

THE IDEA OF GOD

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“AND God said let us make man in our own image”. Scholars tell us that the word “Elohim” which is in this passage translated “God”, though plural in form, is always used as if of the singular number. We can hardly help thinking that the form is a relic of a time when the Hebrews were not yet monotheists and that grammatical accuracy was, later, sacrificed to religious scruple. We seem to see a people of gods creating a people of men, like themselves except in immortality and divinity. But whether the original idea was of gods or of God, the passage shows the conception which men, at a date certainly far earlier than that of the Book of Genesis, ancient though that is, had formed of God.

This is the really significant part of the passage quoted. If given by inspiration, it justifies men in forming their idea of God upon the basis of their own natures. If not accepted as revealed truth it shows, at any rate, that men of the most ancient times conceived God or the gods as, in general, like men. It is anthromorphism either revealed as a truth or shown as a fact of men's ideas. The mind of man had made God in his own image, whether justified in so doing or not.

This was then, and is to-day and must always be, inevitable. God must be conceived as having personality, will, intelligence, a moral nature, power and purpose. These things we see in men, some of them in animals, and savages have even seen most, if not all, of them in some inanimate things. But in man we see them actually in the highest form in which they ever met, potentially in a higher form than man ever displays. If God is so different from anything which we know that nothing can give us any idea of Him, then we are unable to think, talk or reason about Him. But this men have always been compelled, by their natures, to do, and so they have necessarily

assimilated their idea of God to the highest being whom they knew possessing such characteristics as they conceive Him to possess. This inevitable process brought with it the equally inevitable result that the necessary assimilation of God to man, in thought, was taken to come from and to be justified by a resemblance in fact. Men could not think otherwise.

The idea of God held by the early Jews did not involve so much supernal goodness as supernal power. God was to them a sort of sublimation of the sheik, chief or king who ruled them, and nothing more. Of course he was immensely wiser and stronger than the earthly ruler, but morally their simple anthropomorphism did not raise him to a different class. Of course like the earthly ruler, he prescribed laws and rules, often punished wrong conduct, rewarded right conduct and showed mercy, but he was also at times angry (sometimes without apparent cause) revengeful, jealous and fierce. His laws were largely of a ceremonial rather than an ethical character. He was particularly severe upon any neglect of due respect to Himself and particularly rewarded zeal in His service. In such cases He was comparatively indifferent to moral character. He was a "man of war", and His wars were conducted in the merciless way characteristic of the time. He adopted one nation and favored them beyond all others, but He also punished them with cruel severity when He judged them not sufficiently assiduous in their devotion to Him. At other times His attitude toward them was paternal, such as might be expected of a benevolent patriarchal sheik.

But with the New Testament we find a totally new idea of God in the Gospels. The notion of a king is nearly gone. This God is consistently and constantly assimilated to a father and that is the word most frequently used to designate Him. This God is not angry nor jealous. He is quite indifferent to outer marks of respect and cares nothing for formal observances. He is preëminently a moral God, and His service consists solely in ethical conduct. Such conduct alone does he reward, and unethical conduct alone does He punish. He is loving and protecting, not to the men of one race, but to all men. His power to punish is put in the background. The emphasis is laid upon his paternal affection and care for men. This is the burden of the Gospel teaching upon that point.

But this conception was at once too high and not sufficiently imposing to last. Fathers all men knew, and they could readily comprehend what was meant by God as a Father, but this did not satis-

fy them. That He should be a father to each was well, but He must be something higher and more. A Father may love and care for His children, but a God must have a higher dignity and His power and glory must be manifest. The noble conception of the Fatherhood of God did not satisfy and seemed inadequate. God must be modelled upon the glory and greatness of the Emperor.

So by the old inevitable process the idea of God taught by Jesus faded before a renewal of the old ideal, that of the king. Not now as a petty monarch of the East, but as the mighty Roman Emperor did the idea take shape, and that promptly. Compare the idea of God shown by the Book of Revelation with that shown by the Gospels. It would seem as if two different religions were concerned.

When Christianity had become the State religion the situation was what it had been among the Hebrews centuries before, and as then, inevitably, men had formed their idea of God upon the kings to whom they were accustomed, so now the Roman Emperor would have become necessarily the model, even had he not already been so. Since he was so already, the idea of God as a greater Emperor became so definitely crystallized that it has never been lost. The idea of the Empire was more enduring than the institution itself. It lasted through the Middle Ages and beyond, and the idea of God as Emperor is that of most minds to-day.

The doctrine of the Trinity has only served to intensify this conception by removing God farther from man. When the Council of Nicea formulated the dogma of the divinity of Christ it created, besides the one God previously accepted, two subordinate gods, Christ and the Holy Ghost. That they were subordinate, secondary, derivative, was recognized as it is, indeed, stated in the Nicene creed. The real question which concerned the council was whether Christ was *created* or *begotten* by God. If *created* (as the Arians contended) then he had no other divinity than any other of God's creations whom he might inspire. If *begotten*, then he must be of the same substance as his Father, and so really divine by his nature. The Holy Ghost was a matter of less importance. He was always secondary and the later doctrine of the double procession, afterward so important, derived all its seriousness, not from anything concerning the nature and functions of the Holy Ghost, but those of Christ. The double procession placed the Son more nearly on an equality with the God who had begotten him, and made him part of the source

whence the Holy Ghost had come. Important as the subject was, from a theological standpoint, it concerned, really, only Christ.

