

## From Man to God.

KARL BARTH once said that one cannot get to God by shouting man in a loud voice. This sounds impressive and very Christian until it is analysed. Then it reveals itself as too vague to be of any value. If it means that man is not God and is in a relation of creaturely dependence to Him, then that is a commonplace of Christian theology in every age. If it means that there is nothing in man which can give us any clue to God, His nature and purpose, then it is a statement of extremely doubtful truth. As Canon Quick observed, "there is something in man which gives us a true indication of what God is." (Cf. *Doctrines of the Creed*, p. 30). Let us try and see what this "something" is. We may state the issue first in a question:

Does man's intellectual, moral and spiritual life afford any clue as to the nature and purpose of God?

Many Christian theologians to-day are so convinced of the bankruptcy of humanism of whatever brand that they have little patience with any attempt to start with man when God is under discussion. The moral nihilism of a Hitler has made them doubt the validity of any of man's moral intuitions. Yet this is surely a dangerous proceeding. If man apart from Christ must be as blind as Hitler appears to be to moral realities, then we are assenting to Hitler's judgement of human nature as completely stupid and morally irresponsible. If that is true about unredeemed human nature, then to what can the gospel appeal in man, or do we ask men to accept Christ irrespective of what their reason and conscience say? And is not this spiritual Fuehrer worship with a vengeance? Furthermore, does the New Testament suggest that this is the kind of loyalty and devotion Jesus asks of man?

Man, we are told in the Bible, was made in the image of God. The author of Genesis no doubt had a more crudely anthropomorphic idea than is possible for us, but if the phrase still means anything, it surely can only mean that man's moral and spiritual intuitions have a divine origin, and therefore are not without significance as to the nature of that origin. If it is said that man's nature is totally depraved, then all moral and intellectual distinctions are destroyed, and we can no longer speak of truth and goodness in any real sense. Jesus Himself does not seem to have been a Barthian (!), for He frequently appealed to man's moral and spiritual insight. If man is totally incapable of recognising and responding to goodness before he meets Jesus, then it would seem to make completely unintelligible

man's recognition of God in Him. If man cannot see for himself that loyalty, love, honour, truthfulness, purity and unselfishness are "good," then no external revelation can give him an extra guarantee. This does not mean that man, having recognised the good, is able to live it effectively. There is an impotence of the will and a guilty conscience which only the Atonement could overcome. All that is argued here is that "under the long tuition of moral experience, the consciousness of the moral claim comes, by an almost imperceptible transition of thought, to be interpreted as an awareness of the divine reality" (John Baillie, *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 348). In other words, faith cannot prove the validity of moral intuitions which a man has not previously felt to be morally compelling. "If there be no God and no future state," said Robertson of Brighton, "yet even then it is better to be generous than selfish, better to be chaste than licentious, better to be true than false, better to be brave than to be a coward." If the moral realities are not accepted as given, then by no other means can their validity be authenticated. A man either knows them to be morally compelling or he does not. When he says that they are not, one may truly suspect evasion or moral dishonesty.

What, then, are the clues in man's nature which may help us in knowing the nature of God?

- (a) The moral realities which man discovers as part of the moral order under which he lives.
- (b) From man's experience of fatherhood, power and creatorship, we can gain some indication as to what God is, not by exact analogy, but nevertheless genuinely.

"We insist that human fatherhood, power and creatorship themselves teach us, if we think about them deeply enough, that they are not self-sufficient or self-explanatory, but point beyond themselves to an Author, an Authority, and a Power from whom they come and in whom their true meaning is found" (Quick, *Doctrines of the Creed*, p. 31).

Against this whole line of approach, the following objections are frequently levelled.

