



INTERDENOMINATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CENTER

SENIOR ESSAY

A CONCEPT OF GOD IN HISTORY,
"(A Theological Student's
Proposition on God)

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the period of my seminary training, I have tried to understand the Christian Faith and it's concept of God. I have a desire to accept the Christian Faith only on the ground of my personal belief. Therefore I have studied and come to reasonably understand the Christian concept of God. However, the findings seem to be formulated for the convenience of the Christian, rather than on an exclusive truth in existence prior to this formulation.

I am disturbed by the "exclusiveness" in the claims of the Christian Faith. I can only see that a concept of God which does what it proposes it can for it's people is true. I find however, that I arrive at much the same place as does the Christian, which for my convenience seems to be more reasonable and less exclusive.

The reader should know that this paper shall endeavor to formulate a proposition, not to rob Christianity, but to assert in some form the personal findings which are the students over against Christianity.

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I am grateful to Dr. Melvin Watson, for attempting to assist me in efforts that I "alone" am able to envisage.

THE QUEST OF THE AGES

Clear ideas are necessary to an intelligent discussion and a discussion in a systematic manner can only give valid conclusions. It seems as a rule the things that we speak or refer to the most we commonly understand, at least we propose to have an understanding compatible with the groups. However, I think on the contrary the thing that we think we are most familiar are the things which would be most difficult to interpret or explain. The ideas of God and the ideas of religion are all too often proven examples of this idea, though most of us study both in some manner during a week, or profess the both religiously.

Throughout History man has exemplified a quest for both religion and a God of some kind. The quest for these has been a natural outgrowth of his interaction with the world about him, his fellowman, the world within a universal system and as a result of his seeking to understand himself. These basic questions seem to be only satisfactorily answered

and the search for a "larger" truth makes itself prominent in every age. It is interesting that the "present concept" as it prevails over a society, does not propose his "articles of faith", this is then a corporate venture by men about God.

In my life, I hear lecture, read books, and reckon with the "articles of faith" as they prevail for this day, and there seems to be little room for the realm of reason except by Faith. I have often turned to the Scriptures that claim to provided the clue, if not the answer, to the great questions about man, his world and his relationship to a spiritual entity--God. Many are pacified by the proposals in the Scriptures; I find on the otherhand, a new problem in this religious drama--a time or a place to apply the mind.

There are perhaps two points of view from which these two quests might be discussed--"the subjective and the objective, or religion conceived through man and religion in relation to man."¹ I am inclined to follow the subjective view, or the more philosophical but I cannot accept the one, and discredit the other.

¹
A.M. Fairbairn, Religion In History And In Modern Life. (New York: E.R. Herrick & Comp., 1932) p. 78.



I should think only a matter of where I choose to begin my inquiry would best indicate which I should use. However, I am not yielding one to the other, they must inevitably complement each other. "Any theory that leaves a division in a man's own soul is false. If religion be a mere matter of faith, unable to bear the light of reason, it is untrue to the nature the Creator gave man." To resolve any tension which might arise in this investigation, I shall use the subjective approach to begin, for often have I found it difficult to give heed to the Christian Church when it appeals to me saying, "draw near with faith".²

In conclusion of the fact of a "quest of all ages" and in conjunction with our quest in this work I should like to affirm the condition of the subjective world out of which this quest comes along with the "quest of the ages".

"There are two fundamental urges of human life that all recognize: hunger and love. It is hunger that has forced man to toil, that has sharpened invention, driven to thought and study, led to cooperation with his fellows, and has been the mainspring of war down to our own day. It is love that has built families and

² The Ritual--The Lord's Supper or Holy Communion of The Methodist Church.

communities, states and nations. Without hunger the individual could not survive and without love the race would perish."

