

The Christian Doctrine of God

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THE Report of the Commission on Christian Doctrine has had a mixed reception and Evangelical Churchmen in particular have had good reasons for challenging some of its findings. It is however, generally admitted that it is an extremely important statement of the Church's doctrinal position and it must not be ignored. It has been pointed out that the numbers of copies sold suggest that not one half of the clergy can have read it, and I fear that the proportion of Evangelical clergy who have done so, is even less satisfactory. In this paper I propose to examine a statement in the Report, which will be approved by every type of churchmen.

On page 80 we read, "It may be that there are theological propositions accepted in the church which will always be found neither to need nor to be capable of revision, and in that sense may be 'final'; if so, they are final not in the sense that they are exempt from examination, but in the sense that examination invariably leads to their re-affirmation." Christianity has never faced a sterner conflict than at present. In Germany and Russia, the challenge is not to this or that Christian doctrine, but to the foundation truth of the very existence of God. If there is one Christian proposition which is definitely "final," it is our belief in Him. Our religion is based on the idea that there is an unseen order and that our supreme good consists in our harmonious adjustment to it. We do not accept this blindly in submission to the authority of some supposedly infallible church or creed. We accept it because there is no other way in which we can understand the Universe and man's place within it. The Christian Church therefore offers its own interpretation

to the world, based on its own experience of God. This supreme and fundamental belief can be and should be rightly examined in every age and this study was never more important than it is to-day.

THE EXISTENCE OF GOD.

Some kind of *belief in a Supreme First Cause* is held universally. All over the world mankind has always believed in a God. Not, of course, God as we understand Him, but a mystic Being or Beings, with whom it is possible to enter into some kind of relationship. When Christ came into the world there were many religions, but only one nation which maintained strenuously that there was one God who had revealed Himself to them and that the worship of other gods was a hateful superstition. When the Gospel led to the organization of the Christian Church, it came into conflict with other religions on many points: and when its doctrine of God was challenged it became necessary to offer ethical and philosophical reasons for this belief.

At first, stress was laid on Conscience. "Belief in God," said the apologists, "is an opinion implanted in the very nature of man." Man's consciousness of himself involves the consciousness of a power which is not himself, and which has an objective existence. The consciousness of imperfection involves belief in a perfection which must exist above and beyond all things. The fact that we can think of the existence of a perfect Being gives some ground for the assumption that He is. This reasoning is known as the *Ontological Argument* and the schoolmen used it in this way: "My reason had a beginning, therefore it must have had an external Creator." Or again, "I feel myself to be an accountable being, therefore there must be One superior to me, who can reward and punish; otherwise my existence would be an absurdity and a contradiction."

The *Cosmological Argument* is similar in character, but it is concerned mainly with material Causes and Effects in the Universe. Whatever is, must either have a cause or be self-existent. This material world is not self-existent for it changes continually, producing fresh phenomena every day. The dissipation of energy involves the fact that the present constitution of things cannot have lasted for ever—

there must have been a beginning in time otherwise, to use a familiar illustration, the clock would have run down long since. We are therefore led back step by step to an ultimate cause of all things, whose self-existence is thus demonstrated.

This reasoning was developed by Paley into the deeper *Argument from Design*. He contended that the beautiful order and wonderful arrangement of the Universe and the adaptation of means to ends proves that a Wise and Benevolent Intelligence created the world. This is the main line of argument in his Natural Theology. The modern apologist is inclined to reject it because it proves too much—for there are a multiplicity of circumstances which mar the happiness of creation. Earthquakes, famines, pestilences recur continually; all animals prey on and torture each other and unscrupulously powerful individuals in the human race are responsible for much sin, sorrow, and misery. How then can we believe that the Creator, even if He is benevolent, is all powerful? John Stuart Mill's answer is that He must be limited by conditions over which He had insufficient control.

There is, of course, a *Christian solution* of the problem, both in regard to man's wilful shortcomings and to the whole creation, which groans and travails in pain waiting for redemption. We believe that God has given to mankind a unique knowledge of Himself through Christ—He is the Eternal Father and God is Love. This belief remains constant from one generation to another, though its expression and definition is modified and revised continually. Imperfect conceptions of God are not imperfect because they are partial, but because they deny or ignore the perfect. In the mediæval world the half-awakened mind peopled the unknown universe with imaginary dangers and multiplied mediators and intercessors until God became far off and remote. The Reformation was mainly concerned with the restoration of the one God to His position at the centre of all Christian theology and in close contact with His children on earth. Some recent developments of Anglo-Catholicism show that a similar reformation will soon be needed again.

