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## The Personality of God.

BY THE REV. CANON W. HOOPER, D.D.

IT is often said by those interested in the present state and prospects of God's kingdom on earth that the foe worthiest of the steel of Christ's Church is Islam, and that the final conflict will be with that system. So, perhaps, it may be in Africa and the parts of Asia adjacent to it; and it may also be true that a soul steeped in Islam is harder to be won than a soul which has not the great fundamental truths that Islam acknowledges. But let us suppose (which may God grant!) Islam prostrate under the feet of the Church of Christ; and yet a far greater enemy would be utterly untouched by that victory. For underlying both Christianity and Islam, with all their vastly important differences, is the fundamental belief in the personality of the one God. And the question which will remain, it seems to me, to be determined, when all other theological questions are settled, is this, Is the Supreme Being personal or impersonal?

Human thought, unaffected by special Divine revelation, has always and everywhere tended to answer this question in the latter sense. Greek philosophy led up to Plato's *τὸ ὄν* and to the Stoic impersonal Supreme. In India, the vivid personification of the powers of Nature in the Vedic hymns soon gave way to Pantheism; and though only one of the six great systems of Hindu philosophy is distinctly and thoroughly pantheistic, yet that one has so taken possession of the popular mind, that the doctrine of a personal Supreme is held only by a comparatively few Pandits, and by them only in an academic manner. And though, probably through some influence from Christianity, one god or goddess is in popular theology selected as Supreme, and as such made the object of passionate devotion, yet behind even him or her stands always the dark background of the impersonal. And so strong is the tendency in the human mind, when it exercises the power of thought, towards this view, that even Christendom and the Moslem world have more

or less in all ages given birth to pantheistic speculation. Persian Sufism, while outwardly Mohammedan, is a system of mystic Pantheism, and for an illustration of the fact in Christendom one need go no further than the anti-Christian and non-scientific system which calls itself "Christian Science."

The following paper is designed as a contribution to clearness of thought on the subject, in hope that readers who feel, with the writer, its immense importance, may be able to see that though, as matter of fact, the human mind seems unable of itself to reach and to hold consistently the personality of God, yet sound reason really is on this side rather than the other, and that, thus confirming their own faith, they may be able also to confirm the wavering, and to save others who are in danger of being led astray by the speciousness of pantheistic thought.

It may be well, however, first to say a few words on the meaning which the words "person" and "personality" bear in this paper, and in all discussions on these high themes. Pagan philosophy neither ever had nor has any word expressive of these ideas. To this day—in the Indian vernaculars, for instance—either they have to be expressed by circumlocution, or some old word has to be used in a new sense to express them; just as the very word *persona*, which originally meant a "mask," a mere outward appearance, has come to have the diametrically opposite meaning of "person." Pagan philosophy has never been able to get beyond the idea of "individuality," which in the Greek world was regarded as a "circumscription," a cutting out, so to speak, a piece from the whole of the species, and in India as a "manifestation" of the common quality which underlies all the individuals of the same species. This latter idea is, no doubt, that which connects the original meaning of *persona* (and likewise that of the equivalent Greek *prosopon*) with the later meaning.

The idea of personality in its modern sense seems to have first occurred to the Greek Fathers of the Church in the latter half of the fourth century, in the course of their meditations on the doctrine of the Trinity. But there can be no doubt that the

seed thus dropped into human thought was brought to perfection by the German philosophers of the nineteenth century. It is now seen that a person, so far from being a mere specimen of a species, a mere circumscribed part of a whole, a mere manifestation of a general quality, is a centre (limited and subordinate it may be, but still a centre) of its own life and activity; and that, though it may be impossible actually to define personality, yet it may always be known by two distinguishing marks—self-consciousness and self-determination.

