Towards a Definition of God

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IN moving towards a definition of God we should first attempt to answer two basic questions: (1) to what category of reality does man refer when he uses the word God? What does the word God mean to all men everywhere? What is its universal meaning? And (2) how has Western man defined the characteristics of this referent? With what particular characteristics has he endowed God? This level of God thought we shall classify as the particularized meaning of God, in contrast to the universal meaning. We propose, then, two levels of God concepts: the Universal Level; namely, what the word God refers to; and the Particularized Level; what man, especially western man, thinks God is like.

As one wrestles with the question of God, it becomes evident that the term God has ambivalent meaning. It points denotatively towards the ground of being, and reflects connotatively from the experiences of man.

A student once asked me if I thought God created man or man created God, and I answered, "Yes!" This answer was not intended to be glib, or evasive, or even obscure. What it means to say "yes" to this question is (1) that there is a being or process (an ultimate creative power) which creates man. Man is a created creature. There is a God-creating-man reality. (2) This created creature, this man, once created turns back upon the being or process which created him to define the nature of his creator. In doing this he creates a concept of God (a God-idea) endowed richly with various characteristics—life, personality, love, compassion, concern, intelligence, and all the rest. Man defines what he thinks his creator is like, and this man created God-idea then becomes a pivot factor in the life of its human creator. It determines to some degree the direction and course of his human destiny. It becomes, in short, a man-creating-God reality. God creates man and man creates God.

To state this differently we might say that the obvious purpose of religion is to establish and conserve man's most cherished values, and especially the values which validate his own life and meaning. These values are established and conserved in relation to whatever it is that ultimately determines human destiny; i.e., whatever causes reality, and causes it to be what it is. That which causes reality and causes it to be what it is, or if you will, whatever ultimately determines destiny is God.

How can this denotative definition be established so readily? How can we presume to say so abruptly that whatever ultimately determines destiny is God? We can do so because even a superficial examination of the use of the term in the language of man reveals that when man uses the word God he is referring to what he believes to be the determiner, or the determiners, or the determination factor of his destiny. The word God when used by man (be he primitive or modern, Jew or gentile, Christian, Moslem, or what-have-you) means the power or powers which are believed to cause reality to be what it is, the power that causes, sustains and finally determines the destiny of the world. In human history God has been described in many ways and called by many names, but basically the word used and the descriptions given have referred to what man has at various stages and ages believed to be the power upon which he must ultimately depend for the accomplishment and

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preservation of his most cherished values. To a primitive the great power of his world was believed to reside in manna, in spirits and in the magic of his witch doctor; in ancient Hinduism it was believed to reside in the Law of Karma (i.e., in a metaphysical system of reward and punishment meted out to man according to his righteousness and evil), the Greeks called this great power Fate, which determined the destinies of even the Olympian gods.

In Judaism, Christianity and Islam the final ground of reality resides in a personal being caled YHVH, or Father, or Allah. In each case the concept refers to a category of Ultimate Power wherein values are created and sustained and perhaps even destroyed. In the words of Hamlet: "There is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will." The function of the word God, then, used as a universal concept, on the level of universal meaning, is to denote or designate Ultimate Power. God is whatever it is that finally and basically causes and sustains, directs and determines reality. God is, in Tillich's words, the ground of reality, the infinite power of Being.

The word God when used on the level of universal meaning, means Determiner of Destiny. This is the God-creating-man, denotative use of the word. But theology not only denotes God's power, it not only points to the destiny determining category, but also connotes God's specific character. God is particularized, defined, recognized, worshipped. Here the denotation of power is enriched with character concepts, and God enjoys various forms of personification, and symbolization.

It is not in the question of whether there is a God—a divinity that shapes our ends, an ultimate ground of being, a determiner of destiny—but in the definitions we give to what this power is like that we have our wide divergence of opinion, and a basic need for clarification as we move towards a definition of God. It is to this point that we shall direct the major effort of this paper.

II

Our question is: What is God like? And especially how has God been characterized by Western man?

