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A Prophetic Understanding and Interpretation of God

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Whether we accept it or not, the debate on God has been going on since the dawn of the modern era both in the West and in the East. We have been more seriously and hence more urgently seized of it recently. In the U.S.A. and in Europe they have been talking about the 'Death of God Theology', 'God is dead', 'Religionless Christianity', etc. In India the debate is not explicit but is old and even more stubborn, for it is not philosophical and is based on social, political and economic considerations of human life. Even as I am writing these lines, a fierce controversy is going on in the State of Madras—I am sure, it must have spread into other States as well—regarding a State Government Circular that 'pictures and idols' of gods must be removed from the Government offices and institutions. The Madras Government is non-Congress but has been admittedly stable and has been carrying out several schemes for the good of the people. It is one of the popularly elected governments and is democratic. Its official creed is atheistic, and the secular nature of our constitution allows it to rule the people who believe and worship gods and idols. How does a Christian assess this controversy? Is it one of the welfare schemes that the Government has been carrying out for the good of the people? If so or not, what is the relation between people's faith in God and their life on the one hand, and God in whom they believe and worship and their life on the other? In a democratic society people cannot be satisfied with exploits in a legendary world nor with a heaven in the other world. The meaning of God in life and thought must be explored. This is very urgent in our society today.

I. CAN THERE BE A DOCTRINE OF GOD?

(1) This question must be first asked, because we find it too difficult, and sometimes unrealistic, to formulate as an articulate *doctrine* the meaning of God in our thought and experience. The Biblical understanding of God does not

warrant such a formulation. Biblical understanding is primitive, spontaneous, sacramental, personal and social. God is *central and organic to all phenomena of living*. Nothing that exists is believed to be outside His operating will and grace. God is in our midst and is yet beyond; God is all but yet he is intensely personal confronting each one as an individual (Ps. 19, 139).

Again the Biblical understanding of God assumes and allows freedom of will and thought for man which enables him to change, to progress, to fall and to mature. This freedom is made possible under the all-determining operation of God's will and grace. As man grows, his image and understanding of God also grows. The Biblical story bears this out. Does God change them? How should we explain this phenomenon?

Thus we see there are several what F. R. Tennant calls 'logical' elements entering into the constitution of our thought and experience of God. Can we formulate in articulate terms as a *doctrine* this complex phenomenon of thought and experience of God?

Further, a neatly set-out *doctrine* always tends to be a dogma of unchangeable and infallible nature while change and growth are the necessary constituents of our experience of God.

The fundamental error of the doctrinaire position is that it *separates* faith and practice, God and life; consequently, it argues rigidly on rationally built-up premises that, because its doctrine and confession are rational and morally sound, the lives of its adherents are right and good. Sometimes the doctrines are traced to God himself: God is right, good and infallible; his doctrines are also right, good and infallible; in the same way his believers are right, good and infallible. This is particularly the case with respect to certain fundamentalist religious sects.

This is a serious break with and departure from the Biblical understanding of God in relation to man. There are two subtle sources of error leading to this departure: one is philosophy and the other theology. Both have joined to complete the perversion of the primitive, spontaneous and theocratic faith. From our study of the major religions of the world it is revealed that it was the priest who needed this combination and brought it about subtly. In the growing complexity of life in society the priest could not permanently rely upon the spontaneity of the primitive theocratic faith referred to above. He wanted to rationalize it and lay its foundations on an ontological basis. Philosophy readily provided him with ontological premises and theology with the credal and ecclesiastical framework. Our classic example is Anselm's *ontological* proof for the existence of God. He is, because he exists in the 'idea' as the most perfect 'Being'.

God is now a 'Being' articulated in the credal *doctrine*. He is articulated, confessed and taught to others as a doctrinaire 'Being'.

The most subtle danger here, as already noted, is that thought is viewed as *separate* from life, and consequently a rational premise is built up on which the reality of God's person and work is based and explained without any concern for reference or relevance to complex facts of life in society. A few instances can bear this out:

The instances are most commonplace and, therefore, they illustrate the point best. A newly married young couple were returning from Tirupati, one of the most renowned pilgrimage centres in the South. 'What are your impressions?' I asked the young man. 'We will never again visit a pilgrimage centre', he summed up what he wanted to say. 'Why?' I asked him. He went on narrating what he saw and experienced there. The priests and people around there on the hill practically 'trade' on gods put up there as idols. One sample should suffice. 'Devaprasadam' is what is offered to gods and should be distributed to pilgrims freely. But it is 'sold' at one price at the top of the hill, another price on the way up or down, and a third price at the bottom of the hill. But several other heinous things he witnessed there and decided not to attend any pilgrimage centre again. These things have become common nowadays in several of the Christian Church festivities too.

