

# *My Idea of God*

**J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937)**

If my idea of God were really mine, if it were one which I had evolved out of my own inner consciousness, I should attribute very little importance to it myself, and should certainly expect even less importance to be attributed to it by others. If God is merely a fact of human experience, if theology is merely a branch of psychology, then I for my part shall cease to be interested in the subject at all. The only God about whom I can feel concerned is one who has objective existence, an existence independent of man.

But if there be such a really and independently existent Being, it seems extremely unlikely that there can be any knowledge of Him unless He chooses to reveal Himself: a divine Being that could be discovered apart from revelation would be either a mere name for an aspect of man's nature – the feeling of reverence or loyalty or the like – or else, if possessing objective existence, a mere passive thing that would submit to human investigation like the substances that are analyzed in the laboratory. And in either case it would seem absurd to apply to such a Being the name of "God."

A really existent God, then, if He be more than merely passive, if He be a living God, can be known only through His revelation of Himself. And it is extremely unlikely that such revelation should have come to me alone. I reject, therefore, the whole subjectivizing tendency in religion that is so popular at the present time - the whole notion that faith is merely an "adventure" of the individual man. On the contrary, I am on the search for some revelation of God that has come to other men as well as to me, and that has come into human life, not through a mere analysis of human states of consciousness but distinctly from the outside. Such revelation I find in the Christian religion.

The idea of God, therefore, which I shall here endeavor to summarize is simply the Christian idea. I have indeed been enabled to make it my own; I love it with all my heart; but I should not love it if I thought that it had been discovered merely in the depths of my own soul. On the contrary, the very thing that I love about it is that it comes to me with an external authority which I hold to be the authority of God Himself.

At this point, however, there will no doubt be an objection. We have spoken about the knowledge of God; but in reality the knowledge of God, it is often said, is unnecessary to our contact with Him, or at least it occupies merely a secondary place, as the symbolic and necessarily changing expression of an experience which in itself is ineffable. Such

depreciation of knowledge in the sphere of religion has been widely prevalent in the modern world, and at no time has it been more prevalent than now. It underlies the mysticism of Schleiermacher and his many successors; it underlies the Ritschlian rejection of "metaphysics"; it underlies the popular exaltation of "abiding experiences" at the expense of the mental categories in which they are supposed to be expressed; and in general it is at the roots of the entire separation between religion and theology, experience and doctrine, faith and knowledge, which is so marked a characteristic of the religious teaching of the present day.

In opposition to this entire tendency, I for my part must still insist upon the primacy of the intellect. It may seem strange that the intellect should have to be defended by one who has so slight an experimental acquaintance with it as I; but reason in our days has been deposed from her queenly throne by pragmatism the usurper, and, wandering in exile as she does, cannot be too critical of any humble persons who rally to her defense. And, as a matter of fact, the passionate anti-intellectualism of the present age is having its natural fruit in a lamentable intellectual as well as moral decline. Such decadence can be checked - I, for my part, believe - only by a reemphasis upon truth as distinguished from practice, and in particular only by a return from all anti-intellectual mysticism or positivism to the knowledge of God.

Certainly, unless our contact with God is based upon knowledge of Him it ceases to possess any moral quality at all. Pure feeling is non-moral; what makes my affection for a human friend, for example, such an ennobling thing is the knowledge which I possess of the character of my friend. So it is also with our relation to God: religion is moral and personal only if it is based upon truth.

If then, in order that there may be a moral and personal relation to God, there must be knowledge of Him, how may that knowledge be attained? I have no new ways to suggest: the only ways of knowing God which I can detect are found in nature, in conscience, and in the Bible.

