

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE WORSHIP OF CHRIST.

THERE are those who while regarding Christ as the ideal of perfect humanity, the brightest revelation of the moral character of God, while accepting Him as their example and acknowledging his right to their reverence and love, feel it their duty to withhold from Him their worship. This, they say, cannot rightly be rendered to humanity however perfect, but must be reserved exclusively for essential Deity. And they claim to be, in a special and peculiar sense, the worshippers of one God, and maintain that their doctrine is more rational than that of other Christians.

It seems to me that they are in error, and that their error is a dangerous one—dangerous, I mean, not as being a mere speculative mistake in theology, or the true theory of the nature and attributes of God, but as being a practical hindrance to religion, or the divinely appointed means for the salvation and moral perfection of man. I wish to suggest a few considerations which I think tend to shew that the worship of God, so far as it is possible, apart from the worship of Christ, is less reasonable, less effectual to the great end of religion, and less secure against the danger of idolatry, than the worship of God in Christ as prescribed by the Catholic Church, and practised by the great body of Christians.

Let us consider to what extent, and under what conditions, it is possible for man to worship God.

When we endeavour to think of God, whether as an object of intellectual contemplation or of religious worship, we necessarily take our start from our own personality. Man, created in his image, is the only thing with which we can compare Him. When we seek to ascend from humanity towards Deity, we begin by divesting the human personality, as far as possible, of the conditions and limitations to which it is subject. We remove, in thought, matter and

form, and say that God is a spirit. We place Him above all local and temporal relations, and say that He is omnipresent and eternal. We remove as well as we can all restrictions to power and knowledge, all liability to change, all subjection to circumstance, and say that He is omnipotent, omniscient, and immutable. We ascribe to Him a perfection transcending all bounds and all determining modes of being, and say that He is infinite and absolute. So far the process is purely negative; we attribute no positive perfections; we only think away, as far as we are able, intellectual limitations and human conditions. And this is all that Philosophy can do. All her attempts to bring the Infinite Being in his absolute nature within the sphere of positive knowledge have proved a total failure. She can reveal nothing higher than a merely negative Perfection. But such a revelation of God, whatever purpose it might serve in philosophy, is manifestly insufficient for the purposes of religion. It is only when we attribute positive perfections—some form or forms of moral excellence—that we can begin to worship. And all positive perfections are necessarily human. “We may confidently challenge,” says Kant, “all natural Theology to name a single distinctive attribute of the Deity, whether denoting intelligence or will, which apart from anthropomorphism is anything more than a mere word.”¹ It follows that the worship of Deity is only possible to man upon condition of its manifestation in humanity. We can feel no reverence, no admiration, no confidence, no love towards God except in so far as we attribute to Him qualities of which we know nothing whatever, except as we know them in man. The more intently and successfully we strive to divest our idea of God of human attributes, in order as we hope to render our worship purer and more spiritual, the more completely we divest it of moral perfections, and consequently make worship impos-

¹ *Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft*, p. 282.

sible in the only sense in which it is a spiritually purifying and elevating, and therefore a religious, act.

It would be easy to adduce the testimony of philosophers and theologians in support of this truth. But it is not necessary. Let any one who doubts it make the experiment for himself. Let him form the most exalted conception of the most Divine Being whom it is possible for him to religiously worship. Let him try whether he can attribute to that Being a single element of moral character which is not essentially human, or conceive anything more divinely perfect than those elements blended in fair proportion and raised to their highest power. And he will find that it is beyond his reach. Any idea which he may form of God, if it be essentially different from, will be less divine than this. He may, indeed, clothe the divinely human ideal with the attributes of superhuman power and wisdom. But these are not moral qualities, and add nothing to the moral perfection of the Being conceived. A being less excellent than man may be indefinitely stronger and wiser. So, too, he may declare in words that the perfections which he ascribes to the Divine Object of his worship are infinite and absolute. But when he has said this, he will not have added one ray to the brightness of his previous conception, or made it one whit more powerful in moral influence. For it is only so far as any excellence is revealed within the finite sphere of our positive thought that it is a real thing to us; that which completely fills that sphere is perfect; and we can know and conceive no more. And in proportion as we think of goodness as approaching the absolute, the fainter it becomes in outline and the feebler in moral effect. A goodness unrelated, necessary, undefined, implying no effort, tried by no temptation, subject to no law, is destitute of the conditions under which alone we can realize it as *morally* good, and cannot in the nature of things, constituted as we are, excite our reverence and love so strongly, and

move us to so intense an energy of moral aspiration and action (the great end of all true worship), as a goodness believed indeed to be infinite though only apprehended as perfect, and manifested in the human forms of meekness, humility, moral courage, patient endurance, and self-sacrifice.

