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Divine Personality.[1]

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I. Our central question will be, not so much, Is God a person? as, Is God personal?

There was a time, I suppose, in all our lives when we should have thought it a strange question, Is God a person? and a stranger and almost meaningless question, Is God personal? Why, we should have answered, What else can God be than a person? And there would have leapt to our vision the great figure, whether gracious or grim, which our childish imagination had conceived as Divine—the figure—would it not have been?—of some magnified man, dwelling in the heavens, whose lineaments may have owed much to the mediæval painters on whose work it had been our fortune to gaze; to Fra Filippo Lippi, perhaps, whose canvas depicts, above the winsome figure of the young Mother kneeling in adoration before the Babe, the gracious humanlike figure of the Father in heaven, resplendent among the stars, His hands raised in benediction.

But as the years passed over us, our childish visions lost their edge and brightness. An obscuring veil seemed to interpose between us and the heavenly world. We came to recognize that the things of heaven must be other than we had imagined, and in particular that we might no longer think of God as possessed of 'body, parts, and passions,' like a human person; that indeed He must be vastly other than one of ourselves.

Then a time may have come when we became sensitive, perhaps unduly sensitive, to the charge of being anthropomorphic in thought, of making God in our own image, and we began to ask ourselves whether God might actually be regarded as a person, or even as in any sense personal. The result was, that our fellowship with Him suffered diminution and loss.

For consider what is implied for the religious man in the thought of God as personal. Is it not this? That God is a Being with whom man may enter into personal relations; which is to say, with whom he may hold communion or fellowship. God may respond to the heart that seeks Him, as the answering echo is awakened with the striking of the musical chord.

The God of the philosopher is not a personal God, in this rich intimate sense at any rate. Notably is it so in the classical instance of the Aristotelian Deity. The God of Aristotle does not 'measure up,' as an American theologian phrases it, to what religion means by Divine personality. He is the eternal Thinker, eternally wrapped in self-contemplation; the unmoved Mover upon whom all the movement in the world depends, who is yet oblivious to the world's existence. Obviously man can have no communion or fellowship with such a God, no sort of personal relationship with Him at all; and, accordingly, such a God is not truly personal, according to the measure of religious experience.

II. Let these introductory words lead us to ask, How may we approach the question of God's nature and being? As already hinted, it may be approached from the side of religion or from the side of philosophy. And here a notable difference comes to light. The religious man begins with the idea of God, although he may have to revise his conception in the course of experience. The philosopher, as such, ends with the idea of God, if he ever reaches God at all. For the God of religion is immediately known, usually as a being with whom a man may hold converse; whereas the God of philosophy, if known at all, is known only mediately, through a process of reflection, as the ultimate ground of the universe, the unifying principle of all things.

While this is said, and a distinction thus made between the nature of religion and that of philosophy, it should be observed that religion is not without the philosophical interest. Indeed, it would appear that in all spontaneous forms of religion the philosophical interest is already present. Unless the God of religion is not only the higher power with whom the soul may have fellowship, but also the higher power revealed in Nature and history, belief in Him is apt to diminish in vigour and vitality.

Even in primitive religion the philosophical interest appears to be found. The deity or deities whom the savage worships are thought to count for something in the external universe. The notion of the Divine serves at once to sustain the soul, and to explain certain outward existences and events.

It is a valid objection to the group theory of

[1] The opening Lecture of the Faculty of Theology and Trinity College, delivered at Trinity College, Glasgow, on 8th October 1935.

religion, so favoured in the French school of anthropology, that to represent the earliest Divinity as the collective soul of the clan is to ignore the interest which religion appears to possess in the explanation of things. The basis of religion cannot be merely the group-consciousness, and the origin of religion merely the common emotion awakened at tribal festivities, through the ritual dance and other actions. As Clement Webb says: 'The notion of the Divine is no mere mirage of social facts; it is an implicit theory of the universe.' Or, as it may be technically expressed, religion possesses an essentially cosmological character. In the beginnings of religion, no doubt, the god or godling controls only the immediate environment, but even so he is already invested with cosmological meaning.

It is part of the secret of the permanence of Christianity that it enshrines the philosophical interest within its religious formulations. Through its early contact with Greek thought it actually fashioned a chain of identity between the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ and the ultimate principle of the universe.

III. But now let us consider our central question, Is God personal? We may approach it, as we have seen, from the sides both of religion and of philosophy. Take it first from the side of philosophy. Does philosophy attain to the idea of God as personal?