I entered a shop one day in the city of Madras and found on one of the shelves a tin on which were written the words: 'A free gift from the people of USA—not for sale'. It was there precisely for sale! I ran to the proprietor who happened to be the father of my son's classmate and asked him: 'Why have you kept the tin there for sale when it is a free gift?' 'It is a milk-powder tin, sir; your priests and certain heads of institutions sold them to us at a black-market rate, and we must sell them.' There cannot be a more sordid fact than this, and a more real witness than an eye-witness! The poor in the U.S.A. and in Europe sitting in their pews offer their 'mite' to God believing that the more unfortunate people elsewhere will be fed by it. But the priests and heads of institutions who believe in a doctrinaire god made it an offering to themselves. They 'trade' on God, Christ and religion.

The third instance is the simplest but most graphic. I do not know whether it is true all over India; but it is true in South India, particularly in Andhra Pradesh. The festival is called *Nāgula Savita*—the Day of Serpents. Women in the villages go out to feed the serpents. They earnestly look for an ant-hill (the abode of serpent) and pour milk into the hole of the ant-hill and go away home believing that they have fed the serpent. Now the question is: Imagine that the serpent-god, in abundant love for his devotee, comes out with

his mouth wide open to be fed by the woman as she pours milk into the hole. Where will the woman be? The woman implicitly but certainly assumes, and if there is any doubt about it, she makes sure, that there is not any serpent-god in the ant-hill. Only on the surety of his real absence does the woman feed the serpent-god. Are devotees of gods better than this woman? Do they believe in and *expect* the *real presence* of God when they pray for it?

Do not these instances speak to us preachers, priests and theologians? We have been worshipping a God in whose *real presence* we have no faith, or of whose absence we are sure. This is the tragic situation we are in today.

(2) *The Need for a Biblical-Prophetic Understanding and Interpretation of God*

The above argument and instances clearly show that the doctrines and confessions of God are all built on premises shorn of any relevance or reference to complex facts of life. But the *tragic* error is that the doctrines and confessions are taken to be the facts of experience! For example, take the articles in our Creed: 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary . . . The third day. He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead . . . I believe in The Resurrection of the body; And the Life everlasting.' What is our *experience* with reference to these statements in the Creed over and above the fact that we repeat or confess them with our lips? 'On what *basis* do we defend them over against others who do not confess or repeat them?' Paul M. van Buren is justified in asking the question: 'Can the Christian today give an account of his words? Can he say what he means, and does he mean what he says, when he repeats the ancient apostolic creed or confession?'¹ It is so with our doctrines too. It is painful but a fact! This is where our philosophy and theology has landed us! God is separated, or rather God is conceived of as *separate* from the facts of experience. He is pushed to a supernatural plane belonging to 'the other world'. Theologians may use ambiguous words and expressions but, so long as they ascribe attributes to God that do not fall within the natural or normal realm of human experience, they are pushing him to a supernatural realm described as 'the other world'. That is God is practically absent from the human realm.

¹ *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, p. 11.

Therefore the contemporary debate on God—Is God dead, or Death of God Theology—is not only legitimate but also urgent and is most urgent in our country. Is God dead or alive? ‘Why search among the dead for one who lives?’ said the angel to the women in the Lucan story of Jesus. Can it be said to men and women of the State of Madras: ‘Why search among the lifeless pictures and images for one who lives?’ Can it be said to Christians, Muslims and Hindus: ‘Why search among the lifeless doctrines for one who lives?’ There will be a great commotion and agitation. But where are we heading—Christians and Hindus and the Muslims and all other adherents of religions? Is there not a way out of this deadlock? The Psalmist said: ‘The fool says in his heart, “There is no God”’. This means that those who say ‘God is dead’ are ‘fools’. But those who subscribe to the ‘Death of God Theology’ are intellectual giants and social scientists. What shall we say then? How shall we come out of this deadlock?

