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## GOD AND PERSONALITY

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AN able and scholarly English author, Mr. Clement Webb, has, in a recent work—one of the mixed blessings which the Gifford Lectures have so often proved to be—entitled “God and Personality,” laid it down, as his central insistence, that we may speak of “Personality *in* God,” but not of “the Personality *of* God.” He argues this on the grounds that Church creeds and formularies have not defined God so, at least where the Trinitarian faith has been held. He says (p. 65), “the great majority of Christian theologians down to quite modern times have not affirmed in so many words the Personality *of* God.” He adds that he is not asserting that they “have not ascribed to God attributes which it may be plausibly argued can belong only to persons.” But he is concerned “only with the actual ascription of Personality itself to God” (p. 65).

I may say at once that I entirely reject Mr. Webb’s main thesis, for I hold that we must, and should, speak of “the personality *of* God.” For the Christian Church has never known a God that was not personal: that cannot even “plausibly” be argued. One would need to be a victim of the merest verbalism before one could arbitrarily shut off the patent evidence of personal conception of Deity—the thing, the reality, the conception, I mean, not the set phrase—in the writings of the theologians and the saints of the Early and Middle Ages. To their religious consciousness Mr. Webb does serious injustice, when he says (p. 242) that “in the public theologies and ecclesiastical polities of mankind we have the best expression of the normal religious experience of the peoples among whom they have arisen.” I think the history of many of the “public theologies” and “ecclesiastical polities” has been such, in their attendant conditions and polemical strifes and passions, that this value claimed for them

must be greatly modified, when placed alongside the individual testimonies of the religious consciousness. This last was much freer of extraneous influences and foreign modes of thought, than were the "public theologies" and the "ecclesiastical polities." Mr. Webb is really begging the whole question of the personality of God by his method; for he gives away his case in substance when he is compelled to admit that "the great majority of Christian theologians" have ascribed to God "attributes" which "can belong only to persons" (p. 65), and that the historic personality of Jesus—"a real historical person"—has been "worshipped as God" (p. 81). To concern oneself "only with the modern actual ascription of Personality to God" is, in these circumstances, a narrow and arbitrary procedure, of greatly restricted value, scope, and interest.

The Christian Church in general has in all ages regarded God as a Being, not an abstraction; as the self-existent One, not the totality of things; as a Person, not a Spinozan substance; as a Thou, not an it. To the religious consciousness, an impersonal God were none at all. What need, therefore, was there for Councils and Formularies to define God as personal? Consciousness and inward experience made definition unnecessary. The Church, says an American theologian, "has never in one single instance" defined spontaneously, but only as "wrong" from her by serious error. And when the Church did define, how often there were points in the defining, which many of the most orthodox and capable theologians regarded as open to serious criticism. Thus "public theologies" and "ecclesiastical polities" have by no means had their superiority so generally admitted by the most thoughtful as Mr. Webb supposes. The theologians were often averse to the defining process, but polemical ecclesiastics forced their hands. Melancthon, *e. g.*, said there was "no reason why we should greatly devote ourselves to those most lofty subjects, the doctrine of God, of the unity of God, of the Trinity of God." That attitude, however, would hold only of needless speculation. It should, then, not be forgotten how many things have never been defined by Church or Council, because there was no need

to define them. Mozley, for example, asked whether any Council "has yet defined that God is good." While such a Council was pending, would it have been unorthodox for the implicit faith of saints and theologians to hold that God is good? Personality, at the lowest, is the quality of being a person. A thing ceases to be what it is, said Hegel, when it loses its quality. There were Neo-Platonic God-conceptions in which God was denied all qualities. But if God is personal Being, stands to us in personal relations, then we may, and should, speak of "the personality of God." Not to do so would be to impose agnosticism, and induce timidity of thought. The religious consciousness has always clearly—though in varying degrees of clearness—maintained God to be personal, seeing it cannot form the faintest possible conception of a non-personal God.

Comte said that "man at first knows only himself, and applies this knowledge as a formula to universal nature." Yet it is a truism to say that personality was a slow development, and its consciousness of itself a yet slower one. And man's notion of personality in Deity has always been colored or conditioned by the conception of personality in himself. But it is a rather delusive notion, for all that, to think that early religious thought was incapable of forming distinctly personal conceptions, despite the Patristic theory that the humanity of Christ was impersonal. A distinguished French scholar, for example, in speaking of Theodore of Mopsuestia, says he sought to resolve the Christological question, "l'union du logos *personel* et de l'humanité de Jésus qu'il croit *personelle* aussi," and found the solution in a moral union.<sup>1</sup> Mozley says such "personality from all eternity," attributed to the Logos, is not to be treated as a "metaphor."<sup>2</sup>

Let me here recall some words of James: "One great splitting of the whole universe into two halves is made by each of us. The altogether unique kind of interest which each human mind feels in those parts of creation

<sup>1</sup>Italics mine. P. Batiffol, *Anciens Littératures Chrétiennes, La Littérature Grecque*, p. 298.)

