

The Flexibility of God's Unchanging Purpose.

IT has always been the firm teaching of Christian theology that God is immutable, eternally the same. No view of God which denied that God is unchangeable in His essential nature and His eternal purpose could hope to satisfy either the heart or the intellect of Christian people. We feel after Him as One whose unvarying nature and unchanging purpose give unity and stability to the universe, and afford confidence and strength to our human lives. "I, the Lord, change not" (Mal. iii. 6) expresses the conviction, not only of the Hebrew prophet, but of the deepest religious thinkers of all ages. God is revealed in Jesus Christ, who is "the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever" (Heb. xiii. 8). God is "the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation neither shadow that is cast by turning" (Jas. i. 17).

Christian theology has rightly emphasised this doctrine of immutability in reference to the eternal purpose of God. If, however, the doctrine is pressed too far, so as to imply a rigid inflexibility in the purpose of God as it operates in the historical process, it raises difficulties for Christian faith and practice. If "the unchanging purpose of God" be interpreted, as it has been interpreted, as meaning that God, in working out His purpose in history, cannot admit into His plans and methods any change or variation at all, then it seems to be impossible to find room (a) for the fact of human free-will, (b) for the practice of petitionary prayer.

(a) If, as experience testifies, man is really free to choose between alternative actions, then the future actions of man are not fixed and predetermined, and therefore cannot be known even to God. God, therefore, as human actions proceed, will experience change both by becoming cognisant of new situations as they arise and, in some cases, by adopting fresh means towards the effecting of His eternal purpose. His ultimate purpose remains constant, but the subordinate plans which subserve the ultimate end have continually to be re-adjusted and adapted to meet the contingencies which arise in consequence of man's exercise of that freedom of will with which God has endowed him.

It is sometimes argued that man's free-will is not incompatible with God's foreknowledge of all future human actions; that God, knowing the character of a man perfectly, will know also which of various alternative actions he will choose, although the man is free to choose in the sense that his choice is not determined 'from outside', but by his own character. Such

an argument, however, points, not to free-will, but to self-determinism. If our future actions are wholly determined by our present characters, there is no free-will in the sense in which we claim to experience it.

By saying that a man is free to choose we mean that nothing either in his own character or in his environment completely pre-determines his action. Both character and environment are, of course, contributory factors; but, if his action is really free, they do not necessitate it. He is, in respect of his actual choice, an "uncaused cause" or "unmoved mover". It is a fact of experience that a person can, in doing a particular act, either rise above or fall below the level of his previous character. Empirically we "feel" ourselves to be free in this sense.

If then, the future actions of man are not predetermined, they cannot be known at present even to God. If they were known to God, they would be already determined, fixed and inescapable, and free-will would be impossible. But free-will is an assured fact of our moral experience. It follows, therefore, that the future activities of mankind cannot be known in every detail by God; unforeseen contingencies will continually arise, and, in order to deal with them, God repeatedly chooses to make readjustments in his plans.

For instance, if God intended to achieve His purpose in history by making the Jewish nation the nucleus of His kingdom on earth, then the Jewish rejection of the Gospel must have caused Him to alter, not His ultimate purpose, but the means whereby that purpose should be achieved. Such instances could be multiplied a thousandfold, if we take into account the innumerable temporary frustrations of God's will which arise from the exercise of free-will by individual men and women. This need of flexibility within His general and eternal purpose is part of God's self-limitation occasioned by His gift of free-will to man.

(b) It is impossible to reconcile rigid immutability in the purpose of God, as operating in history, with another fact of religious experience—the conviction of the efficacy of petitionary prayer. Prayer is of the very essence of religion, and the most characteristic part of prayer, from which it derives its name, is petition. Adoration, praise, thanksgiving, confession, are all important parts of prayer regarded as worship and communion with God, but prayer in its most characteristic form is petition—the actual asking for something.

If God's purpose is already irrevocably and unchangeably determined with regard to every detail of the future, it is difficult to find room for the petitionary prayer to which we are accustomed. This difficulty has led many thinkers to conclude

that the only justifiable petition is "Thy will be done". But, in point of fact, we instinctively make many other petitions, and we have the authority of Christ for doing so. He taught us to ask our Heavenly Father for good things. It is true that, by His own example, He taught us to add "if it be Thy will". We ought not to pray for anything which we know to be contrary to God's will. But among the things which are not contrary to His will there are many which God will give to us if we ask for them, but which perhaps He will withhold from us if we fail to ask for them. Whether He will or will not give them to us is not already determined by a rigid and inflexible purpose of God, but depends in part upon us.