The conclusion from these considerations is obvious. God in Himself, as infinite and absolute, cannot be apprehended, cannot be loved, consequently cannot be religiously worshipped by men as they are. If, therefore, He would become an object of human worship to the end that humanity may be perfected and made divine, He must limit his infinity, condition his absolute nature, "empty Himself," to use the striking expression of the Apostle, of the fulness of the Godhead and make Himself man.

It is not meant, of course, that, in order to become an object of true worship to man, it was necessary that the Infinite Spirit should be made flesh and manifested in human form. We know that this was not necessary, for the end has been accomplished otherwise. All who believe in Christianity believe also in the Divine authority of Judaism. They consequently believe that the one true God, He who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth, revealed Himself, so far as their capacity for receiving the revelation would allow, to the Jewish nation, and became to them the object of a true, though, as compared with that of Christianity, an imperfect worship. And yet this true worship of the true God was made possible without an incarnation, and without a manifestation in form. No image of the Invisible was seen in his temple; no vision of his face, except in very special instances, was vouchsafed to his worshippers. They heard of Him only by the hearing of the ear; their eyes did not see Him. But though not manifested to the great body of the chosen people in a bodily form, He certainly was manifested to them in essential human nature. Though He was "the

High and Lofty One, who inhabited eternity, whose name was Holy," He was very far from being the ἄγνώστος Θεός, the unknowable and inconceivable Essence, the characterless Abstraction, which He is to many modern, and was to some ancient, philosophers. On the contrary, He was a strictly personal Being, with a strongly-marked character, with very definite attributes, quite within the sphere of positive thought, revealed most literally in human nature so far as moral qualities are concerned, however superhuman in knowledge and power. He could be angry and repent, could rejoice and be grieved, could avenge Himself upon his enemies with a very stern indignation and comfort his people with a very tender pity. He was the God of Abraham in the most anthropopathic sense. Moses spake with Him familiarly, as a man speaketh with his friend. He was seen on earth in human form; and when the sublimest of the prophets looked into heaven, He was seen in human form even there. When Ezekiel "standing among the captives by the river Chebar saw the heavens opened and beheld visions of God;" when, after gazing at the mystic rings of the cherubim, "so high that they were dreadful," he had strength given him to lift his eyes above "the firmament of terrible crystal stretched forth over their heads," and to look at last upon the sapphire throne, he saw there no strange shape or indescribable symbol, but the "likeness as the appearance of A MAN."

And it is of course possible that the Divine Being should have made Himself known to mankind in later times, and still more fully, in like manner. So far as we can see, the Christ of Christianity might have been a revealer of the Divine character more perfectly even than the Jehovah of Judaism, though He had never been born of a woman or dwelt as a man among the sons of men. But, I suppose, no one can doubt that—assuming the great purpose which the Eternal Father had in view in seeking the loving wor-

ship of his children on earth to have been their perfection in goodness, the most effectual mode, so far as man can possibly conceive, by which He could accomplish this end would be by not merely revealing Himself in human nature, but by taking upon Himself human form and submitting to human circumstance. How could the excellencies which it most behoved us to love and follow after affect us so deeply and attract us so powerfully as by the Lord of Glory stooping to our low estate, taking upon Himself the form of a servant, speaking the "dear words of human speech," dying as we must die, rising from the dead as we hope to rise? How far more persuasive such an example than all the precepts which an apostle's or an angel's tongue could utter. How much better than any abstract idea an ideal thus realized. We, in our ignorance, may at times be tempted to think of such condescension to our infirmities as though it were beneath the dignity of Deity. But "our notions of unworthiness are themselves often the most unworthy of all."¹ We do dishonour to the Most High by fearing to trust his mercy and grace too far. We honour Him more by feeling confident that, if He could most effectually redeem us from the power of evil and raise us to virtue and true holiness by taking upon Him, not the nature of angels, but the seed of Abraham, He would do it. If only He desired the end, He would not seek counsel of human wisdom, less wise than his "foolishness," in the choice of the appropriate means. If He took upon Him to deliver man, and to open the kingdom of heaven to all believers, we may reverently conclude that He would not abhor the virgin's womb, or refuse to undergo the sharpness of death, if only He could thus win our hearts more entirely to Himself, and so make our deliverance more complete and our entrance into his kingdom more abundant.

