

BIBLIOTHECA SACRA

THE NEED OF A NEW CONCEPTION OF GOD

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IT is now quite generally agreed that Germany's madness can be traced straight back to Germany's apostasy. Putting the facts in terms of national life, it is said that German *Kultur*, with its brood of insane and piratical acts, is the legitimate offspring of German Rationalism. Or, personalizing the whole matter, it is stated that ex-Emperor William's philosophy and conduct are alike fiendish because his god, with whom he seemed for so long to be on astonishingly familiar terms, is not the Christian God at all, but some barbaric deity. Here is another case of a man's becoming like the Being whom he worships.

It has not yet been said that the same relation of cause and effect holds good in the case of the modern world's conception of God and its moral and spiritual state; and yet the available facts are just as convincing. Look at the situation. The three things most frequently postulated concerning God are, first, that He is love; second, that He is our Father; third, that He is immanent in the universe of which He is the Creator. And of the three, the most frequently affirmed and the universally accepted is that He is Love. Even when men think of Him as Father, it is as the loving Father. And even when they talk of His immanence, they dwell upon the fact that He is immanent in love. The stupendous fact that God is Love has captured the imagination of Christendom.

Now, rightly interpreted and viewed in its relation to the whole body of revealed truth, that one of the eternal verities is of superlative value to mankind. "When John

wrote his copulative sentence in his first epistle, he inaugurated a new era in Christian understanding." But right there lies the crux of the existing situation. This truth is not rightly interpreted, and it is viewed entirely apart from its relation to the whole body of truth. In that statement I am not referring to the fact that most of our modern theology is not orthodox, but to the obvious fact that the popular or prevailing idea of God is as far from the truth as is the ex-Emperor's. "We hold in our mind conceptions of God that are not much better than the Kaiser's." In his discussion of "The Unity of God's Character," William Newton Clarke says:—

"We ascribe to God certain qualities of character, set forth in familiar terms, but when we come to define them we are under the influence of our own limitations, and however large and worthy the terms that we use, our conceptions are sure to become narrowed toward the dimensions of humanity. Naturally, if not inevitably, we bring the perfection of God down towards our own imperfections."

That is exactly what has happened in the present instance. The common man has reduced the statement "God is Love" to the perilous proportions of the half-truth. The equally momentous fact that He is holy, that "our God is a consuming fire," has been almost absolutely obliterated from his consciousness. Whether right or wrong from the standpoint of a strictly orthodox theology, men look upon God as their Father. They have forgotten that he is likewise their Creator; their Sovereign, to whom they owe allegiance; and their Judge, before whom they must stand at last and give an account of "the deeds done in the flesh."

Furthermore, the modern idea of God errs not only in its isolation of the central truth of the Gospel, but in its distortion of that truth. The perfection of God has been brought down to our imperfections. Or, in the blatant words of the skeptic Ingersoll, "man has created God in his own image." The love of God has been evacuated of all ethical significance and all consequent spiritual com-

pulsion. It has been translated into terms of mawkish sentimentalism. In these days of a minimized parental authority, the average man believes in a Fatherhood of God devoid of all moral and spiritual exactions. He has not thought the matter out calmly and thoroughly, for he does not do things that way. But "there is a logic of the hopes and fears that insidiously smuggles its conclusions into the realm of the intellect." By this devious and perilous route he has come to two more or less clearly defined convictions.

The first is that God is not very exacting with His weak and erring children. This kindly disposed and thoroughly indulgent parent not only does not hold His imperfect children blameworthy for their shortcomings, but He willingly accepts generosity in place of righteousness, humanitarian activities as a substitute for "unspottedness from the world," and spasms of virtuous emotion as something "just as good" as the surrender of the will.

The other conviction or vague feeling which men have about God to-day is that He is eternally accessible. It is not so much a belief that they will have in the next world a chance to measure up to the rigid requirements of a moral and morally exacting God as it is that this easy-going quality in the Divine character is permanent; thus making the salvation of all men, however far short they may have fallen of the Christian requirement, an assured fact. The average man, in his loose thinking, has not postulated a second probation. He has done away with the idea of probation entirely. In a strikingly calm, dispassionate article on "Religion in War Times," published in *The Atlantic Monthly* of September, 1918, Dr. William Ernest Hocking, Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University, says of the soldier who enlisted in the Allied cause:—

"Always there is something that sets this particular act of dedication [enlistment] apart in the mind of the decider. . . . It tends to put him on fundamental good terms with the invisible universe as with visible society. And it is likely to serve as an unuttered argument to the effect that

God, if there be a God, will not be too hard on him, whatever happens."