A minister often visits a home where a loved one lies seriously ill, and is asked to offer prayer. He instinctively prays that, if it be God's will, the loved one may be restored to health. God may already have decided that for the accomplishment of His purpose the life of the sick one must be taken. But, as the minister prays, he trusts that, if this be not so, his prayer (and the prayers of those who are with him) may be effectual in securing a boon, which, if the prayer had not been offered, might have been withheld. The testimony of religious experience to the efficacy of prayer and the conviction that praying may make a difference to the direction of God's activity are so strong that we cannot cease to believe in them in deference to an abstract view of God based on *à priori* reasoning.

Accepting, then, as most religious people do in experience, the efficacy of petitionary prayer, we are bound to conclude that God is free to choose, here and now, whether He will or will not grant certain requests. This implies that, although God's ultimate purpose may be fixed and unchanging, the means whereby that purpose is to be achieved are not in every detail pre-determined. God may, in fact, if He sees fit, change or modify His immediate plan in response to a request which pleases Him. It is hardly too much to say that what is involved in this controversy concerning the purpose of God is not merely the freedom of man, but the freedom of God Himself. If God is a living Person, in a social and reciprocal fellowship with free men, then His activity cannot be thought of as rigidly and irrevocably pre-determined. The amazing wonder of prayer is that it can indeed, if God so choose, move the Hand that rules the Universe.

The difficulties which theologians have brought upon themselves by their insistence on the rigid and absolute inflexibility of God's purpose in history may be illustrated by a passage from Aquinas¹: "Is it proper to pray?" he asks, and in answering the question he says: "We must so lay down the utility of prayer

¹ Summa, Pt. II,—ii Qu. lxxxiii. Art. 2.

as neither to attribute any fatality to the course of human history, subject as it is to Providence, nor again reckon the divine arrangement to be alterable." "Divine Providence not only arranges what effects are to take place, but also from what causes and in what order they are to arise. Now among other causes human acts count as causes of certain effects. Hence men need to do sundry things, not that by their acts they may alter the divine plan, but that by their acts they may fulfil certain effects according to the order arranged by God. And so it is with prayer: for we do not pray to alter the divine plan, but to obtain what God Almighty has arranged to be fulfilled by prayers, 'to the end that men by asking may deserve to obtain what God Almighty before all ages has arranged to give them', as Gregory says."

Such a theory reduces men to the level of puppets moved by a God who pulls the strings. Every act of man, on such a view, is predetermined by God, even the prayer which appears to be efficacious. Indeed, according to Aquinas, every event in history, including the granting of a particular prayer, and the prayer itself takes place according to a fixed and unalterable divine pre-arrangement.

This is not what we mean by prayer. Prayer is a free act of the spirit of man. If we really believed, as Aquinas tells us, that both our prayers and their answers had already been predetermined by God "before all ages", our prayers would no longer seem real and we should feel reduced to the level of machines. Such a price is too high to pay simply to safeguard a doctrine of traditional theology.

There must be room for what the Old Testament so frequently calls the "repentance" of God, a change or modification in the working out of His eternal purpose. We cannot dismiss the Biblical references to the "repentance" of God as mere instances of anthropomorphism. Prophets like Amos and Jeremiah, who are deeply convinced of the immutable purpose of God, also speak of His "repentance"² The two truths are held side by side in the Old Testament. They even appear in the same chapter: in 1 Sam. xv. 29 we read: "He is not a man that He should repent", yet in verse 2 we read "It repenteth Me that I have set up Saul to be King", and in verse 35 "the Lord repented that He had made Saul King over Israel." Both the immutability of God's purpose and its flexibility in its detailed working out in history are safeguarded in the Bible. The Biblical conception of God is far better balanced than that of traditional theology.

In modern times the most violent attack on the rigidity of the

² Amos vii. 3, 6. Jeremiah xviii. 8, 10; xxvi. 3, 13, 19; xlii. 10.

traditional conception of God has come from William James, who errs by going to the opposite extreme in teaching a view of God in which He is made to appear less than divine. There is, however much force in his protest against the wide divergence between traditional theology and the facts of religious experience. "There is a sense in which philosophic theism makes us outsiders and keeps us foreigners in relation to God, in which, at any rate, His connexion with us appears as unilateral and not reciprocal. His action can affect us, but He can never be affected by our reaction. Our relation, in short, is not a strictly social relation. Of course in common man's religion the relation is believed to be social, but this is only one of the many differences between religion and theology." (*Pluralistic Universe*, p. 26).

We cannot follow William James, however, in his conception of a finite and "growing" God. A fundamental principle of the Christian conception of God is that He is in His essential nature infinite and eternally perfect. But when we think out thoroughly God's relationship to other free moral agents, like ourselves, we cannot escape the conclusion that the Infinite God has in amazing condescension voluntarily limited Himself by His immanence within the historical process of time and space, by giving to His creature man the boon of free-will, and by His willingness to hear and respond to our petitions. One aspect of this self-limitation must be a certain degree of flexibility in the working out of His purpose for which traditional theology seems to have left no room.

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