The Word "God"

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I

WHAT DO WE MEAN by the word "God"? Perhaps it may help to clarify our thoughts if we consider some expressions of disbelief in God and ask what it is that is disbelieved in.

Not long ago I heard a speaker in a discussion say that it is impossible to believe in God in view of all the evil things that are allowed to go on in the world. Clearly for him belief in God meant belief in the existence of a beneficent, omnipotent, personal Being who is responsible for the world's being what it is; he took it for granted that the word means what, for many people, it has come to mean through a long course of development in the history of Hebrew and Christian thought. This immediately raised many questions in my mind. Does the difficulty lie in the thought of God as being beneficent, as omnipotent, as personal, or as existent? Are all of these elements equally essential to the meaning of the word? If not, can they be graded in degree of essential relevance? Is any light to be gained from reflection on the history of the development of thought which has led to this extremely complex notion?

This last question reminds us that in the Hebrew–Christian tradition unified personality, omnipotence, and beneficence are comparatively late arrivals, the contribution of the Hebrew prophets (with which may be compared Plato's theological principles in *Republic* II, 379). These are alleged qualifications of whatever underlying forces may account for the way in which things exist and happen. Does the word, then, fundamentally mean these forces, whatever may be their nature? Is it a kind of *X*, the symbol of an unknown quantity, the secret of why the universe behaves as it does? This is apparently what it means in the first three of St. Thomas Aquinas' "five ways" of proving God's existence.[1]

At this stage, disbelief in God would mean disbelief in the being of any such *X*. Something of this sort seems to be suggested by H. J. Blackham when he writes:

> There is only experience to be interpreted in the light of further experience, the sole source of all standards of reason and value, for ever open to question. . . .
>
> Scientific inquiry presupposes the situation of human beings confronting objects in the world. Anything supposed outside these conditions is not open to inquiry. Anything totally transcendent, encompassing both subject and object, for example, is beyond such an inquiry and beyond conceptual thought.

1. Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 2, 3.

. . . Ultimately everything as given is equally inscrutable and mysterious: there is nothing privileged in terms of which all the rest can be explained.[2]

It is hard to know precisely what this confused piece of writing means to deny. In the first and last of the sentences quoted the sciences are apparently engaged in comparing discrete experiences emerging out of an inscrutable mysterious background. This does suggest disbelief in any *X*. But then science is said to "presuppose the situation of human beings confronting objects in this world," and reference is made to "these conditions." No attempt is made to analyse and explain what is involved in the presupposition of these conditions, but presumably it is taken for granted that "this world" is a world in which the various experiences are related so that one can argue from one to another. There are, of course, philosophers for whom this is not so, for whom the universe of our experience is at bottom chaos and not cosmos, for whom there is no *X*. Mr. Blackham's faith in the possibility of increasing human knowledge and welfare by progress in scientific research shows that he is not one of these. What then is it in which he disbelieves? Three words suggest the answer. Whatever the *X* may be, it is nothing outside, transcendent, or privileged—two spatial metaphors and one emotive adjective which are not explained further. We must defer discussion of these words since at the moment we are only concerned with the primary meaning of the word God as the *X* implied by the fact that the world is the kind of world that reveals itself to scientific research. We have said nothing about where (if anywhere) it is located or what (if any) are its privileges.

I think, however, that at this stage, when we think of the word as meaning the secret of why the world behaves as it does, we can say that we must think of it as one. Scientific research would be a waste of time if it were like trying to do a crossword puzzle with today's diagram and yesterday's clues.

But suppose there is such an *X*; is it, to use a common phrase, the ultimate reality? There are thinkers for whom this is not so. Those who have learned from Tillich to speak of God as the "ground of our being" do not always realize that by Tillich himself the word "God" is used in two senses. Below or beyond the "symbolic" creator God of our personal worship is the ultimate God who is Being itself. One is reminded of a similar strain of thought in Berdyaev and Whitehead, and of the attempts of Hegelian idealists to devise metaphysical theories which will relate God to the universe of our experience in a system which is the ground of their being for both. The question is whether it would not be a mistake to say that the primary meaning of the word God is the ultimate reality. Should we not be content to use it for whatever it may be that is the ground of its being for Blackham's world of scientific research, leaving open the question of

2. H. J. Blackham (ed.), *Objections to Humanism* (London: Constable, 1964), pp. 12–14.

whether what is the ground of *our* being is also the ground of being itself?

