

THE IDEA OF GOD TODAY: THE NEO-AGNOSTIC VIEW

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IT IS a truism nowadays that ideas and doctrines evolve just as institutions and movements do. Old names may be used by thinkers who have little else in common with their predecessors. The Christian of today is not what the Christian of the middle ages, or even of a century ago, was. The Freethinker of today is not likely to be a follower of Robert G. Ingersoll or even of Thomas Paine. The Positivist of today is not a rigorous follower of Auguste Comte.

Conceptions and ideas change with advance in science, with the general spirit of the age, with all manner of currents and tendencies which indirectly and subtly affect our habits of thought and our use of language.

The idea of God is, of course, no exception to the rule just referred to. That idea has undergone many changes, as scholarly works on the subject have shown. The point of the present paper is, however, a special one, in a sense. The idea of God is changing, as it were, before our own eyes. The discussion of it takes a line that would hardly have been possible even a decade ago.

Under what influences is the change in question being effected? It is hard to say. The new psychology is one factor; the philosophical study of the development and evolution of language is another; anthropology and what may be called descriptive sociology—an inexact phrase, of course—have of late rendered great service to the cause of sober and honest thinking on the subject of religion. The new logic and the new view of the mission and scope of philosophy have contributed to the result in question.

Those who entertain lingering doubts concerning the decline and disappearance of the crude theological notion of a personal God—the God of the Bible, if the Bible be given a literal interpretation—or the misty and nebulous metaphysical notion of God—the power in

the universe which makes for righteousness—would do well, to read and re-read such significant books as Prof. James H. Leubas, *The Belief in God and Immortality*, Prof. C. O. Beckwith's *The Idea of God*, and Prof. A. J. Leighton's *Religion and the Mind of Today*.

To contrast the tone, spirit and method of these works with the manner of matter of Mr. Balfour's lately republished *Foundations of Belief*, is to become aware of a difference of atmosphere, of perspective and of background. It was easy enough to refute Mr. Balfour a quarter of a century ago; indeed, Huxley and Spencer performed that operation with neatness and thoroughness. Today, no well-informed student of belief and its foundations cares to argue with Mr. Balfour. His argument strikes one as irrelevant, antiquated, pointless.

The truth has dawned on the modern mind that there is, in reality, no "idea" of God. The term is still freely used, but those who use it are totally unable to attach any half definite *meaning* to it. They know that, if they try to define it, language fails them and the mind reels. The modern man, even if but slightly educated, cannot seriously maintain that there is a *place* which may be called "heaven" and another *place* which may be called "hell," and that God presides over the former and issues orders and decrees, after the manner of a sublunar autocrat and thus governs the universe and everything beyond it. Such infantile notions are no longer entertained even by those "fundamentalists" who think, or say, they entertain them.

When driven into a corner, some thoughtful people who adhere to orthodox phrases declare that, of course, God is not a person, but a super-person. No one, they admit, can imagine his form or appearance, but it is convenient to think of him as possessing human form and human qualities—that is, the very finest and noblest of our qualities, such as love, tenderness, all-embracing charity. This position seems plausible enough, until one analyzes it.

In the first place, what is the possible meaning of "super-person or super-personality? When we speak of supermen we think of men who are physically, mentally and morally superior to the average man, or even to the highest known product of human evolution. A tall, handsome, distinguished, high-minded, intellectual, attractive, courageous and courteous man would be called a superman. A genius though physically defective, might be called a superman. But how childish it would be to apply such notions of super-personality, or super-humanity, to an unknowable, inconceivable power supposed

to be capable of creating and ruling our universe and every other universe—or whatever we may call it—beyond it!

It is simply and patently impossible for human beings *to transcend their own experience and imagination*. There is, of course, racial experience in addition to individual; racial experience is registered in the whole nervous system—according to modern science—and we become dimly aware of it when we act contrary to reason and to the lessons of limited personal experience under the compulsion of instincts, innate proclivities, categorical imperatives, and the like. In either case, when we come to attach names to things, to feelings, to states of mind and to situations we are of necessity limited to the region of experience. Something is seen, felt, thought, imagined which requires a name. The savage, the primitive man, the man of Biblical culture severally knew what they meant by God. Their ideas were very definite—if wrong and crude. When the Hebrew prophet of old spoke of “the Lord,” he made a powerful impression, because his Monotheism was simple and austere. When we moderns speak of the “spirit that is God,” we use words literally without meaning.