There are some philosophies, agnostic and positivist, that renounce the quest of the Ultimate as one beyond our ken. There are others whose Ultimates are non-personal or sub-personal. A materialistic philosophy cannot entertain the notion of Divine personality, for its God is matter; nor a mechanistic philosophy, for its God is force or energy; nor a vitalistic philosophy, for its God is the principle of life. Even idealistic philosophies, wherein the Ultimate or Absolute is represented as ideal or spiritual in quality, do not necessarily lead to the conception of God as personal.

There are, however, certain idealistic philosophies which are not only compatible with the idea of God as personal, but even claim to establish the reasonableness of that idea. Such, for example, are the theistic humanisms or personalisms which have been in recent vogue among us. They agree in affirming that the principle of the human analogy offers the best and truest clue to the explanation or interpretation of the universe. We should interpret the universe, it is said, by means of the highest category we know, and the highest we know is human personality.

The late Dr. George Galloway, known far beyond our Church for his distinguished work in philosophy of religion, was an exponent of such a system of humanistic or personalistic theism. If, as he said, we are to reach the ground or sufficient reason of the world, we should advance an explanation which does justice to the higher elements in it as well as the lower. It is futile, for instance, to put forward an Ultimate Ground which is relevant merely to the conception of Nature as a mechanical system, but neither explains, nor leaves room for, the emergence within the system of human personality, of spirits self-conscious, reflective, and free. He himself expounds a speculative theory of the universe, owing much to Leibniz, Lotze, and James Ward, and to the new emphasis upon the will in psychology, in which God, the ultimate ground and unifying principle of factual experience, is discovered to be a Transcendent Self-Conscious Will.

It is only, however, when the philosophical or metaphysical inquiry is supplemented by the ethico-religious, only when both factual experience and value-experience are combined together, that the God of theistic faith appears. To Intelligence and Will Goodness is then added, and God is seen to be the Personal Spirit on whom the whole realm of facts and values depends.

Dr. Galloway's is a bold effort in construction, but like similar constructive efforts, it yields at the best a pale reflection of Deity, and not the soul-renewing radiance experienced in the religious relationship.

IV. Turn now to the consideration of our question on the religious side. Philosophy, as we have seen, speaks with an uncertain voice, and gives us at the most an abstract view of Divine personality, so that we seem ready to perceive the justice of Brunner's remark: 'It is not by choice but by necessity that no metaphysician really knows God as personal.' What, then, is the testimony of religious experience?

At the outset we encounter the strange fact that there may be religion without God. The religion of the Buddha was without God, although its atheism was not perpetuated in the Buddhist religion, in which the Buddha himself was eventually raised to Divine honours. And in our own day we hear of sociological religions—the religion of Communism, for example—that dispense with God; whose pedigree, like that of the group theory already mentioned, may be traced to the influence of Auguste Comte and the positivist worship of Humanity.

But religion without God is so rare a thing that it need not further delay our inquiry as to the place of Divine personality in religious experience.

Undoubtedly there are religions of the East, especially of India, which, as being associated with pantheistic philosophies have no place, theologically speaking, for the idea of Divine personality. But it should be observed that in such cases theology and ritual practice do not go together, and God is worshipped as though He were a person, whether under one name or many.

Undoubtedly, also, there are religious experiences of the individual, often of a mystical kind, to which the idea of Divine personality is not, strictly speaking, apposite. The consciousness of the soul of its own nothingness in face of the immensity of Being has been cited as an instance in point. That is a religious experience, but it is not invariably accompanied by a sense of personal fellowship with the Divine.

None the less, the idea of God as personal appears to enter into the normal religious experience of individuals, in our Western world at least. Here is a typical testimony, which William James published a generation ago: 'I remember the night, and almost the very spot on the hilltop, where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer. It was deep calling unto deep —the deep that my own struggle had opened up within being answered by the unfathomable deep without reaching beyond the stars. I stood alone with Him who had made me, and . . . felt the perfect unison of my spirit with His.'

When we turn from individual experience to collective experience, as it is embodied in religions which have reached the monotheistic stage, we discover that the answer to our question, Is God personal?, which after all is properly set only at the monotheistic stage, is unequivocally, yes.

It is said that in the Mohammedan religion—one type of monotheism—the sense of the Divine love and goodness is somewhat deficient, and that as a consequence the relation between Allah and his worshipper tends to be formal and external; yet it is undeniably a personal relation.

In the religion of Israel—another type of monotheism—the relation between Jehovah and His worshipper is close and intimate and richly personal. I have never forgotten Mr. Prothero's happy introduction to his book on *The Psalms in Human Life*: 'Above the couch of David, according to Rabbinical tradition, there hung a harp. The midnight breeze, as it rippled over the strings, made such music that the poet-king was constrained to rise from his bed, and, till the dawn flushed the eastern skies, he wedded words to the strains. The poetry of that tradition is condensed in the saying that the Book of Psalms contains the whole music of the heart of man, swept by the hand of his Maker.'

