

THE ABSOLUTION OF GOD

BY A. KAMPMEIER

O, Thou, who man of baser earth didst make,
And ev'n with paradise devise the snake,
For all the sin wherewith the face of man
Is blacken'd—man's forgiveness give—and take!

—*Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.*

FROM the standpoint of the lowest animals up to that of man, evil is considered as that which threatens their welfare and existence. The same may be said concerning the different forms of the plant kingdom. And besides this ever continuing pressing of the countless forms of life upon each other, each striving to maintain its existence, there is also a ceaseless struggle of different forces with each other in the physical and inorganic world (called absurdly "dead"), often bringing about destruction by the wholesale, upheavals and catastrophes on the earth's surface, as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, storms, floods, etc., besides a whole train of evils, such as famine and pestilence. This has been the history of the past ages of our planet and continues so.

Of all this, called evil from the standpoint of the countless forms of life, man is the most fearfully conscious. The creatures below him, at least as far as we can enter into their consciousness, undeniably enjoy life more than man, since they ever live for the present, while with man the fear of coming evil and constant care and worry that preys upon his mind, increases evil for him the more. Besides on account of his higher mental evolution he is subject to more difficulties in many respects than the lower creatures; child bearing is generally more difficult on account of his upright position, he is probably also more subject to certain diseases than lower creatures on account of his more artificial life. He feels the appearance of bodily abnormal defects, such as hare lip, cleft

palate and other occasional congenital abnormalities, although such also occur in the animals below him, more intensely; and what is worse, in mankind also occur horrible mental diseases, of which as far as we know lower animals are exempt or which can not occur in them in the same degree as in man, on account of lower mental development; and what is worse, man suffers from moral evil which often debases him far below lower creatures, as Goethe says:

"Man, he has reason, yes, but uses it alone
To act more bestially, than ever beast has done."¹

It is no wonder then that the commonplace "The earth is a vale of sorrows" does not only exist in Christianity, but has ever been existing among all peoples, even among the sunny old Greeks, as we see in Homer.

Physical, psychical and moral evil has ever been hard to reconcile with an eternally foreknowing, personal, conscious creator and God, as he is generally conceived.² For modern man there is hardly any

¹ My poetical renderings of Goethe may not always be quite fortunate, but, I think, sufficiently clear.

² God (*Gud*, Swedish and Danish), as it has no relation with "good," probably originally only denoted the mysterious active power pervading the world, apparently connected with the Sanskrit root *hu*: past participle *huta*, "to call upon," or *hu*, p. p. *huta*, "to worship," worshipped with sacrifices." H. and G. interchange in Indo-Germanic languages. Naturally, the idea of personality easily crept into the term God, as soon as man became fully conscious of himself. But man has not always conceived God as personality in human sense. In an earlier stage, before he was fully conscious of his superiority over other creatures, and when he felt himself more nearly allied with and less separated from them, primitive man, comparing himself with them, must have seen that many creatures surpassed him in many respects, in strength, in sight and other senses, in cunning, skill and foresight, in many things of which he knew nothing, flight, swimming, etc. He therefore imagined the mysterious powers of nature, as being animals, only more gigantic and more powerful. Lightning was a serpent; the rustling of wind and storm, the flapping of the wings of some gigantic bird; the roaring of thunder, the voice of some enormous animal of prey, etc. Theriomorphism (God-conception in animal form) is considered by many thinkers, such as Wundt, as the oldest form of worship. Traces of this have gone far into history. Egyptian animal worship is not only explainable from the symbolical standpoint, but it is an echo from primitive times. Even the ancestors of the Greeks, who fashioned their gods according to the most beautiful human forms, began with theriomorphism, as the discovery of many primitive Greek god-images show with heads of animals. Homer and Greek mythology is full of gods appearing in animal form or described with animal characteristics. And the ideas of the primitive Semites may have been about the same as that of the Dog-rib Indians who said that in the beginning all was sea, and that there was a great bird with eyes of fire and glances of lightning, with wings of thunder, who dived into the sea, which caused the earth to rise, or that of the Caribs, who said that *Hurakan*, the mighty wind called forth the earth. The Hebrew *ruach*, spirit, in Gen. i, 2 originally means wind, and the term *meracheshet*

graver assertion than the one, "God is love." Even a man like Richard Rothe, of sincere piety and faith, was compelled to say: "That God is love is easily said, but who that only looks at the natural course of earthly life, would ever hit upon that thought?"