Here I submit, I do this most earnestly and honestly, to my colleagues and fellow-believers, as well as all other believers, that we need to recapture what I called the *primitive faith* which is spontaneous, sacramental, personal and social. I describe this as *prophetic faith* which comprehends the Biblical and all other faiths in their primitive stage. *God is central and organic to all phenomena of living.*

If we study the major religions carefully as to their evolution, we invariably come up with a stage in every religion in which a *New movement* arises in reaction against the priestly monopoly and sets out its principles and practice so as to recapture the *primitive faith*. Two examples should suffice—one from the Vedic religion and the other from the Biblical religion. The *Upanishadic* movement practically did away with the mechanically built-up Brāhmanicāṅ pantheon and interpreted God as movement of life, consciousness and joy (*prāṇa*, *chit* and *ānanda*). The story of gods disappearing before the ‘appearance’ of a fierce being Brahman, called also *ātman*, bears this out (*Kena Up.*, Khanda III). Again, ‘This that people say, “Worship this god! Worship that god!”—one god after another—this is his creation indeed! And he himself is all the gods’ (*Brih. Up.* XIV.6.). There is a clear indication in the Upanishads that God is expressed as life, consciousness and joy, all of which imply movement and involvement. Thus the doctrine of *kōśas* in *Sarvōpanishad* (2), the teaching of Prajāpati in *Chāndogyopanishad* (VII.7 ff.), the teaching of Ghorāngirasa (*Ibid.*, III.17 ff.), the convocation address in *Taittirīya Up.* (I.11 ff.) all confirm that the Upanishadic aim is to affirm that God is *not* out there but is involved in the structures and processes of life and existence.

The New Testament movement in the same way did away with the mechanically built-up sacrificial religion and transcendent God and interpreted God and religion as 'the way, the truth and the life' (John 14:6). The prophetic teaching in the O.T. and Jesus' illustration of it in the N.T. abundantly indicate that God is involved wholly in life and its movement: he is *central and organic* to it. The prophets condemned the temple and its orders; Jesus did the same and even went beyond them in that he fulfilled and illustrated the life and being of God in his life and work (John 14:9-11).

A story is told that life (*prāna*), speech, hearing, etc., went to Prajāpati (king) requesting him to judge who of them is supreme to control the body. Then Prajāpati asked the deities (*prāna*, etc.) one by one to quit the body to see if the person can live and move without the deity that goes out. Speech went out of the person, but he lived as a dumb man; hearing went out of the person, but he lived as a deaf man; finally life was about to go out of the person when all the other deities began to shiver, shrink and die. They conceded to Prajāpati that life (*prāna*) is supreme—*central and organic to all*. God is the *prāna* of all life and existence.

Therefore the prophets of O.T. condemned the temple and its orders (Jeremiah, Amos and Micah). They in one voice insisted on a life of love, justice and mercy. The manifestation of God is in this living rather than in the temple and its orders and principles.

Jesus continued this prophetic task and fulfilled it in his life and work. There is no doubt that he condemned the priestly and sacrificial system of religion calling attention to the life of relationships in society. He said: 'If, when you are bringing your gift to the altar, you suddenly remember that your brother has a grievance against you, leave your gift where it is before the altar. First go and make your peace with your brother . . .' (Matt. 5:23-24). Is not Jesus placing the life of relationships above the religion of the altar? Again, consider the words of Jesus: 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me' (Matt. 25:45). Is not Jesus here endorsing the Indian socialist slogan: *Mānava sevā eva mādhava sevā* (service to man alone is service to God)? May we remember Jesus' words addressed to Philip: 'Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves' (John 14:11).

The upshot of the argument is that the prophets and Jesus (the O.T. and N.T.) make it abundantly clear that God is manifested in the different structures of life and existence. He is 'the life, the truth and the way'.

2. ATTEMPT AT UNDERSTANDING GOD-EXPERIENCE ON THE BASIS OF A PROPHETIC INTERPRETATION

God is central and organic to all phenomena of living—this is the pivotal tenet of prophetic teaching and understanding, as well as experience, of God.²

We began this study by questioning the adequacy and even the possibility of a doctrine of God. The problem, we discover, is not so much the reality or otherwise of the person and power of God, for the experience of God in life and thought is universal and inescapable; but it is how to understand and interpret and communicate to others this phenomenon of experience of God. The Biblical utterance is still the most profound and true in all areas of life: Only a fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'. What does this mean? A man is said to be a fool when he is off his normal thinking: when he says he is not in water while he swims in it; when he denies breathing in and out while he freely respire; when he disowns his parents (male and female) as to his origin. Such is the reality and work and power of God according to prophetic interpretation: you cannot escape him nor can you deny him. Says the Psalmist: 'Thou dost beset me behind and before, and layest thy hand upon me . . . Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!'