<sup>2</sup>*Theory of Development*, p. 185.)

which it can call *Me* and *Mine* may be a moral riddle, but it is a fundamental psychological fact."<sup>3</sup> Something of this dividing the universe into two, took place in the consciousness of the early religious thinkers: over against the soul was set the Supreme Creative and Personal Being, as a Person, a Spirit, an Other-than-self, and these were for it the two primary personalities. It was an elemental "I" and "Thou" relation, the consciousness of which had no need to wait for Councils or Formularies to define the Deity as personal and spiritual.

Mr. Webb seems to me to put his case in a way that is indiscriminating and unfortunate. When he speaks of "Personality *in* God," what he means is, in the Godhead. In the Godhead, God is conceived as He is in His own nature, that is, from within and for Himself. As an English theologian has said of the three Persons in the Godhead,—“They are revealed as really three, and as performing three separate types of action, and we know their Personality through the separate functions which they perform.” But, without blurring or confusing the distinctions between the Persons, the unity of God is to be kept in view, and “the co-operation of the whole Trinity of Persons in every act of God.” But when Mr. Webb speaks of “the Personality *of* God,” it is God, as conceived in His relation to ourselves and to the universe, that is meant. In this case, God is, and can only be, conceived as personal. This, I contend, the theologians and the saints of all ages have understood. Often enough, however, when religious experience has been none too vital or deep in character, expressions have been used of Him as Creator or Supreme Being, without the personal conception of Him being of a pronounced type. An English theologian, other than the one already referred to, says the Trinity position means that there are “three in Personality, One in Deity,” but this does not deal with the situation explicitly enough. Mr. Webb reasons in such a way that it might be supposed that the Deity, with Whom we have to do, might not be fully personal, at any rate, has not been defined as personal. That is an entirely misleading and

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(<sup>3</sup>*Textbook of Psychology*, p. 174.)

impossible impression. The Church neither knows, nor can know, a God out of all relations to us, but God, known in personal relations, can only be a personal God. Some thinkers do not wish to speak of God as personal, or of the personality of God, because they wish to include in their conception of God the world, as coördinate with God, as eternal, and as God's "body." God is then not even incorporeal. The Church, I opine, has not refrained from defining God as personal, in order to make room for such ghastly heterodoxy, but because there was no need to define what was never in dispute.

It may not advance the defining of personality much to say, as some have done, that Personality is spirit, seeing it will be said there is no objectivity in spirit, but at least when we say that God is spirit, we clear His Personality of all association with anything of the nature of corporeity. And, after all, is not personality for us the ground-form of spirit as such? It denotes the formal quality of spirit, which we surely do not take to mean emptiness, but rather clearness, fullness and intensity, of consciousness-content. At any rate, however slow the churchly thought of the generations may have been to grasp in full the personality of God, the qualities or properties that mark Him out as personal, must have existed, as Rothe said, in essential objectivity in God, and did not at all depend for their existence on the slow activity of the distinguishing human intellect. All finite spirits—which, as finite centers of experience, are personalities—are one in God's Spirit, which is the Absolute Personality. There is nothing quantitative in all this; until we have gotten quite clear of the quantitative, we do not understand these matters at all. We are speaking of a realm of free spirit, not of mechanism. As surely as we are spirits, so can God only be the Highest Spirit; but He is Reason, Will, and Love—constituting Him the Absolute Personality. Personality, or self-conscious Spirit, alone meets the spirit's demand in Deity; and no good or tenable reason has been adduced by Mr. Webb, or anybody else, why we should not speak of the personality of God. The moral and spiritual perfection of God, as the Absolute

Personality, are such that no conceptions of a merely super-rational Unity, or of an impersonal Force or Law, or of any imperfectly personal Deity, will meet the case.

Purblind indeed the early Church would have been, had it not formed the conceptions it did of God as personal. Its doctrine of the Godhead—of personality in God—it reached in trying to understand the Person of Christ—to unfold the contents of His consciousness; but its notion of God as personal—its conception of the personality of God—was an inheritance received long before, from Judaism, whose teachings lay before it. “Properly speaking,” said Robertson Smith, “the heathen deities have no personal character in the sense of a fixed and independent habit of will.” “Not so Jehovah. He approved Himself a true God by showing throughout the history of Israel that He had a will and a purpose of His own—a purpose rising above the current ideas of His worshippers and a will directed with steady consistency to a moral aim.” Hebraism, in fact, centered in a personal God, Who had created the world, and ruled over it; and it was already suggestive of personal relation that He had said,—“I the Lord thy God am a jealous God.”