"Is religion, then, a third instinct to be placed by the side of these?there are three sides to our human life. There is the physical which binds us to earth, the social that binds us to our fellows, and this third which takes in the others but goes beyond them."³

³ Harris Franklin Rall, The Meaning Of God.
(Nashville, Tennessee: Cokesbury Press) p. 5

THESE ALSO CONCEIVE

"Whatever else the word God may mean, it is a term used to designate that Something upon which human life is most dependent for its security, welfare and abundance."⁴ Wieman, feels that in conjunction with this idea, the minimum meaning of the God concept is that Something of supreme value for all human living. As a brief analysis will probably indicate, we shall look momentarily at some of the concepts of God in human minds.

Stephen Neill, writing on the Christian God, makes a very valuable point concerning the value of God in the affairs of men. He suggest that men have found it, "more to their advantage to attempt to deal with a God than without one."⁵

The validity in Mr. Neill's proposition can be seen by the fact of many religions from primitive to present day.

⁴ Henry Nelson Wieman, Religious Experience And Scientific Method. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1926) p. 9

⁵ Stephen C. Neill, The Christians God (New York: Stratford Press, 1955) p. 10.

The primitive concept of God was one of animism. The word mana is important in a consideration of the primitive concept. Mana in primitive cultures was a force, not a vitalistic force, but a kind of supernatural attribute of persons and things. Man is, therefore, the work of the unusual when the unusual is not the work of the spirits; Such things as skill, aptitudes healing and warring are classified as mana, suggested Neill. The condition of persons and things which transcend the natural might then be considered mana.

"Animism and mana are attributes of the subjective aspects of supernaturalism. Religion and magic are concepts based upon the ways in which man behaves in relation to the supernatural forces in which he believes."⁶

Not all religions have started out with a belief in a God. "Buddhism started out as a religion without a God. In Ceylon and Burma, there are many who still hold to the teachings of Buddha, five centuries before Christ. Buddha promised to set

⁶ Ibid., 11

men free through knowledge. Since knowledge does not prove to be enough, gods, have been brought back into a religion which began by denying that any gods exist."⁷

Stepehn Neill, continues saying the Communist makes a god of the future. He notes, "they work and plan for the future with a devotion much greater than that of many religious people to their religion."⁸

Before we consider moving forward in this discussion, I should like to acknowledge the "atheist". For this purpose suffice it to be said in the words of Montesquieu, "the pious man and the atheist always talk of religion; the one of what he loves and the other of what he fears. I consider the elements of love and fear to be fundamental in the area of religion.

But there is the testimony of the "worlds great religions" which might be added. But I think our knowledge of them is perhaps more available than those mentioned in this section already. Thus, we should only note from the preceding

⁷ Ibid., 11
⁸ Ibid., 11

investigations, facts indicative of the historical quest for the mystical entity outside of man by man. Not only are these testimonies indicative of man's quest, but the underlying facts of the Crusade suggest the extent to which men will go to assert and protect their convictions.

SCIENCE AND OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

"Two views have been held concerning the way we know God. One has asserted that we must know God just as any other object; that there are no other powers or faculties of knowledge except those by which we know ordinary objects; and that we must know God as we know ordinary objects; and that we must know God as we know trees and houses and men or else not know Him at all. The other view has tried to show that knowledge of God is a special kind of knowledge; that there is a certain feeling, inner sense, eye of the soul, instinct, or intuition, faith, spiritual organ, moral will or what not, which has God as its special object; that trees, houses and men may be known through interpretation of that idea of data of sense that God is discerned in this special and peculiar manner."⁹

I have pointed out already for the reader's consolation my intended procedure--beginning with the subjective and moving on toward the objective. In this regard I should say of the first view that I "know" the trees, houses and men, for these are instances of experiencing the transcendent as well as the immanent. (The former being a different experience altogether from the latter.) There is a need for me to clarify my position, the view which provides

⁹ Wieman, Op. cit. p. 21

that I experience the immanent; I propose the possibility that this position provides the data that may lead to any knowledge of God. This position if correctly interpreted is the subjective view. (View #one.)

The second view represents faith, feeling, intuition and moral will as capable of giving us an immediate knod of knowledge in which there is no need for any further analysis and interpretation of immediate experience by means of concepts.