It is to be observed here that God-experience is a complex phenomenon. It involves several elements *organically* connected—the within and the beyond, the individual and the social, the personal and the universal. None of these elements can be denied with sense and meaning. Only a *fool* will do it. It is in the context of this total dimension—which I call *spiritual dimension*—that God-experience is to be considered. I indicate three spheres of experience which cumulatively clarify what is stated above regarding God-experience.

(1) *God Is Experienced as the Lord of Psychic Life*

The first sphere of experience is psychic life. Man's psychic life is central to all other aspects of life. If we can learn to discern the activity of God in this sphere, it will then be easy for us to understand God's activity in other spheres. We shall take the clue from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* for exploring this sphere of experience.

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's maturest tragedies. Macbeth murdered the good and kind king Duncan when he had been his guest. As he was contemplating the act, he was

² For a background to this understanding, please read: Bible (Ps. 19:139; Matt. 25:31 ff.; Rom. 1:20 ff.), Vedas (*Rigveda*, X.90; *Brihadāranyaka Up.*, I.4:1 ff.; *Gītā*, XI.1 ff.).

attacked in his conscience by the public and by the dagger. In a series of soliloquies Macbeth expresses certain concerns (responsibility for his guest), passes judgements (that Duncan was 'meek' and 'virtuous') and ventilates emotions of fear (fear of the public). In these expressions he presents a state of mind in which an agency without and beyond himself confronts his own self acting within. This confrontation should give us some clue. Sentences and expressions like 'we still have judgment here', 'This even-handed justice', 'His virtues will plead like angels', 'And pity . . . shall blow the horrid deed in every eye', 'I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, but only vaulting ambition' reveal a profoundly complex and dialectical situation—a Beyond confronting the within, a Self speaking to and judging the self, a man in dialogue with himself. What is this agency that is *beyond*? Is it a false 'creation' of the mind as some might want to have it? Macbeth would have been bolder and happier had the fears been *only* of the mind's creation; but he knew that there was something *real* in the situation *beyond* himself and that he had to reckon with it, for he says:

But in these cases

We still have judgment here; that we but teach
 Bloody instructions, which being taught, return
 To plague the inventor, this ev'n-handed justice
 Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice
 To our own lips.

The virtuous Duncan, the pity and justice of the public, the *organic* wholeness of society of which he (Macbeth) was a member with *obligations* to protect his host 'against his murderer', his 'vaulting ambition' and 'bloody deed'—all these constitute the *Beyond* that is within and the *Within* that is beyond. Still some might insist that it is 'conscience' and that it is a characteristic mark of all human beings, and that there is *nothing* beyond about it. They say that it can be explained in psychological and ethical terms and is, therefore, a natural human phenomenon and does not indicate any activity or agency beyond one's self. In reply to this we have to repeat the above argument with renewed emphasis. How was Duncan *virtuous* and Macbeth *ambitious*? *Why* and *of whom* was Macbeth afraid? How was the deed '*horrid*'? How did 'justice' and 'pity' originate and *how* were these qualities *related* to his situation as a *murderer* of Duncan? These and a host of other questions compel us to question if we can explain away 'conscience' as a simple psychological and ethical phenomenon without any reference to an *objective reality* beyond the simple and immediately human and individual self. A careful scrutiny of all the factors forces us again to confess that there is something here which is *within* but is *yet beyond*;

which is *real and empirical but is yet beyond one's empirical and immediate grasp.*

The cases of Joseph in the house of the Egyptian and of Peter before Jesus Christ may give us a more helpful guidance. Said Joseph:

... 'Lo, having me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand; he is not greater in this house than I am; nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife; how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?' (Gen. 39:8-9).

Peter cried:

... 'Man, I do not know what you are saying.' And immediately, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly (Luke 22:60-62).

Now *what* is it that prevents Joseph from committing what he considers as 'wickedness' and 'sin against God'? What is it that makes Peter weep 'bitterly'? Joseph refers to his master's *trust* in him the breach of which is 'sin against God'. Peter remembers his breach of Jesus's trust in him and his colleagues' trust in him and 'wept bitterly'. The phenomenon of this inner operation (conscience) is not simple. It is a complex dimension—a within—and—without, an immanent—and transcendent movement and activity.

May we consider the meaning of the words of our Lord:

Nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for 'behold, the kingdom of God is *within you or in the midst of you*' (Luke 17:21).