But are there not, some will object, terms that, although extremely vague and indefinable, yet stand for great realities? What, for example, is the definition of “beauty”? No two writers on aesthetics give the same definition, and the probability is that no exact definition of beauty will ever be offered. Yet do we not know that beauty exists? Do we not worship beauty? Why not use the term God in the same way, and why not worship God?

This line of reasoning is undoubtedly plausible. But it points to confusion of thought. The term beauty is an abstraction. We know that when we speak of beauty we conjure up fleeting and alluring images of beautiful persons, beautiful scenery, beautiful flowers, beautiful pages, beautiful pictures. It is the experiences with a multitude of things and forms that please and charm us that has given rise to the abstract notion of beauty. But what experiences have given rise to the abstract pseudo-idea of God? The finite cannot suggest the infinite. We have no experience whatever that is not explicable by the constitution and nature of the finite mind.

Every attempt at defining “God,” when closely analyzed, brings us back to misinterpreted experience of something that is finite, limited—pathetically limited. Take two or three illustrations.

"God is love," some schools tell us with an air of superior wisdom and freedom from crude superstition. What do we know of love? We derive the idea from the love we have felt, the love we have observed, the love we have read and heard about. We love human beings, animals, flowers, ideas, institutions. We know that animals love. We do *not* think that there is love between the sun and the planets in the solar system. We do *not* think that there is love between the atoms in the molecule or between the component units of the atom. Love is the name rational people give to a sentiment, an emotion felt by sentient beings. Is God an emotion of a sentient being? The question is absurd; then the phrase, "God is love," is meaningless. Why, then, use it?

"God is the principle of goodness whereby the world lives and steadily advances to perfection." Again, what is a principle? The term was coined by educated men and means, in all scientific discussion, a basic proposition, a cardinal rule, etc. We speak of the principles of economics, the principles of ethics, the principles of jurisprudence, the principles of psychology. How can God be a basic proposition or cardinal rule, and how can a proposition be God?

Or take this definition—Prof. Leighton's: God is "the supreme source and ground of the spiritual qualities of persons, of rational and moral individuals," or, in other words, "the eternal perfection of that type of being which, in our human order, we call spiritual individuality or personality."

What we mean by the spiritual qualities of human beings is quite clear. Love of justice and mercy, love of beauty, the sentiment of generosity, moral courage and devotion to truth regardless of narrow expediency are spiritual qualities. We possess them, and we are certain that the perfect man will always and naturally live up to them. But these qualities have been evolved exactly as the less noble, or more self-regarding, sentiments have been evolved. Animals are not destitute of spiritual qualities; they love, they make sacrifices. There is no reason to suppose that there is one source or ground for spiritual qualities and another for non-spiritual. If God is the name for some unknown and unknowable source of spiritual qualities, what is the source and ground of the others, and what name shall we give them—the Devil? This would be harking back to childish theology with a vengeance. We gain absolutely nothing by calling *our* qualities, or their source, God. And it is presumptuous to imply that God is only a perfect man.

Once more: God is simply a name for the inconceivable power which created the totality of things we call nature. Since self-creation is inconceivable, we are driven by the constitution of our mind to assume that some kind of creative force existed, exists and will continue to exist forever.

This, clearly, is the familiar Paley argument in a modern form. We see a watch, or any other piece of mechanism, and we conclude that some one made it. We behold our universe, infer existence beyond it, and we conclude that some power created all that is. But why is a creator conceivable and self-creation not? In truth, is not the creator, by the hypothesis, self-created? Even children ask, "who created God?" We laugh at that naive query, but the wisest man cannot show *why* it is ridiculous. If we cannot conceive self-creation, we cannot conceive creation by a self-created power. The words, then, have no meaning. Why use them?

Both propositions in truth are verbal and empty. They convey nothing to the human mind.