Zoroastrianism attempted to solve the problem of evil by the assumption of two principles, good and evil, God and the Devil. Ancient Greek theology assumed Fate, which stood even above the gods as well as men. Hebrew monotheism, or rather henotheism, i. e. belief in *one* Hebrew tribal god, in distinction from other Semitic tribal gods, in its earlier form and down to the exile, when Yahveh had developed to a universal god, simply attributed in true oriental wise, both good and evil to the arbitrary will of Yahveh (comp. Amos 3, 6). God is the potter; man, the clay, has no right to complain what he does with him. David is tempted by Yahveh to take a census. (Taking a census was also among other people, for instance the Romans, considered as something evil, needing propitiation). Of the temptation to evil by God, we even have a trace in the Lord's prayer, "Lead us not into temptation" of which the great pessimist Schopenhauer said that the meaning was: "Let me not know what kind of a person I am." Later under the influence of Persian dualism after the exile, Hebrew monotheism also assumed a Devil. According to the late Chronicles David is tempted to take the census by Satan. Job's trials are also brought about by Satan, after he gets permission from Jahveh. Christian theology likewise assumed God and Devil, the first of course mightier than the latter, as in Persian dualism and later Judaism after the exile, and that God permits evil, physical and moral, due to the Devil, in order to finally work out the good plans of God.

Naturally to every thinking mind, a God, who thus was continually hemmed in by the Devil, had to always appear as not truly almighty and the idea that God permitted the workings of the Devil, in order finally to work out the good plans of God, also did not seem to speak for his almightiness. For the question always arose: "Why, if God foresaw all the endless misery and evil of his crea-

hovering (over the waters), is a term used of the eagle spreading out his wings. The spirit of God in the shape of a dove is perhaps only another last faint echo of primitive notions. And the verbal root *harva* in the tribal Hebrew *Yahveh* (Jehovah) also means "rushing," as used of the wind and birds of prey. Primitive ideas have left their vestiges in human thought to our days, as well as that vestiges of the primitive human body are left in our present one.

tion, did he not rather abstain from creating it at all, unless he again stood under a kind of Fate, like that of ancient Greek theology, which compelled him to create, some uncontrollable, irresistible creative urge?"

Before we go on any further we must stop for a moment at the last sentence, the mention of a non-existence of the world, and of some irresistible creative urge.

In regard to the first, Schopenhauer says, "The pendulum which keeps in motion the clock of metaphysics, that never runs down, is the consciousness that the non-existence of this world is just as possible as its existence. Thus then, the Spinozistic view of it as an absolutely necessary existence, i. e., as something that absolutely and in every sense ought to and must be, is a false one. Even simple theism, since in its cosmological proof it tacitly starts by inferring the previous nonexistence of the world from its existence, thereby assumes beforehand that the world is something contingent. Nay what is more, we very soon apprehend the world as something, the non-existence of which is not only conceivable but indeed preferable to its existence. Therefore our wonder at it easily passes into a brooding over the fatality which could yet call forth its existence, and by virtue of which such stupendous power as is demanded for the production and maintenance of such a world could be directed so much against its own interest. The philosophical astonishment is therefore at bottom perplexed and melancholy: philosophy like the overture to *Don Juan* commences with a minor chord. It follows from this that it can neither be Spinozism nor optimism. The more special nature which has just been indicated, of the astonishment which leads us to philosophize, clearly springs from the sight of the suffering and the wickedness in the world, which even, if they were in the most just proportion to each other, and also were far outweighed by good, are yet something which absolutely and in general ought not to be."

In regard to an irresistible creative urge we say the following, first citing a word of Goethe, "God (Goethe's God, as well known, differed very much from the general one) has put such a productive power in the world, that even if only the millionth part of it comes to life, the world so teems with creatures that war, pestilence, water and fire can not affect it." If then, as it has always been, birth and death, coming into existence and going out of existence, seem

to have been eternal laws of nature, and if the single individual does not count anything, if only the race or genus be preserved, be it in the plant or animal kingdom, or that of man, and if life in the inorganic kingdom or what is the same, movement in it, on our planet as well as in the universe, can only be continued by the striving of different forces of nature, to balance each other, or else there would be a general standstill, a supposed creative urge could not avoid what we call evil. Goethe expresses this in different stanzas which for the sake of clearness I will give in prose, thus: "Eternal living doing, ever works to remold what is created, in order that it does not become rigid," and "The eternal always stirs in everything, for everything must fall into nothing, if it wants to persist in being."

