

# Both Gods

In the history of religion – all religion, not just Christianity – there have been two different ways to imagine God. Many religions stress that God is utterly different from us, completely beyond our understanding, separated from our puny humanity by an unimaginable gulf. Others see God as sort of like us, just bigger and more powerful. The first sort of God is more awe-inspiring; the second sort is more approachable.

I should illustrate. Take, for instance, Zeus, the chief god of Greek religion. Zeus is very big and very strong, but in the Greek stories he also has a very human weakness for pretty human girls - lots of them – and an understandable fear of his wife, Hera. Powerful, yes, but with recognizable weaknesses and emotions. By contrast, Persian religion, Islam, and Enlightenment Deism usually describe God as being beyond human categories. This God exists above our sordid weaknesses, ignorance, and emotional instability. This God is worthy of worship, but is not someone you make friends with. Frankly, this God is sort of scary.

What about the God of our Bible, the one revered in Judaism and Christianity? Well, we don't seem to know what we want. On the one hand, the creation account in Genesis describes God as making the universe simply by speaking it into being. The Ten Commandments stress that there is one God and we are not to make any likenesses of that God or compare God to anything on earth, including us. So we definitely have the God that is beyond our understanding. But the same books describe God walking in the Garden with Adam and Eve, eating dinner with Abraham and Sarah, choosing one nation for a special task, and making a covenant with that people – just like people make contracts with each other. In the books of the prophets, we hear God crying out with anguish and indecision, frustrated with the way the people have broken the covenant, but wanting to forgive them and take them back. All very emotional – God seems to be like humans but more so.

All this leads us toward Christmas. Really. Because, you see, the basic teaching of this season is that God is both. God is utterly beyond our understanding and yet entered our world, our time, to become not just comparable to us but rather one of us. Our God both transcends human categories and experienced them. This God is not only impossibly stronger than us, but became a frail and dependent creature among us. The core of our teaching at Christmas time is that both perspectives are valid. Both are right, but neither is sufficient by itself.

We still don't know what we want. Some Christians still want a God of impossible power that looms in majesty above our puniness, while others seem to want a God who is their best friend and with whom they can just hang out.

Neither is wrong. Here's what Christmas means: God is both.