They had before them, too, the consciousness of Jesus, which was never sublated in impersonality, but always in that vaster conception of personal being found in His consciousness of the living Father. The all-shadowing, all-comprehending Personality of the Father is what is ever most deeply present to His unexampled consciousness. God was not to Him the Veiled Being, but Being unveiled. This fact was His “ultimate,” and not any pre-supposition whatsoever. And if we hold that God is the source of our personality, how can we deny the Personality of God? The personality of God had been most clearly revealed in the Incarnation, which just meant the revelation of God’s personality in Christ.

But the early thinkers found proof of God’s personality even in Nature. Athanasius, for example, in his “*Oratio contra Gentes*,” found that, from the order, regularity, and harmony, of Nature, “the conception is forced upon us of a Lord and Master,” “the Supreme Governor and

Lord of all." In Clement of Alexandria, God's intimate personal relations to man are expressly set out, and unique dignity claimed for man as alone made in the image of God. Clement so far discerns the relations of Divine and human personality as to be able to say, "If one knows himself, he will know God." And again, "We are they who bear about with us, in this living and moving image of our human nature, the likeness of God—a likeness which dwells with us, takes counsel with us, associates with us, is a guest with us, feels for us."

Semler said Tertullian was the first to use the words *persona* and *trinitas* of the persons of the Godhead. Tertullian speaks of the three Persons of the Trinity as "being of one substance, one condition, and one power, because there is one God (*quia unus Deus*), from Whom those degrees, forms, and species, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, are derived." Thus he maintained the unity of God against Praxeas. "The orthodox," says Tertullian, "never speak of two Gods or two Lords, though they affirm that each Person in the Trinity is God and Lord." "We speak only of one God and one Lord." Tertullian, in so enforcing the unity of God—against Marcion he says, *Deus si non unus est, non est*—is enforcing the conception of a living God, One Who enters into personal relations with men. What is meant "by God being One," said Mozley, is that He is one as truly as "one man, for example, is one." But I think those older theologians were right who regard it as specific and numerical, since He is one and indivisible, unique, and incomparable, in the transcendental unity of His nature. Athanasius, too, in writing "Against the Arians," says, "We assert the unity of the Godhead, as expressly as the diversity of the Persons." But he, no less clearly than Clement, Irenæus, and Augustine, conceives and speaks of that One Divine Being, whom we call God, as sustaining relations to men of the most personal kind. Nor is it to be forgotten that a new note of the value of the person—of the soul as of more value than the whole world—was the distinctive gift of Christianity, as that religion of superb idealism, which



came to create in human personality the finest and most concentrated power the world had seen.

The emphasis of Augustine on personal relations in religious experience is too well known to require setting forth. It must suffice to say that when we have carried through our discussions of *hypostasis* and *persona*, we find that a significant sense of the personality of God has been at least implicitly present in the spiritual conceptions of a communing Augustine, and of many another who said with him, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and restless is our heart until it rests in Thee." Such a "Thou" represents, I think, a real, personal Deity, and not merely a "plausible" One.

In another work of his own, Mr. Webb says that, in respect of such experiences, "to deny the personality of God is to make religious experience illusory."<sup>4</sup> I agree; but maintain that that is precisely what he has been doing in his later work, in which the personality of God is inconsistently and persistently banned. What is here needed is a clear grasp of the fact that those who speak of the personality of God are speaking of an Absolute and Infinite Personality, stripped of all the accidents and limitations of human personality. It must be kept in view that a qualitative Absolute and an intensive Infinite is what is meant by those who, in speaking of the Absolute Personality, have escaped enslavement to the quantitative. However little it may be understood by many philosophers, personality suggests infinitude of being or life, as nothing else does.

But to resume. John Damascene, last of the Greek fathers, in the middle of the 8th century, wrote that "in all respects the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, are One, except in their respective properties of being unbegotten, begotten, and proceeding." Not till the following century did Scotus Erigena arise to make the strange contention that God did not even know Himself, and consequently could not be known by us. The three Divine Persons, being one substance, are not separable, as three human persons are. They form one God. But the One

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(<sup>4</sup>*Problems in the Relations of God and Man*, p. 252.)