In the West God has appeared to Western man progressively and in cumulation as threat, protection, promise, domination, mystery, and challenge.

Apparently, God appeared to early man basically as inimical and terrifying. Primitive men believed their world to be controlled by a multitude of pestiferous powers. These powers were generally regarded as dangerous and morally indifferent, much as we think of electricity. Properly handled, successfully propitiated, they might prove beneficial, or at least not harmful, but they were certainly not personal, or friendly, or in any way moral. To primitive man life was a terrifying enterprise. He lived in the vast fear of his ignorance. Famine, pestilence, drouth, pain, death, insanity, privation were his in full measure, and with little comprehension of their cause and cure. Consequently he rationalized his fear to make it less fearful and assigned to supernatural powers the cause and cure of the many mysterious evils which beset him. God was for him predominantly an enemy, or at least a constant threat. The supernatural was an awesome and terrifying thing, and he addressed himself to it with reverent fear.

This inimical element in God, first invisioned by primitive man, has remained as a part of the God-concept ever since. It remained even when man came to think of God as his friend. The idea of God as friend, or better of God as protection, was probably first and surely best conceived by the ancient Hebrews. Out of a long struggle, primarily with themselves, the Hebrews emerged finally with a religion both monotheistic and moral, and with the

idea that God and man were united in a sacred covenant. This idea of friendly partnership (yet with its threatening overtones) came to full fruition in the work of the great prophets of the eighth and seventh centuries. In Amos, Hosea, Micah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, we see in full force the idea that man and God had a partnership, that between the Hebrew and YHVH there was a sacred covenant.

Man's part of the covenant was to keep the Law of God as handed down by Moses in the Ten Commandments and the Mosaic regulations. God's part was protection. If the Law be kept, YHVH would reward, and Israel would prosper. God was divine protection, but God was, also, divine threat, for if the Law was violated, then God the friend became God the enemy and Israel was punished, the sons of the covenant suffered. This idea of God as protector and friend was, in the work of certain teachers, especially Jesus Christ, vividly personalized in the concept of God as father. Quite in line with prophetic teaching, yet with a genius of his own, Jesus spoke of his Heavenly Father. Like a good father, Jesus' God grieved and rejoiced over the folly and return of the Prodigal. God was the Father to which the erring son might return from the buffetings and bruises of an alien world.

It is doubtful that a concept of God closer to the desires of man than this one could be created: God is protection enriched with love and compassion; God is like a good father.

Also, in this God concept there is the echo of a new revelation which by Jesus' time and through Jesus himself came alive in the mind of Western man. This revelation was the catalysis of a new faith—the Christian faith, wherein God is seen fundamentally as promise, and particularly the promise of eternal life. The Prophet had proclaimed the unity of God. YHVH was the source of both good and evil, which was measured out to man according to the covenant concept. But beginning with the Babylonian Capticity (586 B.C.) there was for Israel too much evil. For 600 years the people of the covenant were torn upon the rack of Babylonian, Persian, Macedonian, Syrian, Egyptian and Roman conquest. It became increasingly difficult to profess the doctrine of Divine Protection in the face of continual national catastrophy. Surely not even the worst Jews were so bad (in such violation of the covenant) as to deserve what was happening to all the Jews.

To answer this problem of evil there appeared in Jewish thinking (as evidenced in the Book of Daniel) a new concept of divine nature, and an unprophetic split between good and evil. Peripherally in Jewish thought, and centrally in later Christian thought, there developed a form of eschatology called apocalyticism.

As Martin Rist informs us, apocalyticism is the belief that there are two worlds: the present world, an evil one, under the control of satanic force; and a future world, a good one, under the control of God. God and Satan are locked in a metaphysical struggle, but a struggle which is, of course, fated to result in divine victory. God being God must ultimately win. Nevertheless, at the moment, it is God **and** Satan who dominate history, while man is, at best, only a side-line observer. The covenant concept is gone. By resisting Satan's temptations and by keeping God's Law, man can save himself from the wrath to come. He can avoid Hell and achieve Heaven, but he can in no way alter the fact of cosmic evil in the world around him, nor assist in the establishing of God's Kingdom. Out of the political tension of their times, certain Jews came to believe that God was primarily the promise of good things to come—a promise which would see its fulfillment with the appearance on earth of a promised Messiah.