The appearance and triumph of Augustinian trinitarianism, though it so completely expelled from theology the Nicene trinitarianism that most persons now are ignorant that they totally differed, produced no real effect upon the current idea of God. This is natural because it is impossible for the mind to form a definite conception of "three persons in one God." Therefore the Augustinian expression has remained without effect upon actual belief except in one respect; that it did raise the Son and the Holy Ghost to equal nominal rank with God the Father. The equality of the Persons of the Trinity was the sole point in his statement which was intelligible. The subordination of the Son, which St. Athanasius and the other Nicene Fathers had considered a part of their system, was no longer a part of orthodox theology but became an heresy. Henceforth the three Persons must be spoken of as of equal rank.

Nevertheless the effect of all this theology upon the popular idea of God was, after all, practically *nil*. Always the original God, now called God the Father, remained in his place, and it was of him that men thought when they said "God". The Holy Ghost has never had any reality as a person. But with the second Person of the Trinity the case was different and it can hardly be doubted that His rise in importance was due to action and reaction between the conception of Him and that of the First Person.

The Emperor was an awful being. Few of his subjects ever saw him, fewer still might approach him. To them he was remote, inaccessible, the source of power, the embodiment of splendor and greatness, but too remote and too high above the mass of the people for any of them to hope to attract his notice or benefit by his care. If anything needed his mighty interposition a go-between, an intermediary, an intercessor, must be employed; someone whom the humbler suitor might venture to approach and might hope to interest. The nearer to the Emperor this intercessor, the better for the petitioner. but often the petition must pass through several hands. At any rate, without some such help nothing could be expected.

God having been conceived as an infinitely greater Emperor was, accordingly, infinitely more remote and inaccessible. A Mediator was even more imperatively demanded in His case than in that of the earthly ruler. He, certainly, might not be directly approached. But, fortunately, a Mediator was at hand, and in the one who had

been a man and had lived with men, Christ, who was, moreover, the Only Begotten Son of God. To Him, therefore, men's minds turned. Many, indeed, then and now, dared not or thought it useless to look so high as the Son, and sought to propitiate Him through some saint, that he in turn might propitiate God. This served to remove the awful God still further from men. But in any case men were led to turn solely to Christ and to regard God as beyond their reach.

Nor did they ever reach any idea of identity between God and Christ. They could, in the nature of things, go no further than the Nicene affirmation. Christ remained, and is to-day in the general conception, as distinct from God the Father as if St. Augustine had never spoken. That Christ is divine men could accept and have accepted. That He can answer prayer and forgive sins they can and do accept. But that He is not an entirely distinct being from God the Father and that there is not above and behind Him a remote, awful figure which was God before Him and from whom His powers, even if unlimited, are derived, they have never been able to accept. The Governor may be able to do all that the Emperor could do, but he is not the Emperor.

Accordingly when men say "God", they mean, not Christ, not the Holy Ghost, not a composite of these with the Father, but simply and solely "God the Father." "Father" in this designation has quite lost the sense in which Christ used it. In His mouth it meant that God was as a Father to all men; in describing the First Person of the Trinity it means only the Father of Christ, the Only Begotten Son, and by this use of the word it forms another barrier between men and God instead of a link between them: No doubt in various liturgies the old formula is used which would, of itself, imply the old thought, but the Imperial and Royal conception is so strong that this remains a mere formula.

It is, in fact, upon this view that all Christian theology is based. Christ's theory of a family relation in which all men are brothers with God their common Father, hardly survived His death. The sovereignty of God is the foundation of the whole fabric of Christian theology, and men are regarded as the subjects of the Great King and existing wholly for Him. Out of this have grown, at different times, extraordinary theories, some heretical, some accepted as orthodox, but all based on this idea of God's nature and relation to man, all involving views which one who had read only

the Gospels could not understand. It is this conception of God which is largely responsible for the dogmas of modern theology.

It is a truism to say that no definition of God can be adequate. Man being finite and God infinite, it must always be impossible for man to search out and express God. All that can be done, and perhaps all that need be done, is to find some formula which shall express so much as will indicate to man how he is to bear himself toward God and how he may expect God to deal with him. If we may find such a formula we need not be concerned with the fact that it does not express all. It cannot; but if it give us enough for our general guidance will suffice.

But there is caution to be used in the manner in which we deal with our formula when we have it, and it is a failure to observe this caution which has led so many able men and so many churches to the statement of dogmas which have caused difference and discord.