It is here that the Christian doctrine of creation parts company with all such philosophies, and asserts the belief that the primary meaning of the word God is to be the last word, the ultimate reality, the ground of being both for itself and for all things visible and invisible. The statement in the Nicene Creed that the *Logos* is of one substance with the Father means that the rationality in the universe which makes it patient of scientific research is not an accidental characteristic of some eruption from the ultimate reality but an essential elements in that reality itself. Whatever it may be for some philosophers, for Christian believers this is the primary meaning of the word God, behind which it is impossible to go.

II

The use of the word God suggests belief in One who is thought of as personal. For many people this is a source of difficulty and disbelief. It is what leads some Christian thinkers, such as Berdyaev and Tillich, to postulate a more ultimate impersonal reality as the ground of being for the personal God. And many others, theists, agnostics, and atheists, have a feeling (for some of them an uneasy feeling) that it is more reasonable to think of the ultimate reality as impersonal, to use some such phrase as "a power not ourselves making for righteousness" than to speak of God. If the word God is, indeed, to be used for the ultimate reality beyond which there is no other, then for them its use is a mythological personification, as when one calls a wind Boreas and opens the door for artists to represent it in human form.

The more I have tried to think about it, the more convinced I have become that this feeling has no reasonable basis, that it is, in fact, the opposite of the truth. My doubts about it began many years ago, in youthful wrestling with the Augustinian paradox of grace and free will. I came to see that the source of our difficulty lay in the idea that the kind of necessity assumed to exist in the sequence of cause and effect in the impersonal world of the natural sciences was the intelligible paradigm in terms of which we were trying to explain our personal life. If this was the kind of necessity involved in the operation of God's grace in a believer's life, how could the resulting acts be the acts of his own free will? Then I remembered it to be a fact of experience that in human personal relationships a man can sometimes truthfully say: "But for So-and-So's coming into my life I could not have been what I am and done what I have done," knowing that the help he has received has been help which has enabled him more fully and freely to be his true self. In such personal relationships we experience a kind of necessitation which is inexplicable in impersonal terms.

About the same time, now upwards of forty years ago, we were engaged in assimilating the psychoanalytic discoveries and theories of Freud and

Jung. At first the tendency was to regard the discovered content of a man's "unconscious" as a surer guide to what he really is than the thoughts of which he is consciously aware.[3] Further reflection brought the realization that to see things in this way is to see them upside down, that the likes and dislikes, desires and aversions, fears and passions, which make up the content of a man's unconscious, are the material out of which he is being created into a human self personally responsible for those things which he allows to influence his acts of will. We should not try to explain his personal character in terms of the impersonal behaviour of his complexes. The self for which he is responsible, by which he is to be judged, is that self which he is becoming through his conscious exercise of choice. We have to begin by trying to understand him as a person intelligible to us from our own inside knowledge of what it is to be men. Then the more we can learn to know of the impersonal forces at work within our respective unconsciousnesses the better we can help both ourselves and him to become the kind of men we aspire to be.[4]

It is reasonable to try to explain the less in terms of the more intelligible. In these two cases the mistake lies in the assumption that the impersonal kind of necessitation studied by the physical sciences is more intelligible than the purposive activity of personal wills. This assumption makes it impossible to give an account of our experiences which takes them as being what we actually experience them to be; they have to be distorted or explained away to make them fit in with the theory. To quote from what I wrote at that same period of my life, many years ago:

> In refusing to accede to the request that we should regard the loading of the coin as parallel to its subsequent movements in the air, we are not making an obscurantist refusal to abandon the unknown for the known. *We know very well what it means to cheat*—better, indeed, than what it means to be sent spinning through the air. Even when we do experience the latter sensation, it remains inexplicable brute force until interpreted in terms of will; a football game is easier to understand than a railway accident, and the universe does not become more explicable if collisions on the football field are regarded as obscure examples of what happens when a crowd of people is hit by a tornado.[5]

A philosophy which aims at being truly empirical in its account of human life will start from our experience of conscious, intelligent, purposive activity as being the most intelligible thing we know, and will see our scientific research as the means by which we increase our control over impersonal natural forces in accordance with our purposes. Whatever part may have been played by such forces in any event in human history, the "last word" in our attempt to understand it will have to be in terms of personal responsibility.