It is unnecessary at this time to enlarge on the fact that a vast number of good people have translated that vague feeling into a certainty, and affirmed without hesitation that "going over the top" means salvation. It is quite essential, however, to call attention to the yet more significant fact that vast numbers who never saw the front-line trenches are obsessed with the idea that "God will not be too hard on them, whatever happens." In the three years just passed, especially, I have talked with all sorts and conditions of men, with men to each of whom it might truthfully be said, "Many things thou lackest"; and I found them all complacent and calm as regards their future. As one dissolute man said, "If my Father won't take care of me, who will?" Or, as another put it, in speaking of a mutual friend who had passed through a period of genuine conviction of sin, "That's all bosh. The Almighty doesn't require that of anybody."

The prevailing opinion as to the destiny of those who have died, whatever their moral and spiritual state at the time of their exit, is plainly stated by Elizabeth Ashe in her story "Appraisalment," also published in *The Atlantic Monthly*. The story begins with the announcement of Alan Reid's suicide, and the subsequent discovery of his young widow that he had been a defaulter of trust funds, and, at the time of his death, was living in illicit relations with his secretary. Indignant and ashamed, she went to call on his mother, but found her enumerating his good qualities as a child. Together they read his old letters, enlarged upon his cast-off virtues, and decided that, in spite of the fact that he went out of this world a thief, an adulterer, and a suicide, he would ultimately be all right. The author sums up her philosophy in a final statement which she puts into the mouth of the young widow: "Past and present are only a part of a life. There's the future, the long future to complete him. He will go on — with us, dear."

In Dr. Hocking's analysis of the consciousness of the soldier, and Elizabeth Ashe's doctrine of the destiny of a scoundrel, we have the modern idea of God at perigee and apogee. Not only the man who enlisted, but also the sentimentalists of all shades, the intellectualists, and as many of the social idealists as believe in a future at all, have taken the yearning of "the larger hope," and the hypothesis of "the upward thrust by a Universal Spirit," and "the half truths and false psychology of popular altruism," and the erroneous conclusions of Christian Science, and evolved either an indulgent Parent who is too tender-hearted to punish anybody or an automatic salvation in which all men are included, willy-nilly.

It is to be expected that such views of God and destiny would rob religion of its solemnity, life of its moral compulsion, and conscience of its authority. Fifty years ago, in his sermon entitled "One Chance Better than Many," Horace Bushnell pointed out the psychological stupidity and moral peril of such a flabby and unethical faith, if it can be called a faith. To assume for a moment that man can spend his whole life here consciously choosing the lower and inferior, letting the animal in him dominate the spiritual, substituting self-will for the will of God, and then, in the next world, by some magical power of Divine love, either be made selfish and blessed at the same time or be transformed into an angel of light, is to do violence to all the teachings of psychology and to corrupt human life at its center. "It is a very self-evident fact that if we had two or more trials offered us, we should be utterly slack and neglectful in the first and should bring it to its end almost inevitably in a condition utterly unhopeful." It is just as true of ideas as it is of men, that "by their fruits ye shall know them." To put it subjectively, and to use a sorely overworked and much abused Scripture saying, "as he thinketh in his heart, so is he." Experience proved to John Wesley that a liberal theology does not always connote a low moral character in the individual, for he found that there were heterodox saints as well as

orthodox sinners. But historical experience has proved beyond peradventure that a flabby and unethical conception of God, comprehending a "posthumous salvation,"— what Bushnell ironically calls "a basement gospel,"— reacts disastrously upon the race as a whole. It is the merest commonplace that the element of reverence has gone from our modern religion. With the sense of God's holiness has gone the sense of man's sinfulness, and with the ethical conception of the Divine character has gone much of the reality from our religion. There is no use in contrasting the Present and the Past, in putting the worst of to-day beside the best of yesterday. But neither is anything to be gained by glossing over the facts. The triad of sins which curses the modern world is made up of Hypocrisy, Compromise, and Presumption. There are many in the church who are substituting philanthropic activity for spiritual vitality, formal religion for a saving faith, forgetting God's insistent demand, "Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes." Vain oblations have changed in outer aspect, but they are still offered by those who dream of a God who can be placated by gifts. The excuse that "a man must live" is offered in extenuation for corrupt business practices and participation in questionable enterprises. Instead of a social order based upon the clear consciousness that "you can't compromise on the big things of life," we have what Howells gently designates as "that easy-going, not evilly-intentioned potential immorality, which regards common property as common prey." The universal assumption is that the exalted ethic of revealed truth must give way before the pressure of individual physical necessities and a hostile social order. The astounding thing about the world in general is not that moral laxity exists, but that in a multitude of cases it is justified by the specious plea of "moral freedom." And while the world war has modified some of these evils, it has left others untouched.