When once we have found a formula we must always bear in mind that it cannot be complete and cannot express the whole truth. We are not, therefore, at liberty to proceed by logical deduction from it, to erect a whole system of theology. The sovereignty of God has been generally adopted by all churches, as best expressing the relation of God to man. There is, no doubt, truth in the statement itself. Perhaps it may be the best formula. But theologians have proceeded to expand and develop it by processes of deduction until they have spun out of it complete theological systems, differing from each other, but all of them containing some statements repugnant to our reason, and which amount to *reductio ad absurdum*. Yet it was always known that, even if true, even if the best formula which we could have, the conception of God as a sovereign was not and could not be complete, and it was also known that God is beyond the reach of man. But the theologians proceeded as if the formula were complete and as if men could, by mere deduction from it, perfectly know God, His nature, His will and His purposes. They have treated Him as if He were completely within their grasp, and could be dissected and known like a molusk. The error seems obvious, yet it has never been avoided.

We must bear in mind too, that, as has been said already, whatever formula we adopt must be anthropomorphic. It is a common criticism of any particular idea of God that it is anthropomorphic, but the criticism is unfounded because this is the necessary result of a limitation which we cannot escape. It may be true that God

has not personality in the sense in which we understand the word, but personality is necessary to our idea of Him. Without it we cannot conceive Him with will, power, moral purpose, or many other attributes which are so inseparably connected with what the word "God" means to us as to deprive it of all meaning were they eliminated. A God who is by essence, a divine aura or ether surrounding or permeating the universe may be, from some points of view, a correcter conception (though no man has a right to say so) but such an idea would leave us wholly adrift. The reporter who expressed to Dr. Lyman Abbott his idea of God as "a big man up in the sky who runs things" was quite right. Dr. Abbott repudiated the description but, passing by its unconventional phraseology, the definition roughly represents what men have always understood by the word.

We are but men and finite. We only know qualities (other than physical qualities) as expressed in men. If we may not attribute to God a personality similar to that of men without wholly misconceiving Him, we cannot conceive Him at all. But we must conceive Him and must consider Him a person, and this means that our conception must be anthropomorphic. That it will be but a partial and inadequate conception we know, but it is all that we can do and we must hope that, so far as it goes, it will suffice for us. The teachings of all great religious teachers encourage us to think so.

We need not dwell on the pantheistic idea. It is a philosophical speculation which has never been a living reality to anyone. Some forms of religion have been called pantheistic and in a sense perhaps all religions are so, but always one or more personalities are found. For our purpose anthropomorphism is all that we can attain.

There are really but two ways in which we can regard God; as our Father or as our King. The two ways are really exclusive. While recognizing Him primarily as a Father we may admit that he might be called a King; while regarding Him as a King we may admit that He might be called a Father. But the two terms imply such a radical difference in His relation to men and in their relation to Him that to use both would result in a contradiction. One of the two must be chosen.

There can be no question of Jesus's choice. The Gospels are explicit. In His teaching God is a Father, not only His Father, but the Father of all mankind, all men are brothers and all service of Him consists in service to them. The relation between God and man

is direct, personal and immediate. Each man is the object of His loving care, each may approach Him with loving confidence. He cares nothing for ceremonial observances, nothing for formal marks of respect. In short He is the earthly Father, only better, wiser, more loving, more tender, more full of mercy. He is a King, no doubt, but the idea of Him will best show Him to men and best guide them in their conduct toward Him as that of a Father.

The choice of historical Christianity is equally clear. To every branch of the Church God is a King first of all. We are not so much His children as we are His subjects. He is not so much our Father as He is our ruler. He delights in ceremonial observance. Churches, services, Sunday observances, public prayer and praise please Him and He enjoins them. He will punish a failure to observe them. Of course He is a moral God and enjoins also right conduct, but He requires the ceremonial observances as well. We may approach Him directly, and indeed should do so, but in all humility and not with confidence or merely filial respect. There is especial virtue in having a priest, minister or bishop. These He hears with more satisfaction. He is stern and cold, and except Christ had died for us would have sent us all to hell. Mere mercy is not in His composition. He will weigh our conduct without allowance or consideration for our weaknesses and He will condemn us at once unless we have expressed our belief in the Sacrifice of the Cross and its power to save. In that case He will pardon us, though not otherwise.

In short, He is a stern, hard, pure, unsympathizing monarch, who must be propitiated, appeased and treated with the humblest servility. In all ages men have trembled before Him as before a tyrant, fear has driven out love and the love has been centred upon Christ who, by offering Himself as a sacrifice for us, has satisfied justice and made our salvation possible.

If God be, as Christ represents Him, a loving Father to men, it is sad to see Him represented as a stern, even if just, monarch. If He loves them, as Christ says, His justice will never exclude mercy. The name "Father" is a mockery as applied by men to the King whom Christianity sets before us. Not only does it not describe Him but, if He be such as Christianity says, it would mislead us in every way as to His attitude toward and relationship with us. If God be what theology represents certainly He does not love us. At worst He dislikes us (Jonathan Edwards says that He "hates" us);

at best He regards us with an icy indifference, calmly weighing us and with unfeeling impartiality dealing out our fate, save as the death of His Son may have satisfied Him.

But the Church made its choice long ago and has not changed. The idea of God upon which it insists is that of a King. The idea of Jesus is long since lost.