The worship given to the Divine Being by those who

¹ Duke of Argyll, in *Reign of Law*.

believe that He was manifested in Christ, so that whosoever hath seen the Son hath seen the Father, is an easy service, one that can be rendered by the simplest and the humblest as well as by the most highly gifted and carefully trained. It requires no special culture, no effort of abstract thinking, no intellectual subtlety or power; nothing but the moral virtues of sincerity and truth. When such a man bows the knee to the Father of Spirits, he may, and probably will, in the first place be solemnized by a sense of his majesty and glory, and will feel that he is as nothing and less than nothing before Him. So far, it is not religious worship properly so called, but only a preparation of the heart generally suitable for such an exercise. The "awful apprehension of the Divine Majesty,"¹ which such a contemplation induces would be induced by the contemplation of any being who was conceived of as great beyond measure, even though he were not apprehended as being also immeasurably good. If it ended there, it would be little more than the prostration of the soul before an irresistible power, depressing the moral nature instead of stimulating and strengthening it. When, however, the worshipper, ceasing to contemplate the greatness of the Most High, looks rather at his goodness, a different emotion is excited. In so far as that goodness is conceived of merely as a boundless, universal, essential benevolence, a feeling of admiration is awakened which, however elevated, is necessarily vague and moves the soul but faintly. But when that infinite benevolence, which is of the essence of Deity, is apprehended under such conditions as define it into goodness, in the human signification of the word, the emotion which

¹ From the Episcopal "form of prayer to be used at the consecration of Churches." I noticed that the late Bishop of St. David's (Dr. Thirlwall), when conducting in 1866 the service at the consecration of a church in his diocese, altered this phrase into "a due sense of the Divine perfections" (or to this effect), no doubt feeling that an "awful apprehension" was not that which man has most need (if, indeed, he has any right) to ask of God.

it awakens is far more intense. When the King of Glory, the Prince of Life, is seen as one who, for us men and our salvation, suffered shame and tasted of death; as one who bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities; then, and not till then, is the soul moved to its depths, and made to give forth its best treasures; then only does the adoration of the intellect become that of the heart, and the worship grow truly religious. What though, when the conception is analysed, (if it be not almost profane to speak of analysing it,) it is perceived that the object of this loving adoration is not the Infinite and Absolute, but a Person of like nature with ourselves, perfect indeed, but in moral character perfectly human; what though the worshipper has drawn down the Eternal from his throne of brightness and is speaking to Him as friend to friend; what though the light he looks upon be not the effulgence of essential Deity, but the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ? He is oppressed by no sense of failure, no fear lest he has mistaken the true object of adoration. He believes that it was for this very purpose that the Word was made Flesh, that man might see the Invisible, and conceive the Inconceivable and know the otherwise unknown God. The Father and the Son blend in his view into a Divine Unity, one perfect object of worship to whom can be given with full assurance, with perfect freedom, at once the profoundest admiration of the intellect and the warmest love of the heart.

Far otherwise is it, or at least in logical consistency should it be, with those who do not accept this revelation. When they address the "Being of Beings" to whom alone, in their theory, religious worship can rightly be given, the exercise is one of no small difficulty. They must by no means conceive of Him as in human form:—this would be to degrade the spiritual object of their worship, and to render themselves chargeable with anthropomorphism.

They must not conceive of Him as a being essentially human, however perfectly so, or they would become chargeable with anthropopathy. The infinite goodness, which they believe to be his, must be conceived of as necessary, unchangeable, universal benevolence, and must not—except in a qualified and merely figurative sense—be regarded as the same thing with the human goodness which is produced by effort, and made perfect through suffering. When, on the other hand, they contemplate Christ, they are beset by similar difficulty from the opposite side. By their own admission He is the ideal of human excellence, and, as such, He necessarily receives from all who rightly apprehend his character an all but unbounded reverence and love. But the love and reverence must not be quite unbounded, or they would usurp the place of the supreme affection and the true worship which must be given to God alone. They must be jealously watched and carefully guarded lest they go too far and become idolatry. And thus there is caution and restraint instead of confidence and freedom. The two great ideals of Deity and perfect humanity tend ever, in the worshipper's despite, to blend and become one; and if he would preserve his consistency and avoid confusion, he must divide his devotion, giving a portion only to each—as much of intellectual adoration as he can to the Father, and as much of religious worship as he dares to the Son. To neither, if they are sundered and kept apart, can be given the full, undivided, supreme love and worship of the soul.