It is in this sense, then, that we speak of God as personal. Of course we admit the vast difference between His personality and our own: His is infinite, ours limited; His is absolute, ours conditioned. But this does not affect the personality as such. This, we maintain, is common to Him and to us. In this paper our own personality (as now explained) is assumed; and all that is attempted is to give practically sufficient proofs that God, so far like us, is a centre of His own life and activity, self-conscious and self-determining. True, all this is in Him perfect, while in us it is imperfect, but the essence of the thing is the same in Him and in us.

There are two lines of argument briefly pursued in this paper. In one, the personality of God is sought to be proved from the fact of our own personality; in the other, three main proofs for the existence of a Supreme Being at all are shown to be proofs of His personality also.

It seems impossible for anyone who really understands what is meant by "personality" in modern philosophy to doubt that a personal being is, just because of its personality, superior to an impersonal one. As some one has said: "Let the whole of Nature combine to crush me into non-existence, still I am superior to Nature, because I know that I am being annihilated, whereas it does not know that it is annihilating me." In other words, however superior an impersonal thing may be to a personal one in all other respects, still, the mere fact that the former is personal—*i.e.*, is self-conscious and self-determining—constitutes it on the whole superior to the latter. If, therefore,

we mean by "God" the Supreme Being, what right have we to suppose Him inferior to ourselves in that respect to which superiority belongs more than to any other characteristic, or the aggregate of all other possible characteristics? Can I, the self-conscious and self-determining one, look up to a Being which, though infinite while I am finite, absolute while I am conditioned, almighty while I am weak, eternal while I am of yesterday, and all-pervading while I am circumscribed, yet knows neither itself nor me, and is incapable of determining its own movements? The fact is, that so far has man been instinctively (*i.e.*, not through philosophy) sensible of his own personality that he has always read it (so to speak) into impersonal Nature, and *that* not only formerly by deifying natural laws and forces, but even to the present day in talking of Nature as "she," and attributing to it personal motives and actions. So far has man been conscious of himself as a personal cause of his own bodily movements, and the consequent movements in Nature outside him, that he has always tended to attribute personality wherever he has seen causation. Science has, indeed, proved him mistaken in the supposition of a multiplicity of superhuman wills around him; but science has not in the least invalidated, nay, it has left all the more room for, the belief in one personal Will behind all the impersonal causations in Nature.

Why do we believe in the existence of God at all?

One reason is that the human mind ever seeks an ultimate cause for all objects of its consciousness. Now, this instinct may be, and is, satisfied by the supposition of an impersonal supreme, because fundamental, being; and, in fact, this has been the conclusion of all the most influential philosophical systems which have sprung from human thinking alone.

But other reasons are: First, the whole universe exhibits marks of design, and the more science has opened up to us the working of the universe, the more apparent have these marks become. Not, indeed, in the old sense—*i.e.*, the old hypothesis that man was the sole object of all the rest of creation—*that* hypothesis has been exploded by science, as has also the idea

that the object of the design ought in every case to be discoverable by us. But the more science has grown the more has it revealed the fact that the world in all its realms is so full of marks of design—*i.e.*, of adaptations of some things to others, without assuming what is the ultimate object of the design, with which science has nothing to do—as to suggest ever more clearly the existence and presence of a Designer and Adaptor. And the theory of evolution, which is generally now assumed as the simplest way of accounting for known facts, in no way invalidates this argument, seeing that it only teaches the method in which the Designer may be supposed to have carried out, and to be carrying out, His designs. Indeed, if true, it brings out into vastly more prominence than did the old “orthodox” theory the perseverance of those designs through almost countless ages. But design and adaptation imply consciousness and will—*ergo*, the Supreme Being must be a Person.