But there might be a final annihilation of all existence according to some physicists which hold that all differences of nature's energies and all differences of heat will finally have balanced each other, so that no existence is possible any more. Or if this opinion of a final extinction of all being would be wrong, there would continue such a course of coming into existence and going out of existence eternally without end. The assumption of an irresistible urge, a kind of fate, of course would dispose of a personal conscious, almighty, foreknowing God altogether. Such an urge would be something like the demiurge (creator) of the Gnostics of the second Christian century, who without knowing the supreme God or the Autopator (father of himself) but still serving him unconsciously creates the world, or who rises from the *Bythos* (the abyss) or *Sige* (eternal silence). But since the idea of a personal conscious foreknowing God is so ingrained in the human mind, especially in the face of the undeniable wonderful general harmony of the universe far out in the domain of illimitable space with its myriads of stellar worlds, as down into the domain of our solar system, and in the latter again down to the minutest details in the creation of our planet, which harmony would seem to point to an almighty, all wise world-deviser and planner, called God, we must continue in our attempt whether it is possible to reconcile evil with such a God.

Therefore to another point. The idea that God foresaw all the misery and evil, merited and unmerited, did also not seem to imply a moral God, but rather the idea of an immoral, cruel, unfeeling enormity, beyond any human conception whatever. For if any man would foresee any evil endangering his fellowmen, and would not

try to prevent it, he would be considered immoral from the human standpoint. If man attributes to God personality as he has, he must logically also attribute to him morality, as he has, or otherwise the morality of such a God must be something entirely different from human morality, be the latter of ever the highest kind. In fact human morality, of course, because it is a human evolution can be as little directly applied to God, as human personality, which is also an evolution. We must not be so arrogant, as to attribute human personality directly to God. Animals, if they could reason, could with the same right apply their personality to God as the old Greek philosopher Xenophanes, when criticizing image worship of God in human form, said, "If oxen and lions could fashion images of God, they would do it in their form." If we intend to attribute personality to God, this personality must be multiform, as the term God embraces all creation.

The only way to get rid of the idea of a supernatural conscious personal God somewhere outside of the universe, foreseeing all the misery and evil of his creation and yet creating it in apparent apathetic arbitrariness and without any sense of the fearful power of temptations his creatures must go through, in order after long eternities to fulfil his final personal plans, whatever they may be, seems to be, by conceiving God as something intercosmical, inter-natural, active and passive (the latter used in its real meaning as suffering) alike as his creation, within the forces and matter of the universe, active and passive alike within the inorganic as well as the organic life of our planet, as well as in the history of man.

Further, in all higher religions, God is generally styled as father (especially in Judaism and Christianity) and conceived as masculine. Why not also as feminine, as mother? The idea of fatherhood consistently implies that of motherhood. It may also be mentioned that the idea of God is not at all settled by rigid monotheism. Without intermingling any ideas of sexual relation with the conception of God, the fact that the forces and energies of nature always reveal themselves in attraction or repulsion, in centrifugal and centripetal motion, in contraction and expansion, in the striving of equalizing the different tensions, in the affinities or dis-affinities of the chemical elements, etc., alone should teach us that a rigid monotheism does not answer all questions, and that polytheism, at bottom personification of the forces of nature, in spite of its mythical and gross ideas

of gods and goddesses after all contained a germ of truth. To resume, the idea of a fatherhood of God, applying it to an inter-natural, not supernatural, active and passive presence, implies the bearing of all the duties, responsibilities, burdens, cares and sufferings of his offspring. Therefore only a God, who is intimately related and bound up with creation and active and passive in and with it, such a conception alone can absolve God from being the apathetic, arbitrary, conscious personal source of all the endless misery and evil in nature. God must be intercosmical, internatural, suffering just as much in the birth throes of creation and in the long train of world catastrophies, evil and misery, accompanying the continuance and evolution of that creation as the individual members of it. Such a God must be bound up as closely with the world, as soul and body, which can not be thought of as being active or passive apart from each other. God is an activity and passivity born with the world, and if it ever dies, will die with it, or he has ever been in it and will ever be.

