

Divine Immanence and Christian Experience.

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RECENT controversies have conspired with certain tendencies of modern thought to concentrate attention on what is called the immanence of God. This conception is regarded by many as the means by which the doctrines of Christianity are to be reconciled with the monistic philosophy which is now fashionable. The idea is not new, for in the early centuries, in the schools of Alexandria, when Christian faith came into contact with Greek thought, a similar process of reconciliation took place by means of this very conception. The Logos doctrine which is found in the Gospel of St. John became the foundation of a great theology, in which the methods of Greek philosophy were applied to the systematic interpretation of the facts of the Christian revelation.

It must be granted that this conception of God as immanent must find a place in every system of theology which aims at completeness. Certain aspects of the Divine activity as revealed in Nature, and certain elements in the religious experience of mankind, as manifested in Scripture and in human history, unquestionably imply it. But are we justified in regarding this conception as the main principle of our theology?

To clear our minds, let us ask, What exactly do we mean by the Divine immanence? We think of God as Creator, maker of heaven and earth. What do we mean by this? Only by help of the things which come within our ken can we form an idea to represent those which lie beyond. We know of man as a maker. We think of him as standing above and apart from the things he has made. He transcends them. So we think of God as the Eternal Creator of the universe, who, just because He is the Creator, transcends all that He has made. Here is the idea of transcendence. Contrasted with it is the idea of the Divine Being as the Spirit which dwells in the universe as the soul of a man dwells in his body. The world, which our eyes

can see and our hands touch, is the outward manifestation of an inward life, a universal soul or spirit, which is God. Here is the idea of immanence.

When thus presented, the two ideas seem to stand in hopeless antagonism. The believer in the transcendence of Deity regards the believer in immanence as a pantheist, the latter regards the former as a crude and unphilosophical thinker, to whom Creation is like the making of tables and chairs.

Further consideration shows that Holy Scripture speaks of God as the Eternal Father, who stands above and apart from the universe, and also of the Son, who is the Logos, the Light of the world, "the Light that lighteth every man," who "was in the world," a world which "was made through Him," who "became flesh and dwelt among us," who still, though exalted to the right hand of God, bears our human nature. In the distinction of the Divine Persons we find a means of bringing together the two great conceptions.

Modern philosophy has opened up a new way of approaching the question. That great analysis of experience which we owe in the main to Berkeley, Kant, and Hegel has taught us the priority of consciousness. We know that there is nothing of which we are, or can be, aware, which is independent of consciousness. If this is true of the world as known to us, it is also, we must conclude, true of the world apart from our knowledge—unless, indeed, the world apart from us be totally unlike the world as we know it; and this there is no reason to believe. Thus we gain the conception of a great universal consciousness on which all that exists depends.

Side by side with this philosophical view of the universe, there has emerged a scientific view which regards the history of Creation as a continuous evolution. The unity of nature is the chief idea here. From the simplest beginnings up to the most complex developments, from star-mist to civilization, the universal process is under the guidance of some unifying principle. How inevitable that this principle should be identified with the universal consciousness to which philosophic thought testifies! Here is

the Divine Immanence most gloriously revealed! Here we find the grandest results of science in harmony with the profoundest convictions of religion! God is the Spirit which guides the universal process, bringing order out of confusion, realizing Himself. Not dwelling apart in lonely isolation, but living in the world, in its physical processes, in its organic developments, in the higher sphere of human and social existence. Everything we can know is, therefore, according to its due place and degree, a manifestation of God. We discern His mind in the order of Creation, we gain a still deeper knowledge of His nature in our own hearts, in conscience, in love. The highest things we know are, in the light of this doctrine, seen to be the clearest and best revelations of God. It is, therefore, no unscientific or unphilosophic attitude of mind to find the supreme revelation in Jesus Christ. The best and greatest among men is clearly the brightest image of the invisible God.

The grandeur, the simplicity, and the usefulness of this line of thought, in view of the needs of the present day, cannot be over-rated. To attack it as false, because the "New Theology" considers it sufficient, is surely a mistake. It seems to the writer that the best possible way to gain a just estimate of its value is to consider it in relation to Christian and human experience.