No alternative is left except this—that, it is useful, for practical moral purposes, to adopt the God hypothesis and to suppose that God—or the power above, below and in all things—is benevolent in our human sense of the word. In science and philosophy, it is pointed out, hypotheses are absolutely indispensable. Facts only begin to acquire significance when we regard them in the light of a theory. This is indisputably true, but in science and philosophy, when we frame and put forward a hypothesis, the words in the formula have meaning. The hypothesis itself is of use. We discard it when it fails to account for all of the facts, and frame another. The God hypothesis is not of scientific origin; it has served no *scientific purpose*. It was an absolutely natural hypothesis in the infancy of the human race, and it has been modified from time to time to correspond to tests and demands of advancing intelligence. Today further modification, in the sense of attenuation and refinement, will not suffice; even men and women deeply religious are not content with the hypothesis; they would rather take the frankly Agnostic position than profess beliefs which they cannot rationally entertain.

Furthermore, the God hypothesis is no longer useful for moral purposes. Professor Leuba, in the work above referred to, deals with this question at considerable length, and with ability and knowledge. Here it is necessary to make only a few points deserving of particular attention.

In the first place, the God hypothesis does not help us in the smallest degree to solve the problem of evil. From Job down to Professor Jacks and other contemporary thinkers, that problem is evaded, not faced. We are told that evil may not be evil—a question-begging argument. Pain and suffering, especially when not deserved by sin and crime, are evil to the human mind and heart, and a just and omnipotent God would not inflict them. "Evil is the price of discipline and character building," suggest some. They assume, without proof, that evil develops character, although there is evidence to the contrary, and they overlook the reasonable objection that a benevolent and omnipotent God would have devised more acceptable means of building character. They reason in a circle. When convicted of this beyond all escape, they fall back on the ancient plea that poor, groping, limited beings like ourselves cannot hope to comprehend the ways of God!

Where, then, are we? We cannot comprehend the ways of God. We cannot grasp the idea of God. We cannot reconcile our hypothesis of a benevolent and omnipotent creator with the facts of life. We cannot solve a single moral problem with the aid of that hypothesis. What problems we manage to solve, we solve scientifically. What and where, then, is the value of the God hypothesis?

The Agnostic answer is, the hypothesis has been shorn and deprived of real value. The conclusion is not an agreeable one; indeed, the Agnostic position as a whole is unpleasant and humiliating. One cannot help wishing—futile as that is—the human mind had a longer reach than it has. It is disheartening to feel that the wisest among us is ignorant and hopelessly unequal to the solution of the problems which concern us most vitally and deeply. What is the ultimate purpose of existence, and what the destiny of man, the highest product of evolution so far? Has existence a meaning, and, if so, what is that meaning? Alas, we cannot scientifically answer these poignant questions. We are bound, being human, progressive and curious, to frame hypotheses; but we must not and cannot adhere to theories which find little support in known facts and fail to account for other facts. Above all, we must be honest with ourselves and with others, and make no statement that is unintelligible even to ourselves. Religion and philosophy must be reconstructed—are being reconstructed. There is much in past thought that we can take over and utilize; but let us be sure we know what we take from the past, why we take it, and what we propose to do with it in more scientific, philosophical and coherent systems.

Not that mysticism has no place in life and thought. It may have a very important place. But the mystic can only appeal to other mystics. Those who have not had his actual or fancied experiences can attach no weight to his "proofs"; to offer proof is to adopt the tests of science, to acquiesce in the results of such tests. Let the mystic who asserts he is certain of the existence and presence of God tell us how we may achieve like certainty, like communion, a like sense of presence. Let him even plead for free play for the will to believe—in other words, for the provisional adoption of his particular hypothesis. This is legitimate, as we have seen. But if, with the best will in the world, we fail to verify his hypothesis, to repeat his experience, he cannot censure us for rejecting his hypothesis and framing another, or for suspending even tentative and provisional opinions till the right amount of evidence of the right quality—scientific evidence, in a word—is available and a new working theory becomes profitable and serviceable.

We may add, in conclusion, that there will never be a dearth of theories. We frame them too readily, rather than too reluctantly. The neo-Agnostic does not dogmatize. He does not deny propositions that he does not understand, and does not issue sweeping denials of all possible propositions concerning God or purpose in creation. He denies only propositions which he knows to be arbitrary, false or absurd, and he asks for explanations and definitions of terms in propositions which *appear* to carry meaning but do not really possess any.