Secondly, God’s existence seems a necessary postulate, to account for what Kant called the “categorical imperative”—*viz.*, the instinctive belief (or feeling) of moral obligation. This instinct has been very variously accounted for, but the question of its origin does not concern us now. Suppose, *e.g.*, for argument’s sake, that the feeling “this is right” or “that is wrong” was only a modification of “this is pleasant” or “advantageous,” or “that is unpleasant” or “disadvantageous,” this would not affect the existence, now to some extent even in the most degraded of mankind, of the former class of feelings as quite distinct from the latter, and as affecting us in quite a different way. When we do what we believe to be pleasant or advantageous, we may congratulate ourselves on our cleverness, and when we do what we believe to be unpleasant or disadvantageous, we may call ourselves fools; but there is no *such* self-approval in the former case, or self-reproach and remorse in the latter case, as there is when we do or neglect what we believe to be our duty. We feel ourselves under law, and from that law we cannot escape. We may break it, but we invariably suffer for doing so. We cannot deny its authority to say to us

“thou shalt” or “thou shalt not,” however we may disregard its saying this. Now, this law is to a small child the law of its parents or other guardians; at school it is the law of the school; and when a person becomes a member of society, it becomes to him the law of his township or of his country (among Hindus, of his caste). But whatever forms it assumes, it carries through them all the same sense of obligation, the same approval or disapproval of conscience. But there are several kinds of human action, the obligatoriness of which, or of the avoidance of which, cannot possibly be accounted for by any of these partial, limited laws, because, if so, they could not possibly exhibit the uniformity under all governments and all religions, and in all races and all degrees of civilization, that they do exhibit. Such are lying, murder, unprovoked violence, adultery, disobedience to parents, theft, etc., as actions to be avoided; and truth, kindness, honesty, personal purity, etc., as actions to be done. Special causes may, indeed, and do, in special cases, distort the general instinct about these actions, but where no such special cause of distortion exists these moral instincts are universal. But where is the authority which could lay down a universal law? Where is the power which could make itself felt in the universal conscience concerning any class of actions? Is it not simplest to postulate a moral governor and judge of mankind? But a governor and judge must be personal. Duty—*i.e.*, indebtedness—must be to a person; *ergo*, the Supreme Being must be a Person.

Lastly, there are a great many instinctive impulses in human nature which are not satisfied at all by impersonal objects, and only very partially by our fellow-men as objects. Such are the impulses to honour, reverence, trust, love, devotion, familiar intercourse, and exchange of thoughts, etc. Hence the vast majority of mankind have in all ages and climes believed in the existence of superhuman persons as worthy objects of these feelings; and some of the words expressive of the latter, which at first were equally applicable to human and to superhuman objects, have in time been restricted to superhuman (*e.g.*,

“worship”). A growth in knowledge of the uniformity—nay, unity—of the world has, indeed, in all cases led people to suppose a superhuman unity behind these gods and goddesses; but in the absence of the true revelation this has (as already stated) generally been conceived as impersonal, and therefore unable to be an object of the feelings now under consideration. And, indeed, these instincts can never be fully satisfied, while the intellect regards their objects as being many, and therefore limited, and inferior to any other being. But Christian philosophy has shown that personality and infinity, personality and absolute-ness, are not contradictory terms, but rather mutually complementary. Hence, there is every reason to believe in a Supreme Person, the entirely worthy object of our adoration, trust, love, etc.—instincts which would otherwise be destined to be for ever unsatisfied.

Of the four reasons now given for believing God to be personal, each one may perhaps seem weak to some minds, but the accumulation of the four seems irrefragably to point to a personal God as the simplest solution of the problem.

It is hardly necessary to add that this dogma is very far from being a merely academic one. Religion cannot be worthy of the name unless it rests on this belief; and, on the other hand, the intellectual acceptance of it is vain, unless it be followed by true devotion of heart and life to the one personal God.



## Messages from the Epistle to the Hebrews.

BY THE BISHOP OF DURHAM.

VIII.—HEBREWS XI. (*a*).

THE eleventh chapter of the Hebrews is a pre-eminent Scripture. With the fullest recognition of the Divine greatness of the whole Bible, never forgetting that “every Scripture hath in it the Spirit of God” (2 Tim. iii. 16), we are yet aware as we read that some volumes in the inspired Library