God is revealed, I hold, in the first place through the things that He has made. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork." This revelation of God through nature is commonly called - or used to be commonly called - "natural religion." And natural religion is by no means altogether dead. Modern men of science, if they be thoughtful, admit that there is a mystery in the presence of which the wisdom of the wisest men is dumb; the true man of science stands at length before a curtain that is never lifted, a mystery that rebukes all pride. But this revelation through nature is far richer than many men of science suppose; in reality it presents to us not merely a blank mystery, but the mighty God. The revelation comes to different men in different

ways. For example, when I viewed the spectacle of the total eclipse of the sun at New Haven on the twenty-fourth of January 1925, I was confirmed in my theism. Such phenomena make us conscious of the wonderful mechanism of the universe, as we ought to be conscious of it every day; at such moments anything like materialism seems to be but a very pitiful and very unreasonable thing. I am no astronomer, but of one thing I was certain: when the strange, slow-moving shadow was gone, and the world was bathed again in the wholesome light of day, I knew that the sun, despite its vastness, was made for us personal beings and not we for the sun, and that it was made for us personal beings by the living God.

In the second place, God is revealed by His voice within us. I am perfectly well aware that that voice is not always heard. Conscience has fallen on evil days: it is drowned by a jargon of psychological terms; it is supposed to be rendered unnecessary by an all-embracing network of legislative enactments.

The categories of guilt and retribution are in many quarters thought to be out of date, and scientific sociology is substituted for the distinction between right and wrong. But I for my part am not favorably impressed with the change; self-interest seems to me to be but a feeble substitute for the moral law, and its feebleness, despite bureaucratic regulation of the details of human life and despite scientific study both of individual human behavior and of the phenomena of human society, seems to be becoming evident in an alarming moral decline. The raging sea of passion cannot, I think, be kept back permanently by the flimsy mud embankments of utilitarianism; but recourse may again have to be had to the solid masonry of the law of God.

In the third place, God is revealed in the Bible. He is revealed in the Bible in a way which is entirely distinct from those ways that have just been mentioned. The Bible tells us things about God of which no slightest hint is found either in nature or in conscience. Of those things we shall speak in a moment.

But first it should be observed that, in addition to that fresh information, the Bible also confirms the revelation which has already been given. The confirmation is certainly necessary; for the revelation of God both in nature and in conscience has been sadly obscured. In comparing the fortieth chapter of Isaiah or the first verse of Genesis or the teaching of Jesus with the feeble and hesitant theism which is the highest that philosophy has to offer, and in comparing the unaided voice of conscience with the fifty-first Psalm or the searching law presented in the Sermon on the Mount, one feels that in the Bible a veil has been removed from the eyes of men. The facts were already there, and also the gift of human reason for the apprehension of them; but the light of reason somehow was obscured until in the Bible men were enabled to see what they ought to have seen before.

Thus, in these three ways there is attained, I hold, a genuine and objective knowledge of God. Certainly that knowledge does not remove the feeling of wonder which is dear to the mystic's heart. Indeed, it ought to accentuate that feeling a thousandfold. There is nothing in the knowledge of God which should stifle, but everything which should awaken, the "numinous" quality in religion of which Otto speaks. God has gently pulled aside the curtain which veils His Being from the gaze of men, but the look thus granted beyond only reveals anew the vastness of the unknown. If a man's knowledge of God removes his sense of wonder in the presence of the Eternal, then he has not yet known as he ought to know.

Yet partial knowledge is not necessarily false, and there are certain things which are known about God.

At the very centre of those things stands that which is most often denied to-day; the very centre and core of Christian belief is found in the awful transcendence of God, the awful separateness between God and the world. That is denied by modern men in the interests of what is called, by a perversion of a great truth, the "immanence" of God. We will have nothing to do – men say – with the far-off God of historic theology; instead we will worship a God who exists only in and with the world, a God whose life is found only in that life which pulsates through the life of every one of us. Pantheism, in other words, is substituted for theism, on the ground that it brings God nearer to man.

But has it really the desired effect? I, for my part, think not. Far from bringing God nearer to man, the pantheism of our day really pushes Him very far off; it brings Him physically near, but at the same time makes Him spiritually remote; it conceives of Him as a sort of blind vital force, but ceases to regard Him as a Person whom a man can love. Destroy the free personality of God and the possibility of fellowship with Him is gone; we cannot love a God of whom we are parts.