Then there is *the Argument from Values*.

Canon Barry has pointed out that "the traditional triad of absolute values is unsatisfactory and artificial" in a presentment of Christianity to the average man. It is not

easy to make him understand that if he wishes to do the Will of God, he must earnestly seek to apprehend the inner meaning of Goodness, Truth and Beauty. They are not three co-equal absolute "goods," for they mutually involve one another. He also points out that Knowledge is a better word than Truth in this connection—"Truth is a quality of propositions; what is meant clearly is true knowledge. . . . Where one is present there is the whole trinity—for what constitutes any of them 'values' is precisely the goodness which they share in common."

What then do we mean by absolute values? "The current idiom talks so much about values as almost to make it into a 'blessed word' which serves to conceal confusion in our thinking. . . . It is better to drop the word which suggests all manner of abstruse speculations and substitute the word 'goodness.' This does convey a definite meaning to all of us and we can generally recognize it when we see it. The things we live for, which we regard as good, are what we call our 'values.' A man may live for whisky, or for dividends, for his wife and children, or for the New Jerusalem. Whatever he lives for, that is what life means to him. That is what he believes to have 'value.' And normally we appraise the worth of a man by a scale of values which he appears to acknowledge." If we accept this contention of Canon Barry in his *Relevance of Christianity*, some highly important consequences follow. The idea of "value" is easily related to the idea of an Eternal Purpose and in this sense "values" explain the universe. They are the reason why it exists and there is a kinship between this line of thought and the Christian doctrine of the Logos. "All things were made by Him and without Him was not anything made that was made. . . . He was in the world and the world was made by Him." This theory of "values" is the basis of the Christian Theism in Dr. Inge's *Confessio Fidei* and Dr. Temple's *Christus Veritas*.

There are some who say that *Religious Experience* means the abandoning of objective values and a falling back on the purely subjective statement, "I value what I value." In one sense this is true, for we cannot define what we mean by goodness, for it is in itself something ultimate. Nor is truth true because thinking makes it so. If the mind makes or constitutes truth, then what it makes is just not what we

mean by truth. Truth is there for minds to discover, yet there is no truth unless there is a mind to know it and we get to know it by experience. Experience therefore has a real evidential value, for, to quote again Canon Barry, "Apart from any relation to any subject nothing could be said to possess value. No valuations, no value. What we call beauty would not be beautiful if there were no subject to enjoy it. It exists in that specific experience. This does not mean that beauty is subjective in the sense of being merely a matter of taste or in the sense that the subject's enjoyment invests the thing with the quality of beauty. It means simply that the idea of beauty presupposes both the beautiful object and the subject of that experience, and is significant only in that relation."

If in this quotation we put in the word "God" instead of beauty we can deduce on the same grounds that personal religious experience justifies an assumption that He really exists.

What do we mean by Divine Immanence? Modern theologians aim at keeping Transcendence and Immanence in a correct poise and perspective. It has not always been so, for stress has been laid first on one to the exclusion of the other and vice versa; but now, in every branch of the Christian Church, we emphasize belief in a holy and living God, who is "the Determiner of destiny, the Source of spiritual values and the Guarantor of the human prerogative." In other words, God is realized as being both Transcendent and Immanent. He is the immanent creative Spirit revealing Himself in the life of the whole universe. He is both the First Cause and the Abiding Ground.

In these dark and difficult days it is valuable to relate all that has been stressed in this article to the strife and warfare now going on. How does a Christian belief in God bring light into our darkness and peace into our souls? Surely because the core and essence of the Christian faith is that the God we know and worship is not only the Creator of the world, He is also its Redeemer and Saviour. It is His will that the whole world, the whole of human thought and enterprise shall be gathered within the power of His redemptive purpose. In the present conflict the issue is perfectly clear and plain—it is between the power of evil on the one hand and the power of God on the other. Can there be any doubt about the ultimate result?