The assumption of such a God is not any more materialistic, absurd or illogical than the traditional one, that God is pure immaterial, universal spirit, or the metaphysical one, that God is the world-soul and mind, severed entirely from the material body of creation.

For what do all the terms, spirit, soul, mind mean? The term spirit, from the Latin *spiritus*, means breath, that which indicates that there is life in a being. And the terms throughout all other languages, answering to the Latin *spiritus*, also mean breath, the Greek *pneuma*, the Germanic terms, *Geist*, *Geescht*, *Gisht*, *Yeast*, *ghost* (compare Holy Ghost for Holy Spirit) even *gas*, as invented by the Dutch chemist Helmont, all mean the same. The old Germanic church, as Grimm tells us, was long undecided, whether to use *atum* (mod. Germ. *atem*) the same as Sanscrit *atman*, and meaning also breath, wind, or *geist* for the Latin *spiritus*. The Hebrew *ruach*, as said above, also means nothing but breath, wind. And what does the Latin *anima*, *soul*, related to Greek *anemos*, wind, and Latin *animus*, mind, mean? Originally nothing but breath, wind. The Greek *Psyche* for soul also means breath. And the English "soul," Anglo-saxon *sawel* (Gothic *sairwala*) is related to the verb "sough" (pronounced "suf") meaning to blow or sigh as the wind. Is there any special supernatural revelation in the words:

"God is a spirit?" Nothing more is said by the term "spirit of God," than that it indicates the universal life, prevading nature. If the terms spirit, soul were later used for an imagined immaterial, nebular form, a ghost in the sense ghost is now used, leaving man at the time of death, but not only in the case of man, but also in the case of an animal, for primitive man believed in the ghosts of animals as well as those of men, and was more consistent regarding the soul's immortality, that was a different thing. Originally the word spirit had nothing to do with an immaterial, nebular form, neither in regard to man, or in regard to God, who even now probably is imagined by most people as a man-like, immaterial, nebular form, everywhere present in the universe. And what does mind mean if we speak of God as the world-mind? Mind, allied to Latin *mens* and Greek *menos* at bottom originally meant the same as spirit, soul. It denoted the life principle in man and only later it acquired the meaning of the rational principle in man, just as spirit and soul did. It finally acquired the metaphysical meaning as if it could exist without the body, just as it happened to the terms spirit and soul. To sum up, originally all these terms meant the same thing, it denoted that mysterious thing "life," of which breath gave evidence. But breath again, analyzed chemically, as well known, belongs to the domain of matter, as animals and man inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, while plants inhale carbon dioxide and exhale oxygen. Thus what we call spirit, soul in man, animal and plant is accompanied by a chemical process, by which of course we do not mean to say that the mystery of life itself is explained as little as when that mystery is explained by saying that life is due to the spirit of God, supposed to be something immaterial severed from matter, but only, that life and God has no supernatural but an internatural origin, or has ever been in nature or will be.

"Would that be God, who from outside alone
 Would move the all and let it circle on
 As were it from his fingers spun?
 He's due to move the world within,
 Enclosing nature, nature him,
 So that what in him moves and is,
 Does ne'er his might nor spirit miss." (Goethe)

The foregoing attempt to absolve God will of course be considered as utterly materialistic, pantheistic or atheistic by many. The objection will be made that the views expressed make no distinction between God, spirit, soul, mind on the one hand, and matter on the other. To this the answer may be given, "If God is something purely immaterial, pure spirit, pure mind and as such has created the world, why did he not create a purely immaterial world? Why are, what we call soul of man or his mind, if they are supposed to be immaterial, joined to a material body? A purely spiritual world, bereft of all matter would also have been free of all what we call evil. And why is all life joined to matter? And what is life? As long as the mystery of life is not explained, but only its outward evidences and phenomena described by the terms spirit, soul, mind, objectors are on the same par with the writer, as he made no attempt to solve the mystery of life itself.