3. This was apparently still the belief of Mr. H. A. Williams when he wrote his essays in *Soundings* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1962) and *Objections to Christian Belief* (London: Constable, 1963).

4. On all this, cf. L. Hodgson, *Essays in Christian Philosophy* (London: Longmans, 1930), chs. I–VI.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

More recently at least five lines of thought have converged to convince me that this is equally so in our attempts to think about God; that, so far from being mythological, to think of him as personal is an approach to a more reasonable grasp of the truth.

1. There is the apparent dilemma caused by the contrast between the living, active God of Hebrew belief and the Greek assertion of his eternal changelessness. Not long ago, in a broadcast address, Mr. Robin Denniston was expounding what it meant to him to think of God as Father. A child, he said (I quote from memory), might sometimes disagree with his father, might rebel against him, might for the moment even hate him, but through all the fluctuations in their relationship the father could always be depended on as the source of stability in their joint life. As I listened I realized that those advocates of the Hebrew faith who reject the insights of Greek thought as static must be assuming that it implies an impersonal changelessness, ignoring the kind of dynamic persistence through change that is possible in personal life.

2. It is often said that the Aristotelian–Thomist philosophy, expressed in terms of substance and accidents, has no relevance in present-day thought in which substance is resolved into function. Here again it is assumed that the paradigm for all reasonable thinking is provided by the procedure of the sciences which study the relations of impersonal forces. But it is impossible to read Part II of Dr. Austin Farrer's *Finite and Infinite* without coming to see that there may be more to be said for the traditional mode of expression, and that to think of God as personal may be reasonable as well as illuminating.

3. I have said that a philosophy which aims at being empirical must give an account of human responsibility as being what we experience it to be. This involves the reality, within this world of space and time, of human freedom of choice and of chance events. Neither a materialistic philosophy, for which the last word lies with the sequence of cause and effect in the physical world, nor an idealism in which persons and things are related to one another in an impersonal metaphysical system, can find a place for accidents which are really accidental or for choices which are really choices. Their aim is to find a point of view from which they can be explained as something other than what we experience them to be.

But if the ultimate explanation of all that exists and happens can be in terms of personal purpose, it may be possible to account for our experiences without being false to our empiricism. The question will be whether we can reasonably conceive of a purpose which can explain their being what they are.

4. The questions posed by choices and accidents reach their climax in the problem of evil. It is a mistake to think that this problem is aggravated by thinking of God as personal. If scientific research is not to be undermined as an attempt to do a crossword puzzle with the wrong clues, we must be able to imagine a diagram into which good and evil can both be fitted. To

do this on an impersonal basis without explaining away evil either as unreal or as good-in-disguise is more difficult than to think of reasons why a personal God might allow it to be what it is.

5. We are in search of the *X* which is the secret of why the world is such as to lend itself to study by the methods of scientific research. We have also to account for our experience of accidents, choices, and evil. I am maintaining that we can most intelligibly co-ordinate all the factors if our last word is in terms of personal will. When we do so, the natural word to describe this *X* as the source of *all* that exists and happens is omnipotence.

Omnipotence is most intelligible if interpreted by analogy from our experience of personal activity. We finite creatures know what it is to use such power as we have in self-restraint; wise fathers allow their sons and daughters to grow in freedom to run their own lives at the risk of getting into trouble. It is conceivable that an omnipotent God might will to create finite beings who should grow into responsible persons, and that for this purpose he should give them a world which is both patient of scientific study and open to accidents, choices, and evil.

The ultimate question is whether the universe of our experience is such as to make it reasonable to think that a divine purpose of this kind is the explanation of its being what it is. Before we approach this, it will be well to try to see where we have arrived in our attempt to understand what we mean by the word God.