But the deepest and most personal relationship of all is surely that of the Christian believer to his God. It is expressed through the great spiritual symbols of fatherhood and sonship: 'Now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be.' And in the Christian faith the thought of the Father in heaven is inseparably associated with that of the Son in whom He is personally revealed: he that hath seen the Son hath seen the Father also.

'There in that redeeming love,' says a theologian of our Scottish Church, 'which has touched and blessed us in Christ . . . is the crucial fact constraining us to say that God is personal.'

Notice at this point that to say that God may be thought of as personal in nature or being is not of necessity to say that God is a person. That may or may not be a true way of speaking. It would depend in large measure on what we include under personality. And it should be recalled that orthodox Christian doctrine does not speak of God as a person, a solitary person, but as a unitary Being consisting of three 'persons.' But the three 'persons' are not persons in the clear-cut modern sense, and no formulation of the mysterious dogma of the Trinity need be inconsistent with the fundamental faith of the Christian religion that God is a personal Being.

V. But how has this position of the Christian and other monotheistic religions been received by those who refuse to ascribe personality to God? The answer is, it has been received with the reproach of anthropomorphism, of making God in man's image.

It is a reproach to which, as I said at the outset, the religious man is apt, perhaps, to become needlessly sensitive. He should remind himself that there is a lower and a higher anthropomorphism. That of the childish mind, which recapitulates the crude and naïve conceptions of the race, need not be defended. But the higher anthropomorphism appears worthy of defence, even as already seen on philosophical grounds. By all means let us rid our minds of crude and naïve conceptions of Deity, but let us hesitate greatly before abandoning the human analogy. Once abandon it, and we are launched upon a sea of doubt and perplexity. Even our scientific terms, as Dr. Tennant reminds us, take their colour from human experience, and why should not our religious terms also?

Perhaps the chief specific objection, under the general charge of anthropomorphism, to the concept of Divine personality, has been the psychological objection, that personality is a finite quality and therefore inapplicable to God. 'A person,' said Strauss in an oft-quoted reference, 'must have over against it a not-self through collision with which it comes to self-consciousness—a foil to provoke it, as it were, into independent being, just as the eye must be confronted by luminous objects, other than itself, if it is to see.' Hence God, so the objection runs, who can have nothing over against Him, is not a person. On this view personality is regarded as not accidentally but essentially finite, and, accordingly, to attribute personality to God is to be guilty of a false anthropomorphism.

Those who take this view sometimes speak of God as suprapersonal, and the phrase may not be inappropriate. If it means that God's consciousness and will are of a higher type than ours, that is only what is declared by all theists who employ the human analogy. 'The name "person,"' said Thomas Aquinas, 'is fittingly applied to God; not, however, as it is applied to ourselves, but in a more excellent way (*via eminentiae*).' That is, if we are wise and good and powerful, then God must be infinitely wise and good and powerful. There is a likelihood, however, that if we cherish the phrase 'suprapersonal' it will sooner or later come to spell for us, as for pantheists, 'impersonal.' It was so for Strauss, and it has tended to be so in Hegelian thought generally.

But personality may be regarded as not essentially but only accidentally finite. As Lotze said in his famous discussion of this point, finiteness is a limitation of personality, hindering it from reaching completeness. A self does not need to have a not-self over against it in order to exist and develop, to be provoked into independent being. It possesses an immediate awareness or consciousness of itself, which it is able to contrast with its own changing states. Thus, according to Lotze, there are two things in personality, the permanent core of selfhood and the changing states of thought and feeling and will.

It is an old notion this of a real core of personal being, a substantive soul, but it has fallen out of favour in much modern thought. Our states or experiences have us, it is said; we do not have our states. It has, however, been recently revived among us, if in new forms, by writers who abide by the conviction that the self cannot be reduced to a series of states or experiences, that it contains at its very centre a factor which defies the analyst. In sympathy with this view, the present Dean of St. Paul's has suggested that the inner core of selfhood, the central and essential self, of which Lotze spoke, is nothing more nor less than activity, which is by its very nature beyond the grasp of the analytical intellect. Accordingly, he advances what may be called an 'activist' view of the self. In much current psychology the self is built up out of prior states; in this view the self is continually creative. If we have no intuition or immediate awareness of the self as 'substance,' we have—it is claimed—an intuition of the self as activity, as 'the profound self which is the subject of knowledge, the bearer of feeling and the agent in willing.'