The objection of atheism is only in so far valid as the writer does not place God outside but in nature. In what way, what we call consciousness is connected with an internatural God we do not pretend to know. But we know this much, that man's very limited consciousness, which has only been developed very gradually through ages and ages, has drawn all the elements, which form its basis and have evolved it, from nature and the workings of the life in it, which is termed God, and that man with his mind can not create anything really new. All our creations and inventions are only products based on discovered secrets of nature and the God active in it. We only detect and unfold the secrets of nature, and as every one knows, it has taken thousands and thousands of years till man has come to the knowledge he now has, and which is still exceedingly limited. We still need to draw on nature and only on it. Nature was our teacher and will ever be. If mind is dependent on life, and life is everywhere in the universe, then mind is everywhere, as the countless wonderful examples of instinct in animal and plant life show. Instinct and reason are only matters of degree, and the word instinct only a confession of our ignorance in regard to the working of mind in the organic world below us. And if in the inorganic, and what we call the physical world, comprising the great forces of nature, there is always and everywhere movement, only another term for life, there is also mind. Whether we describe that life in terms of chemistry and physics, as also many

things in plant life or in that of lower animal organisms, does not make much difference.

Everybody tries to work out a philosophy, which seems to answer questions, by which he is troubled. So the writer. If his attempt, probably very defective, is pantheistic or atheistic, for both are generally considered the same (Schopenhauer says: Pantheism is only a polite way for saying farewell to God as generally conceived) the writer finds himself in company with many of the greatest thinkers from ancient times on till today. Their name is legion. They all arrived at pantheism in one or the other way in their attempt to unite the idea of God with nature.

But atheism can be arrived at even from the standpoint, that God is pure spirit and that the human soul is an outflow of God, having nothing in common with matter, which is nothing but fleeting and at bottom the source of evil. For what is really the final outcome of that extravagant mysticism to which Thomas Aquinas, the normal dogmatic theologian of the Middle Ages gave the strongest impulse followed by such mystics as Eckhart? God could, according to the mystics already here on earth, so be received into the human soul, that it enjoyed in the fullest sense the vision of his essence, and that the earthly, still clinging to the soul, was as unsubstantial as the earthly connected with the transubstantiated host and wine in the eucharist. The writer here follows Harnack, *History of Dogma*, (Vol. VI, p. 105). But the description of God, into which the soul is finally after death absorbed completely, is so negatively defined, that God at last vanishes into nothing. God is described as the abysmal substance, "the waste Deity," "the silent substance." Such descriptions remind of the God of the Christian Gnostics mentioned above, who spoke of "the God that is not," creating chaos, containing all the seeds of the world" from himself, or of "the Abyss," "the father of himself," or of "Silence" from which the world arose. The absorption into a God thus described is an absorption into nothing, like the Buddhist Nirvana. It is a question whether the general Christian idea of God is not often just as hazy as this mystic mediaeval one, so that the opprobrium "atheism" is not always justified, when used by traditional religion against others. That term, as all know, has always been used in a very heedless way against ancient Greek philosophers, by traditional religion, as also against the first Christians.

The God, whom the writer has attempted to absolve, is at least not a God, whom at all times even his sincere believers have often been on the verge to blaspheme in bitterness, since they considered him as having called forth the world with full foreknowledge of all the evil to follow. If God has been born in and with the world or has ever been in it, he is part and parcel of it and must bear with it all the unavoidable evils, which seem to be necessary to carry on the whole creation and to produce its general harmony and well being, though of course it must be admitted this is often not of much consolation to the individual sufferer who must bear his fate resignedly.

Of all the evils, which God must suffer with the world the most, are the avoidable ones, those in the moral world, which is the world of man. It is undeniable that man, who loves to call himself the crown of creation, its masterpiece, has brought about more evils that were avoidable, through his egotism, greed and ingenious brutality, of which no beast of prey is capable, since it only seeks to quench its hunger, than have ever the forces of nature, animals of prey, or other things, brought about evils which are seemingly unavoidable in creation. We only mention the horrible waste and bloodshed man always brought about by war alone. In one year of war, especially in modern times, more destruction and waste are brought about than can be replaced by many years of peace. It is this fact, which sometimes makes one doubt, whether man is the crown and masterpiece of creation, were it not, that man has also in many other ways shown his worth in creation, which worth we generally bring into connection with the idea of God as being the essence of that, which is the best, highest and noblest. God was to Goethe the name for that, which gives worth to existence, while nature was that which gives actuality to it, and both these live together as one reality, according to Professor G. Simmel in *Logos* III. 3.