III

We started from an expression of disbelief in God when thought of as a personal being who is beneficent, omnipotent, and existent. Of these four epithets I have said something about personal and omnipotent, but nothing about beneficent, which must wait until later. What of existent?

If the words "exist" and "existence" are specifically appropriated for use with reference to particular existents in the world of our experience, then clearly they cannot be used of God in the sense in which we have been speaking of him. In the systems of Whitehead and others they might conceivably be used of the God who is one eruption from the more ultimate reality, but not of the ultimate reality itself. To meet this difficulty it has been suggested that some other word, such as subsist, should be used instead.

It is a waste of time to dispute over the meaning of words. What matters is to make clear the thought that they are used to express. If anyone likes to use the word subsist, he is welcome to do so, but I myself can see no reason why the word exist should be appropriated to the narrower use. The real question concerns the mode of existence or subsistence which we have in mind as predicable of what we mean by God. To this question no answer can be given beyond saying that it must be such as to account for the existences that make up the world of our experience. All I have said so far is that since these include both the regularities which make possible progress in scientific research and control and also the irregularities which

make possible growth in human personal freedom and responsibility, we have to think of One who is personal and omnipotent. This is the least that we can say about the *X*, which is the secret of the universe's being what we experience it to be, the minimum of what we must mean by the word God.

It seems to me that without going further we have arrived at an intelligible and reasonable meaning for the word, and need not follow those linguistic analysts who would have us discard it as meaningless. Their so-called verification tests were devised for dealing with particular existents and are inapplicable to that which is believed in as the ground of their being. Nor need we join Dr. Van Buren and abandon God on account of Professor Flew's fable of the celestial gardener, in which the world is likened to a garden where men discuss whether its order and beauty are due to the care of an invisible gardener whom no one has ever met. The man who believes in his existence cannot be brought to admit that any conceivable circumstances would suffice to falsify his assertion, but in evading the pressure put upon him he has so to qualify his original idea of the gardener that in the end his belief dies by the death of a thousand qualifications.

As in the case of the linguistic analysts, arguments drawn from the relations between particular existents are improperly assumed to be applicable to that between the universe and the ground of its being. But there is more to be said here. Unlike the theist in the garden we must be prepared to admit that there are conceivable circumstances which would falsify our belief in God. If it could be proved that the scientist's faith in the relevance of clues to diagram is mistaken, that there are no human choices which are really choices, that no accidents are really accidental, or that the distinction we make between good and evil is illusory, then the falsification would be done.

There are psychologists and sociologists for whom it is an article of faith that sooner or later this proof will be found. There are theologians who seek to anticipate this danger by claiming as the basis of their faith a guaranteed revelation immune to criticism born of scientific or historical research. This is surely mistaken. If we are to have a gospel to proclaim which will have any relevance to the needs of men and women in their life in this world, it must aim at giving a reasonable interpretation of the nature of the world and of human history as we actually experience them to be. We must have the courageous faith of St. Paul who opens his Epistle to the Romans by claiming to take his stand on natural theology and challenging its critics to do their worst. It is important to notice that the conflict is not between science and faith but between two rival faiths. The would-be scientist who maintains that the time is coming when it will be shown how all apparent accidents and human choices result from natural causes is making an act of faith based on the assumption that an ultimate explanation in terms of such causes is more intelligible than one in terms of intelligent purposiveness. The theist who questions this assumption is not fighting a rearguard action in defence of "God in the gaps"; he is asserting a reasoned faith based

on what he believes to be a more intelligible interpretation of the whole field.

What of Mr. Blackham's disbelief in anything that is "outside" our experiences, "totally transcendent, encompassing both subject and object," and "privileged"? "Outside" and "transcendent" are spatial metaphors; "privileged" implies an ascription of rank. These notions may or may not be relevant to the developed idea of God which is the product of a long history of religious and theological thought. At the present stage of the inquiry they are beside the point. The *X* for which we are using the word God is something involved in the fact that our experiences are what they are; nothing has been said so far on whether this *X* is inside or outside, above or below, or of higher rank than ourselves and the objects of our experience.