Thus, I for my part cling with all my heart to what are called the metaphysical attributes of God – His infinity and omnipotence and creatorhood. The finite God of Mr. H.G. Wells seems to me to be but a curious product of a modern mythology; He is to my mind not God, but a god; and in the presence of all such imaginings I am obliged to turn, very humbly but very resolutely, toward the dread, stupendous mystery of the Infinite, and say with Augustine: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee."

This devotion to the so-called metaphysical attributes of God is unpopular at the present day. There are many who tell us that we ought to cease to be interested in the question how the world was made, or what will be our fate when we pass through the dark portals of death. Instead, we are told, we ought to worship a God who is not powerful but merely good. Such is the "ethical theism" of Dr. McGiffert and many others; Jesus, it seems, was quite wrong in the stress that He undoubtedly laid upon the doctrine of heaven and hell and the sovereignty of God. We moderns, it

seems, can find a higher, disinterested worship - far higher than that of Jesus - in reverence for goodness divested of the vulgar trappings of power.

It sounds noble at first. But consider it for a moment, and its glory turns to ashes and leaves us in despair. What is meant by a goodness that has not physical power? Is not "goodness" in itself the merest abstraction? Is it not altogether without meaning except as belonging to a person? And does not the very notion of a person involve the power to act? Goodness divorced from power is therefore no goodness at all. The truth is that overmuch abstraction has here destroyed even that which is intended to be conserved. Make God good and not powerful, and both God and goodness have been destroyed.

In the presence of all such abstractions, the heart of man turns with new longing to the Living and Holy God, to the God who is revealed in nature, in the dread voice of conscience, and in the Bible. But as one turns to such a God, there is no comfort but only despair; the whole human race is separated from God by an awful abyss. Strange indeed, to us Christians, seems the complacency of the world; the very root of our religion is found in the consciousness of sin.

But at that point, on the basis of such presuppositions, there comes the really distinctive revelation that the Bible contains. It is not a revelation of things that already were true, but the explanation of an act. The Christian religion is based not merely upon permanent truths of religion, but upon things that happened in Palestine nineteen hundred years ago; it is based not merely upon knowledge of what God is, but also on a record of what God did. Into our sinful world - the Christian holds - there came in God's good time a Divine Redeemer.

His coming, marked by a stupendous miracle, was a voluntary act of condescension and love. During the days of His flesh, He proclaimed by His word and example the law of God. He proclaimed it in a new and terrible way that of itself could only deepen our despair. But with His proclamation of the law there went His proclamation of the gospel; with His pronouncement of the Divine judgment upon sin there went His offer of Himself as Saviour. When that offer was received in faith, there was not only cure of bodily ills, but also forgiveness in the presence of God.

At first faith was implicit; men trusted themselves to Jesus without fully knowing how it was that He could save. But even while He was on earth He pointed forward with ever increasing clearness to the redeeming work which He had come into the world to do. And at last, on the cross, that work was done. The Divine Saviour and Lord, for the love wherewith He loved us, bore all the guilt of our sins, made white and clean the dark page of our account, and reconciled us to God. There is the centre of our religion. But how pitiful are my words! I may perhaps make men understand what we think, yet I can never quite make them sympathize with what we feel. The holy and righteous God, the dreadful guilt and uncleanness of sin, the wonder of God's grace in the gift of our Saviour Jesus Christ, the entrance through Christ into the very house of God, the

new birth by the power of God's Spirit, the communion with the risen and ascended Lord through His Holy Spirit present in the Christian's heart – these are the convictions upon which rest our very lives.

If these convictions are false, they must be given up. But so long as we think them true we must act in accord with them, and it is morally wrong to ask us to do otherwise. At this point appears the profoundly unethical character of most of the proposals for Church union that are being made at the present day. The right way to combat us who call ourselves evangelical Christians is to combat honestly and openly our central convictions as to God and sin and redemption, not to ask us to hold those convictions and then act contrary to them. So long as we think as we do, we cannot, if we love our fellow men, allow them, so far as our testimony is concerned, to remain satisfied with the coldness of what we regard as a baseless and fatal optimism. We must endeavor, by the preaching of the law of God and of the gospel of His love, to bring them into the warmth and joy of the household of faith.

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