(2) *God Is Experienced as the Lord of Social-Historical Experience*

Investigation into this sphere of experience can be conducted along two lines: We shall first consider a few popular sayings (proverbs) which reveal that God is involved in social-historical experience; then we can study some social and political structures which confirm the involvement of God. This should be just in outline only.

In the Dravidian group of languages there is one saying in *Telugu* which runs as follows: *NALUGURI NŌTILŌ DEVUDUNNĀDU* (There is God in the mouth of four people). What does this mean? This means that you can confide in

the *agreed opinion* of four people—four people here representing or implying the majority, not necessarily the whole group or council. The word *four* also has the meaning of *ecclesia*: those called out to meet in a public place. The word *nōtilō* literally means 'in the mouth', a *singular* noun applied to express the voice of four people. Clearly, therefore, the saying *naluguri nōtilō devudunnādu* means the agreement by the majority on a particular matter or a general consensus of the council or *ecclesia*.

In more primitive times people used to take an oath by the sky or by the earth believing that they are the known and available deities. But later it has been required that the individual should take an oath 'before the four' (*naluguri mundu*). Thus God has come to be associated with a dialectical phenomenon of agreement-and-disagreement, majority agreement and the general consensus.³

By selecting one or two examples from the Indo-European group of languages we can confirm the above interpretation of a popular saying. The most common saying from Sanskrit is '*sanghībhavameva balam*' (The spirit of unity is strength, or simply, *sangha saktih*, 'Union is strength'). Here the word, *balam* or *Sakti*, translated as strength is generally interpreted as physical energy for resisting the enemy. The English equivalents are 'Unity is strength' or 'United we stand, divided we fall'. But the word, *balam* or *sakti*, and its English equivalent need not mean merely physical strength; *balam* or *sakti* can be interpreted as creative energy. Thus the saying can express the experience by men of a power from beyond them; and the agreement of the body or assembly of men could represent the reality and activity of God (Cf. Matt. 18:20, 'There am I in the midst of them').

In the same way, a study of social and political structures will reveal to us the power and activity of God. What is the difference between communism and democracy? Let us not have in mind for the moment Russia or America. Democracy is the *form* and communism the *content*. Communism denies the *reality* of God because, according to it, democracy affirms that God is 'in heaven', not in the life of the world. The writer believes the helpful way of apprehending God is to discern His *reality* in the dialectical phenomena, collective and individual, under a *democratic* framework. When he says 'democracy', he does not mean the cabinet or government in Washington or in New Delhi. He would rather prefer to put it in the unsurpassed words of Abraham Lincoln: 'This nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.' Democracy is the government of the people, by the people, for the people. He considers this to be the

³ Cf. Deut. 17:6, 19:15; Matt. 18:16.

real content of democracy. Dwight Eisenhower says: 'Human dignity, economic freedom, individual responsibility, these are the characteristics that distinguish democracy from all other forms devised by man.' Reinhold Neibuhr says: 'A Christian view of human nature is more adequate for the development of a *democratic* society than either the optimism with which democracy has become historically associated or the moral cynicism which inclines human communities to tyrannical political strategies.'

The *dialectical* nature of democracy is its virtue. It follows the principle of opposition and criticism within its being. The total aim is the good of all. But in history so far, and in possible future history, the total aim could not and cannot be achieved by any elected government, much less by a dictator or by a situation of anarchy. Therefore there is a *dialecticism* in a democracy and there is also an *eschatological* element. Each government is judged by its people in a democracy; it is weighed in the balance every four or five years. There may be corruptions in high places or low places; they are to be condemned and right order must be restored. In a democracy people who rule themselves for themselves are also the judges. William Penn wrote words remembering in a democracy:

. . . Let men be good, and the government cannot be bad; if it be ill, they will cure it (*Chicago Tribune*, Editorial, 24 February, 1965).

(3) *God Is Experienced as the Lord of Natural Phenomena*

In a similar way we can experience God working everywhere—in the heavens above and on the earth below. The Psalmist declares:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night
declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice
is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

—(Ps. 19: 1-4)

3. CONCLUSION

Our conclusion is that God is real, God is love and life; his activity is experienced in psychical and social-historical and natural phenomena. We have discovered beyond doubt that he is the Beyond that is within and the Within that is beyond. He is our eternal contemporary—our creator, judge and redeemer at the same time. He said:

'Be assured, I am with you always, to the end of time'
(Matt. 28: 20).