Such was the living thought in the world into which Jesus was born, and

to such conceptions did he give his allegiance. After his baptism by John, he began to proclaim man's urgent need to prepare himself for the promise that was imminent. "Repent," he said, "for the Kingdom of God is at hand."

Progressively in Western history from primitive man to ancient man to medieval man, God was conceived or revealed as threat, protection and promise. To the founders of the church and the fathers who carried it to unprecedented heights in the Middle Ages, these three basic elements of divinity were seen in the Threat of Damnation, the Protection of the Faithful, and the Promise of Eternal Life.

With the rise of the modern world (which we might arbitrarily date as beginning in 1543, when Copernicus published his work **Concerning The Revolution of The Heavenly Bodies**), a new revelation developed. God, the ultimate power of the universe, was seen increasingly as absolute power. Even the minor details of physical, vital and spiritual reality were precisely controlled by the deity. Ultimate power became absolute domination.

Religion, science, philosophy (and later history), each in its own language, made obeisance to determinism, to the notion that every element of the universe from the mightiest galaxy to the tiniest atom was locked by irrevocable law in an irresistible system of cause and effect.

In religion John Calvin proclaimed God's absolute domination in the doctrine of predestination. In science Isaac Newton proclaimed it in his Law of Gravitation and the Celestial Mechanics. In philosophy Georg Hegel proclaimed it in his Absolute Idealism. (And in the study of history Spengler and Marx have proclaimed a similar kind of thinking in their doctrines of Organicism and Dialectical Materialism.)

The sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries characterized God not only as threat, protection and promise, but emphasized the unbelievable extent of God's power both in astronomic and microscopic dimensions.

III

There are at the present time two concepts which seem to be thrusting for basic acceptance as characterizations of God. One is the idea of God as paradox or mystery, and the other is the idea of God as challenge. In recent decades several outstanding theologians have been promoting with increasing persuasion a theological position sometimes called the New Orthodoxy. Carl Barth in Europe and Reinhold Niebuhr in America are the father confessors of this movement.

Briefly, in the area of God-concept, these men argue that nature and supernature are discrete categories of reality. The natural is one thing and the supernatural is something completely different. What is true of the natural order is not necessarily true of the supernatural order. Reason and science can neither affirm nor deny the truths of religion because religion is an absolute experience and religion is unreservedly esoteric. It may be possessed and affirmed among those who have enjoyed the crisis experience of God revealing himself to man, but it cannot be properly defined or explained, for human thought processes, human knowledge, human expressions are all inadequate! They are, in short, natural, and the natural cannot define the supernatural. God is the absolutely other, the unknown, the unknowable, an ineffable mystery.

No matter what we think about the theology of Barth-Niebuhr and company, Neo Orthodoxy demands our attention in the fact that it registers emphatically a fundamental insight concerning the character of God, for whatever the Ultimate Power is, it is certainly mysterious and paradoxical.

But this mystery has a characteristic which at least one modern historian is ready to affirm. From his study of his-

tory, Arnold Toynbee has concluded that the ultimate power of our universe, and particularly the force which governs human history, is most accurately defined in terms of challenge and response. God is challenge.

The power which sustains and orders life offers to all its creatures an endless variety of challenges—an endless list of opportunities for new accomplishment. If the creature has sufficient capacity and energy to respond successively to the challenges before it, if it can appropriate the possibilities offered to it through the dynamics of life process, value can be accomplished and new worlds created. God is the challenge of life to which we more or less successfully respond.