God was not conceived as anything but personal. Theological sanction for predicating personality of God was found in the ancient formula that God created man in His own image, and after His own likeness. Said Gregory Nazianzen: "No man knows, or will ever know, what God is in His own essence and nature; but to my thinking we shall know what is like to God in ourselves; our mind and reason will be united with Him Whose likeness we are, and the image of God will be raised into the presence of the Original, with Whose desire our soul is touched, and then we shall know, even as we are known." So, too, with even more explicit bearing on personality, St. Bernard says: "That blessed and eternal Trinity, the One God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, the Supreme Power, Wisdom and Benignity, created to His own image and likeness a certain trinity in the rational soul, which bears a resemblance to the Supreme Trinity. This resemblance consists in the memory, understanding, and will." This Divine image or resemblance, being so essentially personal, reflected for them the personality of the Divine Being. So that with Morell<sup>5</sup> we may ask, "With the *image* of God before us, who can doubt of the Divine type?" So real to these men was this image of God in man that St. Bernard daringly says: "The image of God in man cannot be destroyed, even in hell. It can burn, but cannot be consumed: it may be tormented, but cannot be extirpated." No wonder Ruysbroeck, of the 14th century, should have said that "by His own image God has made His creatures like unto Himself in their nature, and in those who have turned to Him, He has made the likeness even greater." This excellency of human nature was explicitly brought out by Calvin—"Imago Dei integra naturæ humanæ præstantia." Man's likeness to God consisted in his self-consciousness and freedom, as a rational and moral personality, formed for fellowship with God. And merely because our modern notions of "personality," and our set phrases about "the personality of God," had not yet arisen, we are to deny to these men any knowledge or experience of the realities which these

(<sup>5</sup>See his *History of Philosophy*.)

terms represent! It seems to me more "plausible" than just or profound, to do so. If a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, so did the personal conception of God prove as comforting, real, and efficacious, to great and saintly spirits of the past ages, to whom our modern connotations of these terms were unknown, as it can possibly be to us. Everywhere their God is a living "Thou," a vivid personal conception.

The "Proslogium" of Anselm is an excellent example (c. 5, and c 22, for instance). Aquinas, too, said "Person" is fittingly applied to God," but in "a more excellent way" than to creatures. He rejects with emphasis the idea that the term Person should not be applied to God merely because it does not occur in the Scriptures. He thinks the term "person" is one which "pre-eminently belongs to God."<sup>6</sup> This in virtue of the dignity of His Divine nature.

Mr. Webb forgets that another doctrine, the Fatherhood of God, suffered eclipse for ages before Calvin, who set it out more fully and seriously than is usually realized, and yet, after his doing so, the conception of bare sovereign will was allowed to take overshadowing place down to the last century. But would it have been unorthodox to cherish the Fatherhood of God while "public theologies" were neglecting it? I need hardly say that, in claiming to do some justice to the past, no one appreciates more fully than I do the heightened modern conceptions of personality, alike in God and in man. For these, I think, we are largely indebted to certain philosophers of the past, such as Descartes, Locke, Reid, Leibnitz, and Lessing, although some of them, Locke in particular, are very open to criticism on the subject. But the men who in modern times have done most for the subject are the band of distinguished thinkers who, in the mid-nineteenth century, formed the Speculative School of Theology in Germany, otherwise known as the Theistic School. So far as his book is concerned, Mr. Webb appears never to have heard of them. I shall say nothing of them here, having devoted a recent work to them.<sup>7</sup> Following them,

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<sup>6</sup>Summa Theol., Vol. I, qu. XXIX, Art. 3.)

<sup>7</sup>Seven Theistic Philosophers, Blackwood, 1920.)

and deriving largely from them, especially from Weisse, is Lotze, who stood for the Personality of God, but did somewhat scant justice to personality in man. Martineau held personality "not the largest," but "the highest fact in the known cosmos."

Although I reject the philosophy of William James, yet I welcome his claim for personality as "the only complete category of our thinking." In his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, he called it "the one fundamental fact," and in his *Principles of Psychology* said that we "know" its meaning "so long as no one asks us to define it," adding that "to give an accurate account of it is the most difficult of philosophic tasks." The strange thing is that, with all this, James did so unsatisfactorily by the self. It is indeed strange that so many philosophers should so inadequately realize that, in the philosophy of personality, the personality of God and the personality of man must stand or fall together. In some cases the sense of personality is very weak in both respects; in other instances, the sense of personality in man has been vindicated, but the sense of personality in God has been lamentably feeble. Our grasp of the personality of God should be such as to quicken spiritual energy and ethical vitality in us: our personal relation to God as the Ultimate Reality should be complete, determinative, ethically and spiritually strong. Our sense of the one side of the truth should strengthen and reënforce the other. For the reciprocity between them is real, strong, undoubted. The free personality of man is no great, inspiring, and satisfying fact, save as it is grounded in the freedom of the Absolute Personality. "God is a Spirit" (and a Person); "and they that worship Him" (Who is not merely a Person, but an Infinite Spiritual Life) "must worship in spirit and in truth." "God is Love, and he that abideth in love abideth in God" (Who is unchangeably ethical) "and God in him." In such love, reason and self-consciousness reach their height and climax, and in the conception of such love in God, the conception of Infinite Personality becomes for us real, vital, glowing.