I cannot follow this view for it (View # two) places God outside the grasp of my quest. Furthermore such a mystical situation must demand that I be endowed with a special faculty to reach out in quest for it. I think further that it is really because of this view that there has come about throughout the nineteenth century a tension between Philosophy and Religion.

William Temple, (clearing away debris of pass controversies) in his second Gifford lecture, says "Philosophy and Religion both claim a universal sphere, and supremacy throughout it". Thus, it is quite understandable that the tension will almost inevitably exist." Temple says, "Religion starts from the

Supreme Spirit and explains the world by reference to Him. Philosophy starts from the detailed experience of men, and seeks to build.... by reference to that experience alone."¹⁰

The reader should not be alarmed with the preceding conclusions being sought by a seminarian in search of his definite claims. I am inclined toward this scientific circle, not as a professional scientist, but by scientific method.

"All knowledge must depend ultimately upon science, for science is nothing else than the refined process of knowing. We call it scientifically or rather scientific only because it has been deliberately developed for the purpose of guarding against error."¹¹ In this regard I have no knowledge of God-scientific knowledge.

¹⁰ William Temple, Nature, Man And God. (London & New York: MacMillan Co. & St. Martin's Press, 1960) p. xvi.

¹¹ Wieman, Op cit., p. 11

MY CONCEPT OF GOD

I am inclined to agree as I state my concept of God with Wieman, who writes, "Any metaphysics that may be developed must make some pronouncement concerning the nature of God if God is understood in the sense we use the title."¹²

My attempt is one that might also lend itself to an understanding and an appreciation of the religious experience. "Whitehead" says Wieman, "employs the term, "Principle of Concretion" to designate God. He says, the principle of concretion in its common and simple form was expressed by Tennyson in his lines about the little flower in the "Crannied Wall."

"If I knew you, root and all and all in all,
I should know what God and man is."

The principle of concretion in its common and simple form was designed to show that everything that exists, as for example the flower, involves in its existence the totality of all being. Thus, the flower is what it is because all else is as it is.

¹² Henry Nelson Wieman. The Wrestle Of Religion With Truth. (New York: MacMillan Company, 1929) p. 182

I find this data significant in attempting to discern the subjective world, in a systematic approach.

Of the flower, I suggest of Whitehead's idea, that upon my immediate experience of this flower, I do not have knowledge of this flower. To gain such knowledge of this "lovely" bit of matter I should have to investigate its component part, characteristics, behavior and/or then possibly conclude the source from whence it came. I can experience an electrical shock, however the experience, I am not in a position to conclude what electricity is. Such knowledge can only come ably from a scientific investigation.

I can not assert the same formula about God, I can only move to this "likely-ness"-God from this realm of scientific investigation. (When I shall have arrived at this conclusion I should assert the nature of God, and not before).

With the study of the immediate objects and/or the objectivized world, and upon discerning there more detailed nature I gain greater knowledge of the objects and I gain a broader interpretation of the flower, or the electrical shock as the case might be.

Science in its more popular sense, suggest to me

that all matter is in its most simple state a condition of elements. All that science can say with reference to the elements is that they represent "physical" principles. Thus, this is as far as science can take us on this journey of inquiry as to the nature of the object world.

If I should accept the findings of the world of Science I should have to conclude that God is Principle. Because of our approach we must accept the systematic findings.

This deduction in this case leads me to an investigation as to the nature of God, which is not of the objectivized setting. I should think that since in the object world only an apple can beget an apple, or only an apple seed can beget or cause to be that which it is itself, that the same principle is true of God in his transcendent nature.

Thus God, is Principle; this principle begets and/or generates other principles. The nature of these principles is capable of bringing into being a cosmos and/or world order. It seems then that the matter of man is basically one of being principle, after having arisen in a historical world process, having been generated by a "Supernatural" Principle I call reasonably so concluded-God!

CONCLUSION

I have come to the conclusion that each age has sought to find out God. My search as a seminarian following the scientific and/or subjective method has delivered me to the conclusion that God is Principle, due to the closest possible deduction of this objective world. Historically man arises as the principles have caused a "world process". God is thus the transcendent and/or immanent reality of all existence.

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