There are not wanting those who say that all this is due to the lack of a "social consciousness." Unless I have

read both my Bible and my history upside down, it is due, primarily at least, to the lack of a "God consciousness," a deep and overwhelming realization that God's love is ethical, God Himself is inexorably exacting, and "life is ethical from the outset." There is a growing "disdain for consequences," because there are no consequences serious enough to be concerned about. The occasional plea of the old-fashioned preacher to "flee from the wrath to come" is received with supercilious scorn or hilarious contempt. The simple and comfortable fact is that there is nothing to flee from. The average man has answered Joseph Cook's question, "Is there nothing in God to fear?" with just two words, — "absolutely nothing." And so he either contents himself with spiritual minimums, the calm confidence that "God, if there be a God, will not be too hard on him, whatever happens," or the satisfying hypothesis that the mysterious and unknown forces of another life will effect in his indifferent soul the needed transformation which the exigencies of this life could not.

Obviously, then, any serious attempt to make the new social order Christian must be accompanied by a rediscovery of the Christian God. And that means that we must turn from the philosophers and sentimentalists and intellectuals and social idealists, and endeavor to comprehend "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," revealed to us not only in what Jesus said but also in what he was and did. It is not within the purpose of this paper to attempt anything like an outline of the Christian doctrine of God; but it is, to insist that any doctrine or conception worthy of the name Christian must emphasize the ethical consistency and unity of the Divine character. One thing that the race needs "in order to full goodness" is a clear knowledge of the elements that go to make up Perfect Personality, "with a perception of what they mean and what they require." Two generations ago men needed to be told that "God is Love," that He is on their side. To-day they need to know that God's love is moral through and through, that He is not on their side unless they heed His voice and

do His will. The modern world sadly needs a re-emphasis of God's holiness and of the retributive element which inheres in that holiness. A legal enactment is not necessary in order that evil-doers be punished. The severity of the Heavenly Father is as essential to His Fatherhood as is His goodness. Or, putting the truth in the terms of cause and effect, so popular in this scientific age, the consequences of sin are written into the moral universe and the nature of man, a moral being. Furthermore, "a good God demands that His children be good," and that they be good here and now or suffer the consequences. To do away with the crucial character of man's decision as to the fulfillment of his obligations to God, the probationary character of life, and "the strict limitation of the probationary period to this life," is to deny the plain and explicit teachings of Jesus Christ. The man who insists upon the claim that "the redemptive purpose of God must continue forever" ought to be as honest as was Theodore Parker when he said, "I believe that Jesus Christ taught the everlasting punishment of the wicked, but I refuse to accept it on his authority." He ought to go farther and admit that his God is not the Christian God. Soft and easy conceptions of God have no place in Holy Writ. In a terrific arraignment of the ex-Kaiser and a most melancholy prophecy of his probable destiny, Lyman Abbott says:—

"I believe that he will pass, as we all must pass, from the deceptive lights and theatric shows of this world to the revealing lights and stern judgments of the world to come. There he will stand for judgment before Him who denounced as a generation of vipers, fit only to be cast out as the offal of the universe to be destroyed by the fires of Gehenna, those who had devoured widows' houses and made long prayers. . . . I have no power to conceive what divine scorn and wrath he will confront who has spread over half a continent, poverty, famine, disease, slavery and death."

Those are puissant words, and right well do they sound in an age of soft phrases and honeyed drippings. But is William Hohenzollern to face Almighty God in solitary shame and terror? Upon him alone are the scorn and

wrath of an outraged Deity to be poured out? What of the whited sepulchers, by no means all "made in Germany," who are beautiful without but within are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness? And the profiteers who, even though they buy Liberty Bonds and sing "The Star Spangled Banner" with tearful eyes, justify Samuel Johnson's blistering affirmation that "patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel"? And the impure, who would insult a holy God by attempting to offer Him physical courage in place of a clean heart? And the apostles of compromise, between whose private life and business practices is a "great gulf fixed"? And the horde of selfish and indifferent who, in the presence of the unending conflict between the forces of righteousness and forces of evil, turn a deaf ear to the cry, "Come up to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty"? Is it true that God will not be too hard on them or that the upward thrust of a Universal Goodness will bring them at last to blessedness and perfection, while, cowering under the fury of an indignant Creator, William II. suffers the punishment he so richly deserves?

The case may be summed up in a sentence, "When thy judgments are on the earth, then shall its inhabitants learn righteousness." The part of Dr. Abbott's philippic which needs to be burned into the consciousness of the race is "as we all must pass." When men know clearly and feel keenly that "God cannot be an enswathing kiss without also being a consuming fire"; that His love is ethical and inexorably exacting; that His insistent demand is "for a careful ordering of the present life as antecedent to and determinant of future destiny"; then, and then only, shall we have a conception of the Divine character consistent with the inspired word of His revelation, justified by psychology and historical experience, and provocative of holy living and holy dying. A Christian social order or a widespread spiritual quickening of the race without a clear, Christian conception of God is a moral impossibility.