"Transcendent, encompassing both subject and object." This apparently confused spatial metaphor, the expression of disbelief in something described as both above and all around us, points to something more worthy of belief, something to account for the fact that subject and object do belong together in a world in which the subjects of experiences can discover them to be related to one another in an orderly fashion. I have argued that, if we are to take into account *all* our experiences, we have to think of this something as someone, to find our ultimate explanation of all things in terms of intelligent purposiveness. If we do this, we come to see why any attempt at description in spatial terms is bound to appear confused, why believers in God speak of him as being at once above, below, all round, outside and inside.

Our immediate experience of this kind of explanation comes to us in our personal relations with our fellow men. Since in this world we are the subjects of experiences which come to us as the self-consciousnesses of our particular bodies, we are related to one another both in space and time. But in and through this kind of relationship we become aware of Another which cannot be described in these terms, and which, for want of a better word, we may say transcends them. Here as I sit writing in England I know that I should not, could not, be what I am and do what I do were it not for certain people in other lands, across the Atlantic and on the continent of Europe, who have not only entered spatially into my life in the past but whose influence even now affects my thoughts and deeds. The existence of this kind of personal intercourse, its potentiality for good or evil, for the strengthening or weakening, the raising or debasing of character, is a fact of our experience which cannot be denied or explained away. The feelings, thoughts, and deeds inspired some twenty or more years ago by Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill cannot be understood except in terms of spiritual power which works through, but yet in some sense transcends, relations in time and space. In this kind of personal relationship we experience the paradox which illuminates the theological question of the relation between

divine grace and human freedom. Somehow or other my friend in America is both inside me and outside me. He is inside in the way in which his mind and character play their part in determining what I think and say and do; he is outside, not only bodily with the Atlantic between us, but because I am aware that we are distinct persons and that my decisions are my own.

To account for our experiences being what they are we affirm our belief in the intelligible purposiveness of One whom we conceive by analogy from what we know of personal life among men, a purposiveness which exerts its power over us, which may make itself felt through our experience of things in space and time but cannot itself be located as here or there. Whence, for example, does it come into Mr. Blackham's mind to say that a humanist should be "more than ordinarily honest-minded, public-spirited, tolerant" and must "aim at social agreement to promote human welfare"? Clearly these ideas exercise a compelling power over his mind and in his life. His own acceptance of them may be traceable to various factors which have influenced him in his birth and upbringing and human associations, but the compulsive power works in and through his experiences in time and space without itself being of them. If we are to understand more fully what belief in God should mean for a Christian today, we must see it as the development and enrichment of whatever power it may be that compels Mr. Blackham's reverence for the causes he has at heart.

IV

Finally we must consider the development of this basic idea in the history of human thought. By "basic idea" I do not mean the idea in human minds at the beginning, but that which for us today is the minimum required to account for the co-existence of scientific control and human responsibility. All serious human thought is an attempt to grasp what is objectively real or true. Inevitably what is thought and said will be coloured by the thinker's presuppositions. In studying it our aim throughout must be to disentangle the objective reality or truth from the subjective colouring.

When we look back to the beginning we see men aware of the elemental forces at work in the universe and adopting (often confusedly) two distinguishable attitudes towards them, magic and superstition. Whether or not they were in general animists in the sense of personifying these forces is irrelevant to the distinction. Magic was the attempt to obtain control by knowing the right incantation to utter or ritual act to perform. Whether or not the magician was an animist who thought he was dealing with personal deities or spirits, his aim was to get them within his power, to force them to do his bidding—in short, to treat them not really as persons but as things. The superstitious animist had more respect for his gods as persons. They might be incalculable persons, with mysterious passions, whims, and caprices. What he needed to know was how to avoid their displeasure and gain their favour. Our science of today is the lineal descendant of primitive magic, the

attempt to discover how to exercise control over those natural forces which we treat as impersonal. Our religion is developed from primitive superstition. Both have their histories. We are concerned with the latter, and in particular with the development that has led to the form of Christian theism which provoked the expression of disbelief from which I started. For my immediate purpose it will suffice to consider two outstanding incidents in the course of this history: the contribution of the Hebrew prophets and the coming of Jesus Christ.