I speak of course of the logical consequences of the system, and not of the practical devotion of its adherents. With many, no doubt, the theory governs the practice, and the result is what might be expected—a worship highly ethereal and refined, it may be, but refined into weakness and etherealized into coldness; a comparatively passionless, and therefore, in a religious point of view, profitless, contemplation of an abstract idea. But in the case of many

others who accept this theory, their spiritual instincts are too strong for their logic; and, in spite of the interdict of their speculative theology, they give their worship to Christ. They do not, indeed, call it by the name of worship, but it is so none the less,¹ far more truly so than any merely intellectual exercise,—far mightier in beneficial effect upon the spiritual nature of man and consequently more acceptable in the sight of God. For it is surely not worthy of a “rational Christian” to suppose that the Almighty desires from men any worship that does not make them better as moral beings. It is surely an unreasonable notion, which many however seem to entertain, that He is pleased with praise for its own sake;—that He accepts with complacency any adoration which *ends* in the intellectual contemplation of his perfections, and does not pass on and become a means to the spiritual improvement of the worshipper. True it is that He has made all things for his own glory. But it is equally true that his glory as the Creator and Redeemer of men can only be displayed by them according to the measure in which they attain to their chief perfection—the perfection of their spiritual nature. By growing into his image in all things,—thus and thus only can they truly glorify Him. They please Him best who imitate Him most.² Apart from sympathy with his moral character, bodily exercise, and even mental exercise, profit little. And that the worship of Christ—that is of God in Christ—is more effectual to this end, is a more direct and powerful means of inducing aspiration and effort after and growth in goodness than the worship of any being beside, few, I think, who seriously consider the question, will deny.

¹ “If the lowliest reverence and the most enthusiastic love constitute adoration, Dr. Channing worshipped Christ. I care not what a man says. What care I if Dr. Channing adores, *saying* that he does not adore.”—*F. W. Robertson; Life*, vol. i. p. 284.

² “*Vis Deos propitiare? bonus esto. Satis illos coluit quisquis imitatus est.*”—*Seneca, Ep.* 95.

This, at any rate, has been the conviction of the Catholic Church in all ages. Others, beguiled by a false philosophy, might essay to pass beyond the Incarnate Word and worship the Deity immediately and in Himself; in the view of the great body of believers this is to reject the divinely-appointed means in the vain hope of otherwise more effectually attaining the desired end. From the beginning they have been accustomed *carmina Christo quasi Deo dicere* ("to sing hymns to Christ as God"). They have accepted, in their fullest meaning, the words: "No man cometh to the Father but by me. Whosoever hath seen me hath seen the Father;—how sayest thou, then, Shew us the Father?"

It is a matter of unquestionable fact that to this conclusion almost all have come who have sought from the inspired Word to discover the Divine will. Whatever difference of opinion there may be as to the purpose of God in giving Christ to the world, there can be no dispute as to the actual result of the gift. Whether it were so intended or not, it is certain that Christ has in practical effect become "very God" to the vast majority of Christians. It is not a matter of choice with them whether they will worship Him or not; worship follows necessarily upon the contemplation of his character. They "needs must love the highest when they see it," and they see the highest excellence in Him. Most true it is that they believe and are sure that, in giving their supreme love to that Divine Humanity, they are supremely loving that in the Deity which alone is to man a possible object of affection. But if this belief be for a moment supposed mistaken, the fact itself remains, and it is a significant fact. The man Christ Jesus stands to the great body of his followers in the place of God; and, if He does not fully reveal Him, He *conceals* Him. If to worship Him be an error, the design of God in giving Him to the world has been frustrated, and his honour taken from Him by the Son whom He sent, and in whom He is always well pleased.

I have said that the doctrine of the manifestation of God in the flesh is a reasonable doctrine, far more so than that which seeks to proscribe it in the name of Reason. If it be reasonable to believe that the Divine Being desires the moral perfection of man, then it is reasonable to believe that He has appointed such means as will most effectually attain that end. If it be true that moral sympathy with supreme excellence is of all means that best fitted to develop and perfect human excellence, then it is reasonable to believe that He who only is good has revealed his character to man; and revealed it under such conditions as render possible its clearest apprehension and its warmest love. If it be true that the Divine character thus revealed could be apprehended more clearly and loved more fervently were it embodied in human form and displayed in human circumstance, than it could be if it were only described in words or shadowed forth in type and symbol—then it is reasonable to believe that He did not stop half-way in his sublime condescension, his glorious humiliation, but became in the fullest sense a partaker of our nature, to the end that He might thus become in the fullest sense also the Saviour and Redeemer of our race.