The very first element in this experience, which we must consider, is the life and teaching of our Lord. That we can find much in the Fourth Gospel and in the utterances of our Lord as recorded in that Gospel which can be shown to be in harmony with this conception of Divine immanence—or, at least, not discordant with it—is quite clear. But to assert that this idea is characteristic of our Lord's teaching and attitude towards God, or, to go further and to assert that this idea fully explains that teaching and attitude, is surely impossible. While it is true that spiritual inwardness is ever a mark of His religious and ethical teaching, our Lord does not habitually point to the God within; He points to the Father above. "Your heavenly Father" is the name by which He taught His disciples to think of God. "Our Father which art in heaven" is the

familiar address which bids us ever look upward. The constantly repeated "in heaven," which we find connected with the thought of God, is evidently intended to lift our minds above this world to a higher order of being to which God essentially belongs. It is the simplest possible way of presenting to the unphilosophical worshipper the glorious transcendence of deity. Heaven is "the throne of God," earth, this lower order of things, "the footstool of His feet" (Matt. v. 35). Heaven is the world of the eternal, the incorruptible, "where neither moth nor rust doth consume, and where thieves do not break through nor steal." Even the very idea of fatherhood as applied to God, and presented by our Lord, is expressive of the Divine transcendence. It teaches us, indeed, to think of God as the source of our being, but also as one who is ever watching over His children, providing for and guarding them with loving care, who is able to control the course of this world for their good. Overruling Providence, rather than indwelling, describes the relation of God to Nature, which is suggested by this teaching. God is revealed to us as essentially a Higher Power, One who, because He is above all that belongs to the discords of the world, and because He is a loving Father, not an angry Tyrant, may be trusted to bring good out of the evil. And this is why the revelation of the Father, which has been made to us in Jesus Christ is, and ever has been, satisfying to the needs of the heart. Amid all the cares and sorrows, the confusions and disasters, of this life, we have need of the faith that over all there is an Infinite and Loving Power in whom we can trust.

If we were compelled to stop short at the conception of God as an indwelling Spirit realizing Himself in all the processes of Nature and of history, it is hard to see how the thought of God could be a source of any sure confidence as regards the present or hope for the future. While very impressive to the imagination and stimulating to the intelligence, this conception leaves the heart cold. Indeed, we may go so far as to say that its tendency is to fill the heart with a vague sense of mystery and dread. It is not at all clear that Nature and life, apart from

Christ's revelation of the Father, do not convey the impression of a passionless disregard of suffering, both animal and human, with a view to some end which is for us altogether out of sight and wholly disconnected with our individual, or even racial, welfare. We need a great faith in a higher order of things, a higher world, a higher power, a higher love, if we are to have confidence that the discords of this finite life shall ultimately be merged in the harmonies of the eternal. We need, that is, to believe, in the transcendence as well as in the immanence of God.

It would be profitable and interesting to pursue this leading thought through our Lord's teaching in all its elements, and through the teaching of the New Testament generally, and it would certainly be found that, while the doctrine of immanence seems to be implied in many passages, especially of St. John and St. Paul, the doctrine of transcendence is clear and unmistakable and is everywhere characteristic. In the short space of this article all that can be done is to show that this fact is no mere result of a naive and childlike faith applying the simple language of our common life to the things of the spirit without question as to its philosophic fitness. We are here face to face with a distinction which goes down to the very foundations of our human and religious experience.

There is one fact which, in many shapes, renders futile all endeavour to reduce our thoughts concerning the great universe in which we live to a single consistent system, a fact which, more than all others that we know, forces us to recognize an ultimate mystery in things. That fact is the existence of the individual soul. Modern philosophy, in its effort to understand the contents and implications of our consciousness, has been led to a view of the self, or ego, which forms its chief distinction as compared with the philosophy of antiquity. For thinkers in our time, the self stands revealed with a clearness unknown in former ages. It is implied in all knowledge. It is the presupposition of our consciousness.

There is a suspicion spreading widely just now that the dis-

covery of the subliminal consciousness must modify the view of the self which has just been mentioned, that the boundaries of the individual seem to be melting away, and that we shall find that there is no such distinctness of self from self as we were inclined to imagine. But surely it is absurd to deny a fact because we find it is greater and more complex than we thought. The reality of the self is not rendered doubtful because we have discovered that it touches the universe at more points than those which we call our senses.

All that modern philosophy has done in this connexion is but to interpret to thought that doctrine of the infinite value of the individual soul which Christ gave to the world. In the practical sphere this doctrine becomes the recognition of personal responsibility. There is that in each one of us which stands alone against the world, alone when face to face with God. In every individual is a source of spontaneity. Here is the truth which, with reference to our decisions and actions, we call free will. Here is the basis of our moral nature, the principle which makes goodness a reality and sin a possibility. Man is not a mere part of Nature, not a link in a chain of physical causes; he is, within the limits which belong to his position, a free spirit made in the image of God. It is, of course, quite possible to produce very powerful arguments to prove that, in thinking of himself in this way, man is deluding himself; but it is not possible to do so and preserve anything which can be called either morality or religion.

