative debate with the followers of Thales a few generations later. Anaximenes suggested that air was more basic than water. After all, water seems to be partially comprised of air, and air can be found in almost everything. Anaximenes concluded that air must be the most fundamental element of existence.

Heraclitus followed these two philosophers. Although he was mainly interested in noting that all things change, Heraclitus also joined the discussion by considering what the most basic unit of existence might be. For him, fire was more basic than either air or water, because fire reveals that existence has both stability and change.

Other early philosophers entered the debate. Many suggested that the most fundamental element of existence is dirt. From dust we came, and from dust we shall return. So dirt must be most basic.

These four elements – water, air, fire, and dirt – vied for the role of ultimate explanation for everything. Each pointed to some important truth evident to common experience. But none of the four encompassed the truths of the others. When any one element was suggested to be the most basic, it became apparent that it was woefully inadequate at encompassing the truths expressed by the other three.

Into the history of philosophy came someone whose idea integrated the others. That someone was Democritus, and he argued that existence is fundamentally composed of atoms. Water, air, fire, and earth all are made up of these atoms.

Democritus's proposal won the day, because it proved to be an adequate explanatory principle. His atomic theory incorporated the truths expressed by those who had come before. Because of Democritus, scientists today still speak of the atom – although they often also use other terms to avoid the connotations that the concept of the atom carries over from previous centuries.

This true story of how atomic theory emerged in competition with other theories illustrates what we want to say about the relationship between the core and contributing notions of holiness. Contributing notions express something true, but they are inadequate in themselves for capturing the other truths that must be represented.

When contributing notions are treated as core notions, problems arise. Contributing notions cannot carry the full weight required of the core notion. And it becomes difficult for us to defend wholeheartedly the truth of a contributing notion when it pretends to fill the role that only the core notion can fill.

The core notion incorporates the truths that various contributing notions express without negating those varying truths. And the core notion becomes the bottom-line explanation to which one ultimately appeals. When an adequate core notion is found, contributing notions become more valuable as they fulfill their proper place of support. In many cases, contributing notions specify in their own ways the more general truth expressed in the core notion.

With differences between core and contributing notions in mind, relational holiness might serve as a beginning point to understanding the core of the holiness doctrine. This may provide a means for affirming the best in holiness while speaking to a contemporary setting. We address this and other crucial matters pertaining to holiness in our new book, *Relational Holiness: Responding to the Call of Love*.

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*Excerpted and adapted from the first chapter of *Relational Holiness: Responding to the Call of Love*, by Thomas Jay Oord and Michael Lodahl (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2005). For a more detailed explanation of relational holiness refer to the book.