If we may not accept this manifestation of Deity in humanity there is for us no true worship. We may still have some sort of a metaphysical God; but, like the great philosophical historian of Germany¹ we “shall not know what to do with him.” We cannot love him, for he has no heart; we cannot worship him, for there can be no worship without love. We must say of the teachers of this refined theosophy, but most ineffectual religion, what the broken-hearted hermit said of the well-meaning but unwise theologians who had robbed him of his old—and, whatever

¹ Niebuhr. “I have often said” (he wrote in 1818) “that I do not know what to do with a metaphysical God, and that I will have none but the God of the Bible who is heart to heart with us.”—*Life and Letters of Niebuhr*, vol. ii, p. 123.

error there may have been mixed up it—his essentially true idea of the Christian Deity: “Unhappy that we are! they have taken away our God, and we have nothing left us that we can apprehend, nothing left us that we can worship.”¹

If it be said that the Incarnation is inconceivable I admit that it is so. We can no more imagine to ourselves the mode in which “very God” could be also truly man, we can no more understand how the Omnipotent could be manifested in weakness and the Unchangeably Blessed in self-sacrifice and suffering, than we can understand many of the other mysteries by which we are encompassed. But that it is inconceivable in any such sense as to make it unreasonable to believe it, I confidently deny. To my mind the contrary theory is rather inconceivable and incredible. I cannot imagine a mode in which the Infinite Spirit could ever manifest Himself—I do not say to man only, but to any, even the highest, created being—otherwise than by so conditioning his essence as that it should be, not what it is in itself, but the chief perfection which that lofty, but still limited, intelligence can apprehend. I can hardly believe that Michael or Gabriel looks upon the unveiled face of God. I can more easily believe that, for all beings capable of worship, the Eternal Word is—not it may be made flesh—but made such that they can contemplate without confusion, and love without restraint; that not for men only but for all created intelligences the saying is true: “No one knoweth the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son shall reveal Him.”

¹ “Ita est in oratorio senex mente confusus eo quod illam ἀνθρωπομορφον imaginem Deitatis quam proponere sibi in oratione consueverat aboleri de suo corde sentiret, ut in amarissimos fletus crebrosque singultus repente prorumpens, in terram prostratus, cum ejulatu validissimo proclamaret:—‘Heu me miserum! tulerunt a me Deum meum, et quem nunc teneam non habeo, vel quem adorem aut interpellem jam nescio!’—Cassian Collat., x. 2. (Quoted by Gibbon, *Decline, etc.*, c. 47.)

This is perhaps an idle speculation ; at best it is a speculation only. We cannot by searching find out the absolute nature of God or know the manner of its manifestation to other beings in other worlds. For us it is enough if we give our supreme worship to the brightest and most perfect manifestation of the Divine Glory which we can find in this world. And *we* see that glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

If any man can make unto himself a mental image of the Divine Glory brighter and more perfect than this, he will do well to bow down before it and worship it. But if the image be less bright and less perfect, if it be little more than an abstract idea, if it be destitute of any of the features of moral excellence which we behold in Christ, or if those features are beheld less clearly, then it will not be the highest and worthiest representation of the Supreme Goodness which is attainable by man, and the worship given to it will consequently be but a form—though it may be the most refined form—of idolatry. And it will not be the less so because the idol is called ‘ God.’

For my own part I cannot believe that any man will ever be able to attain otherwise so clear a vision of God as that which can be attained by fixing the eye of the mind and the soul steadfastly upon Christ. And if this be so, it is surely greatly to be regretted that so many religious teachers should feel it their duty to forbid their followers to worship God as thus manifested ; and, by so doing, exclude them from what reason and long experience combine to prove to be the most direct and powerful of all possible means of spiritual development ; leaving them no alternative but the contemplation either of the cold abstraction which is all that Philosophy can reveal, or at the best of an ideal of excellence which is as really human as that presented in the person and life of Christ, and only differs from it in being an ideal never realized, fainter, and less perfect.

T. M. HOME.