Historically, it was the urgency of the problems which arose out of this great truth which taught the Church the insufficiency of the conception of immanence. In the Alexandrian Theology that conception was supreme. The Augustinian Theology gave itself to the consideration of the questions of free will, sin, forgiveness, atonement, and was compelled to think of God as transcendent. There are those who regard this whole theology as a huge mistake, but they forget that it was inevitable. They fail to realize that it was only dealing, to the best of its ability, with the great central problem presented

by our moral being in its relation to God. They also ignore the fact that that problem exists to-day, and that the time will come when our modern theology must be prepared to face it afresh. For the moment, owing to physical science and its endeavour to unify our knowledge about the material universe, the cosmological aspect of theology seems the most pressing, and therefore we have turned back to the idea of immanence. But the greater and more intensely human problem will begin to press again, and, once again, we shall find the necessity of remembering that God is transcendent as well as immanent.

And this consideration enables us to approach that higher way of regarding the idea of transcendence after which we have been feeling all along. While we think of the universe as a continuous chain of causes and effects, pervaded throughout by some one great principle of organization, and combine with this thought the idea of consciousness as the underlying truth of all that we know as existence, we can understand that belief in a great Immanent Spirit should seem the loftiest of all possible creeds. Compared with it, the idea of a Maker of things seems almost childish. But when we come to realize that the universe is no such simple matter as many of our contemporaries seem to think, that, besides the physical order of cause and effect, it contains a vast multitude of centres of consciousness, spiritual beings possessed of some degree of independence, with will and moral faculty, capable of goodness and of evil, each, from its own point of view, a world in itself, we feel that the ultimate truth needs some further expression if it is to be expressed at all. How to attempt any expression is a question which may well make us pause. We can, however, see that the mere idea of personality, or consciousness as we know it in ourselves, is not adequate. Every human spirit may be said to be immanent in its own experience. It is because of this that we are able to think of the Infinite Spirit as immanent in Nature. But our knowledge of ourselves gives us no power to imagine a spirit capable of giving being, not merely to a world of phenomena, but to a world of persons. Here is something which transcends,

not only Nature as we know it, but Spirit as we know it. There must be an ultimate unity, the final truth of all things, the Nature of God : so we are compelled to believe. Such a unity must comprehend all that, to our minds, stands apart as irreconcilable, the opposition of mind to mind, of will to will. In spirit, as we find it in ourselves, resides no such unifying quality. Therefore we must think of the Nature of God as one which transcends personality as it exists in us.

That Christian theology was led to hold a doctrine of God which involves such a transcendence as this is certainly a fact worthy of our consideration in view of the controversies of the present time. The doctrine of the Trinity is essentially a doctrine of transcendence in the highest sense, for it maintains that, in His innermost Being, God transcends, not merely our nature, but all that our minds can conceive. That mutual exclusiveness of person with person, which prevails for us, does not exist for Him as He is in His ultimate unity. All we can say of that unity is that it is a unity which transcends personality.

When our thought seeks to approach these sublimest heights of theological speculation, we seem to have left behind all that belongs to the practical side of our religious life. Yet a little consideration should convince us that this is not so. The doctrine of the Trinity guards the most precious of all truths, the unity of the Godhead and the deity of Christ. It also guards—though we seldom realize the fact—our great heritage of personal dignity and freedom. Its meaning, from the human point of view, is that man is neither sunk, as a mere thing, in the world of physical causes, nor is his personality merged in the personality of God. He has his place as a created spirit between God above and Nature below. He possesses freedom because he is neither subject to the necessity which binds the material order, nor is his conscious and volitional life a mere aspect of the life of God. He is capable of goodness and of evil, because he possesses that freedom which is a trust committed to him by God above him and for which he must give account. In human experience morality has always this reference to a larger order

in which man must take his place. Thus the great problem of sin and forgiveness arises.

Thinkers who make the immanence of God the corner-stone of their theology are always inclined to minimize or explain away the fact of sin. This is inevitable, for if the life of man be but a moment or aspect of the life of God, there is, in truth, no place for sin, nor, indeed, for individual freedom. Such teaching is simply untrue to human experience. It forgets that, if it is to be in any sense a theology, it must deal with the data of religion, and not with those of physics merely. And on this subject of sin, responsibility, and the need of forgiveness, the voice of religious experience speaks with no uncertainty.

If the transcendence of God is implied in the possibility of sin, it is also implied in the possibility of forgiveness. In His ultimate nature God is one; He is the great final unifying principle. But sin is, from our human point of view, an opposition of man to God which can by no possibility be overcome. It is an injury inflicted which no amount of subsequent good can repair. Is forgiveness, then, impossible? So it would seem, so far as the order of Nature and of the world in which we live is concerned. But we believe in a transcendent God, a God to whom the things impossible with men are possible, a God who is essentially an "atoning" God; for He is the ultimate unity who transcends all the discords and oppositions of this finite world. The atonement, impossible for us, can be undertaken and accomplished by Him.

Surely we have seen reason to believe that, even when viewed in relation to modern thought, there is need of the idea of the Divine transcendence as well as of the Divine immanence if we are to take account of the facts of human and Christian experience.