1. It is often very glibly asserted, and without any attempt at proof, that the moral intuitions of the human race are so varied as to be without value. Where there is such a great difference of opinion, the evidence it affords is insufficient to prove anything. Yet this divergence is not as great as some suppose. Aldous Huxley, who has no Christian axe to grind, rightly declares: "The Ethical doctrines taught in the Tao Te Ching, by Gautama Buddha and his followers in the Lesser and above all the Greater

Vehicle, in the Sermon on the Mount and by the best of the Christian saints, are not dissimilar. Among human beings who have reached a certain level of civilisation and of personal freedom from passion there exists a real *consensus gentium* in regard to ethical first principles" (*Ends and Means*, p. 382).

2. The second objection runs as follows: How can we be sure that the moral and spiritual experience of the human race is not simply the result of the intense working of the human imagination? Is it true, as Feuerbach declared, that *Die Theologie ist anthropologie*? Obviously, all human thought is and must be anthropomorphic. Whatever we wish to explain or describe demands the use of symbols, images and concepts taken from our own human experience. We must look at everything through our own mental spectacles. The vital question, then, is not whether man's intellectual, moral and spiritual knowledge is anthropomorphic. That it must necessarily be, but is it only that and nothing more? Is it only knowledge of man's mind, or is it a means to the discovery of an environment not of his own making? The short answer to this objection is that if such scepticism is directed against one aspect of our experience, namely the religious, then in strict logic it must be applied to the whole. Science and art go the way of religion as simply the play of human imagination about an unknown somewhat. This may be true, but if so, it empties the word truth of any rational meaning and makes nonsense of our human experience.

Surely sane men will not allow themselves to get to such a philosophical impasse unless the evidence is particularly cogent, and that is by no means the case. Intellectual suicide is not the only way out for thinking men. The Christian need not query the psychological account of the mental mechanism which comes into play in religious as in every other human activity. Man's ability to "project" his mind is only possible because man is first a creature of God's mind and bears the image of His heavenly Father and Creator within himself.

If we can get thus far by appealing only to the general moral and spiritual experience of the race, what need is there of Jesus? If He only exemplified more clearly what men have always known, albeit dimly, is not the Incarnation in fact unnecessary?

This again rests on a misunderstanding of God's purpose in sending Jesus. Christianity never said that Jesus came only to tell men that love is better than hate, unselfishness better than selfishness, etc. Many men have known this even before His coming. The significance of Jesus was not in His ethical teaching, which was new only in part, but in Himself. Jesus alone of the moral and spiritual leaders of the race was free from the

torturing gap between the "is" and the "ought," between the present achievement and the ideal aimed at.

Jesus by His atoning love rescued man from the despair of an enlightened and therefore more acutely accusing conscience, and by His Resurrection gave the assurance that the moral struggle will finally reach a victorious term because the moral realities are the expression in human experience of the divine and eternal purpose. Man's moral experience and ability to know ethical principles are powerless of themselves either to make a man a "new creature" or to remove the sting of death. In this sense, God sent His Son for us men and our salvation to do a work which moral man of himself could never have achieved. From man to God, therefore, finds its necessary compliment in God to man and through man.

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*A Free Religious Faith: A Report presented to the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches*, edited by R. V. Holt. (The Lindsey Press, 5s.)

This closely packed little volume is the work of a Commission set up by the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. It aims at giving to persons who reject authoritarian forms of religion "an exposition of a religious faith which is free and yet definite in content." Part I summarises, in some forty pages, the major conclusions of the group on a number of questions, such as The Decline of Religion and its Causes; The Impact of Scientific Discoveries and their Interpretation; Religion in Human History, etc. The bulk of the book, however, consists in a series of "Papers and Notes" which are dealt with in Part II., while two brief individual contributions appear in Part III.

The book contains—as one would indeed expect from the distinguished names represented on the Commission—not a little that is helpful and thought-provoking. But it must be confessed that the disjointed nature of the contents makes it a difficult book to read. And it is unlikely that the average Christian will take kindly to the general outlook which inspires the papers, since that frankly regards Christianity as a stage towards a "world religion" which has yet to come into being.

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