Upon this basis, which admits of the thought of personality as possibly non-finite, Dr. Matthews proceeds to justify the conception of the personality of God. But I shall not venture further with him upon ground which is as unfamiliar to me as to many of you. Whatever be the true nature of personality, we may reasonably contend that finiteness does not belong to its essence. Personality is not determined by the contrast, invariably present in personality as known to us, between self and not-self.

Instead, then, of speaking of God as suprapersonal, and perhaps discovering that suprapersonal has come to mean for us impersonal, let us rather speak of Him as completely or perfectly personal.

Here let me remark that I should not be so hesitant as a recent upholder of Divine personality, Dr. Miall Edwards, of accepting Rudolf Otto's pictorial and suggestive words: 'Assuredly God is for us "Thou" and a Person. But this Personal character is that side of His nature which is turned manward—it is like a "Cape of Good Hope" jutting out from a mountain range which, as it recedes, is lost to view in the "tenebrae eternae"—only to be expressed by the suspension of speech and the inspiration of sacred song.'

No doubt personality can never be for us an exact counterpart of the Divine nature; it remains at the best a high and significant symbol. This, as we have remarked, Thomas Aquinas freely recognized; but it has always been implied in Hebrew and Christian thought. Says the author of Job, 'Canst thou by searching find out God?' and the original words are better rendered, 'Canst thou find out the immensity of God?' Says Jesus, 'If ye . . ., being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children; how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?' 'How much more?'—the *via eminentiae*, the more

excellent way, in which the name 'person' is fittingly applied to God.

VI. In conclusion, let me offer two words of exhortation. The first is, let us hold to the belief in God as personal. We can hardly let it go without grave consequences. We might still be able to pursue the long highways of the philosophic quest, or to follow the lovely winding paths of mystical feeling, but with the loss of this belief much else would certainly be lost, and our spiritual life greatly impoverished. If, as St. Paul says, faith, hope, and love are the things that abide, then think what our faith would be were it not faith in a living and personal God: would it be the victory that overcometh the world? Or what our hope would be were it not hope in a living and personal God: would it be a hope full of immortality? Or what our love would be were it not, in the first instance, love towards a living and personal God, who first loved us and gave Himself for us: would it be the same inspiration to neighbourly service and deeds of charity?

This, then, is the first word of exhortation—hold to the belief in God as personal; and the second is—fear not to express that belief in human terms. If we are to speak of God at all, we can use no worthier language than that of the human analogy. If we are to speak *to* God at all, we need not weigh our words with the scrupulosity of the metaphysical purist. Anthropomorphism is the very life-blood of devotion, which turns to figure and symbol as the flower to the sunlight.

The prophets and psalmists of Israel, with all their insight into the deep things of God, did not hesitate to take over even the naïve language of the theological and devotional tradition and make it serve the purposes of a pure ethical monotheism. And they have left a rich and lasting heritage to Judaism and Christianity. They knew well they were not making God as 'one of ourselves' when in words such as the following they spoke of the Immortal and Invisible: 'When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy *fingers*'; 'Behold, the Lord's *hand* is not shortened, that it cannot save'; 'Underneath are the everlasting *arms*'; 'The *eyes* of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his *ears* are open unto their cry.'

Such anthropomorphic expressions are far from being limitations in the witness borne unto God by psalmist and prophet. Through image and emblem, picture and symbol, the Biblical writers actually nourish and strengthen the devotional life within us: enabling us to see a Divine Face looking upon us from the sacred page, and to hear a Divine Voice calling us by name; lifting up our eyes to the eternal hills whence cometh our help, pointing us to the valleys of green pastures and still waters where Divine comfort may be found, preparing us in mind and heart to behold the glory of God as it was manifested in the face of Jesus Christ; and thus conserving for us the great truth which may perhaps reward the philosopher's search, and which the theologian may perhaps enshrine within his formulas, but which is ineffably precious to the religious soul, all the world over, that the great Being with whom the soul enjoys communion and fellowship, whatever else He may be in His unfathomable nature, is at least personal.

Experiments in Christian Service.

IV. Practical Christianity and the Law-breaker.

By Arthur R. L. Gardner, London.

1. Ever since the days of Queen Elizabeth—to go back no further—it has been practical Christianity (as defined by the Church of England's 37th article) for the State 'to restrain with the civil sword the stubborn and evil doers' and 'to punish Christian men with death for heinous and grievous offences.'

It has likewise been practical Christianity for the faithful churchgoer to acquiesce in the supplication (in the prayer for the whole state of Christ's Church militant here in earth) that the King's 'whole council and all that are put in authority under him, may truly and indifferently minister justice to the punishment of wickedness and vice and to the maintenance of true religion and virtue.' There has, in fact, been no departure in principle from the