Religion was the attempt to enter into personal relations with whatever gods, demons, or other spirits might control the elemental forces. By their doctrine of the one Creator God and his righteousness the prophets initiated the transition from superstition to reasonable religion. If by "God" we mean the *X* which makes possible scientific research, I need say no more about his oneness. His righteousness needs further attention.

Our concern is not with the extent to which the prophets themselves were aware of the significance of this doctrine, but with its implications for our own thought. It is no longer possible to think of God as the mysterious wholly other Power whose inscrutable will has to be discovered by casting lots or consulting oracles. What a man has to do is to ask himself in each situation what he honestly thinks is the right thing to be done and accept that as the will of God for him. The fundamental act of faith in God is to try to live up to this and trust that whatever powers may be behind the universe will support him in it.

By "God" we now mean the *X* which makes possible progress in both scientific control and moral insight. His method of self-revelation is the same in both fields. We have to use our brains to discover both how to increase our control over natural forces and what we are to use them for. Progress in moral insight is as much a matter of human endeavour as is advance in scientific knowledge. Each has its own autonomous canons of procedure. What we learn from the prophetic doctrine is that growth in either field is growth in our knowledge of God, that our idea of God may have to be revised in the light of our progress in scientific and ethical understanding. In the latter field we have seen the Christian mind revise its attitude to slavery and family planning, and it may be that today we have things to learn from humanists to which fundamentalists are blind.

But in opening the door to this way forward the prophets introduced the acutely embarrassing problem of evil. If by "God" we mean the power expressed in all that exists and happens, how can we think of it or him in relation to the evils that make up so much of our experience? This is a further reminder of the expression of disbelief from which we started, and an introduction to the development arising from the coming of Jesus Christ.

Here again there are two lines of thought deriving from what in Christian belief he was and did. In him we see God living a human life in which he takes upon himself the responsibility for having allowed his creation to become infected with evil, accepts what he has to suffer to effect its rescue,

and enlists his disciples in the body through which that rescue is to be fulfilled. The understanding of this has to be worked out in thought about the doctrine of the atonement, without which we can find no light on the difficulties arising out of the problem of evil or how we can think of God as "beneficent." Then, if this Christian belief is true, we have to take it into account in seeking to know more of the character of God. The fundamental question to be asked about any religious or theological statement is: What kind of an idea of God does this imply? Is it consistent with the belief that in Jesus Christ we see revealed the character of God?

To this question there can be no complete and final answer before the end of time. As the years go by the Holy Spirit takes of the things of Christ and declares them unto us. Already this century's theological study of the New Testament is making important contributions to our understanding of what it is to have the mind of Christ.[6] We are not responsible for what our successors will be thinking when they use the word God. But more than nineteen hundred years of Christian religious experience and theological inquiry have enriched our understanding, and we should not mean less than the best that is offered to us by the theologians of our own day.

To sum up. The word "God" is a religious word, derived from the attempt to enter into personal relations with the *X* which is the secret of why the universe of our experience exists and behaves as it does. For Christian faith its meaning has been, and is being, purified and enriched by a long history of its use in the practice of our religion and in thinking about it. In discussion with linguistic analysts, humanists, and others we are apt to confine our attention to its use in theological or philosophical thought, by stupid fundamentalists, or by specially gifted mystics. We tend to lose sight of intelligent ordinary Christians who use it as they try to live by their faith.[7]

6. Cf. John 16:13–15; 1 Cor. 2:16. On all this, cf. L. Hodgson, *The Bible and the Training of the Clergy* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1963), pp. 61–70.

7. I should like, as I conclude, to mention four books which have helped me to keep my thinking "true to the kindred points of Heaven and Home": E. Underhill, *An Anthology of the Love of God* (London: Mowbray, 1953); L. Menzies (ed.), *Retreat Addresses of Edward Keble Talbot* (London: S.P.C.K., 1954); M. L. Yates, *God in Us* (Greenwich, Conn.: Seabury Press, 1959); R. Schutz, *Vivre l'aujourd'hui de Dieu* (Taizé: Les Presses de Taizé, 1959).