So much for the documentation; let us once again quickly summarize the proposition: Western man has progressively discovered ultimate power to be a threat to his existence and value, a protection for his existence and values, a promise of existence and value beyond what is initially given, a power which dominates at least the large dimensions of his existence and value, a challenge which provokes him to greater accomplishment in existence and value, and an immense mystery which penetrates his conscious existence sufficiently to place premium value upon the attitudes of humility and reverence.

IV

An observation is in order: In every age the intellectual focus of that age has elicited fundamental insights into the character of Divine Power. It was from his necessary attention to the precariousness of life that the primitive drew his threatening gods. The protective YHVH was discovered by a people preoccupied with the preservation of a cultural heritage. The God of promise, revealed in Christian history, was the insight of people who for more than a thousand years were intellectually occupied with the problem of eternity, with the Heavenly City of God. When in modern times men turned their intellectual efforts to problems in astronomy and physics, Ultimate Power began to appear in the intellectual guise of determinism and domination.

This observation should inform us wherein we might expect to find the historic revelation of God in current times. The greatest intellectual accomplishment, if not the greatest effort, of contemporary Western civilization is modern science. From this (unless we subscribe to the Barthian dichotomy) we should expect to come new and mighty revelations.

Although the truths of modern science are in detail not fixed and final, the large meanings of modern science are firmly established and likely to remain. From these larger dimensions we should observe, primarily for the sake of illustration, two more Western characterizations of God. Many more and/or less familiar characterizations are possible from science, but these two will suffice in illustrating the revelatory character of the scientific disciplines. These characterizations are novel only in the source from which we propose to elicit them.

The world we live in, the world revealed by modern science, is a dynamic process governed by a power of at least two discernible dimensions: creativity and value. As characterizations of the ultimate nature of reality, these dimensions become ipso facto characterizations of God.

First, God may be characterized by the word **creativity.** One of the fundamental facts of our world is the existence of possibility. In a sense, we live in a world where anything could happen. Each passing moment is bursting with possibilities. Indeed, this is a fact so real, a system so basic, that we have scientific formulae to render it somewhat predictable. We call these equations for predicting possibility the Laws of Probability.

The fact of possibility and the nature of the laws which govern it can be seen

quickly in an act as unsophisticated as the flipping of a coin. A coin flipped into the air will come down either heads or tails. We say it has a 50-50 (or 1/1) chance of being one or the other. And statisticians assure us that if we flip the coin often enough (a million times or more) it will come down heads and tails approximately an equal number of times. Far more complicated probability predictions can be made, involving, of course, more complicated mathematics. But regardless of the complexity of the problem, probability (and thus possibility) is mathematically demonstrable in the world around us.

It is even more dramatically evident in the field of biology. The number of possibilities involved in the reproductive process of animals is fantastic. Two ducks, male and female, possess together the possibility of giving birth to literally millions of ducklings. And what is true of ducks is no less true of men. According to Dr. Sherman A. Kaufman (**Human Fertility**) there are, at the moment of human conception, on the average of 300,000,000 male sperm present, any one of which could fertilize the female egg and become a unique human being.

No one should ever complain that he is unlucky, that he has never won anything in his life, for at least once in his career the odds were 300,000,000 to 1 that he would not win, but he did.

It might appear somewhat irreverent to talk of God in terms of flipped coins and the reproduction of ducks and men, but this seeming lack of respect disappears immediately when we realize that the system of possibility demonstrated in coins, ducks and men is not different from the system which invites everything in the universe and the universe itself to change into something different every moment of the night and day from creation to eternity. We live in a world where anything could happen, but in point of fact not everything does happen. For at the heart of this dynamic process there is not only a system of possibility, but also a dimension of limitation, a system of concretion. Some possibilities rather than others ingress and become concrete. They come out of possibility and into existence.

Possibility and concretion taken together constitute creativity, i.e., the emergence of the new, the novel, and sometimes the radically unique. Modern science assures us that progressive emergence is a fact. This is what the whole concept of evolution amounts to —there is a concretion-of-possibilities process evident everywhere in the world around us. Creativity arises from, and characterizes, the fundamental nature of reality. It is, in short, an accurate characterization of God.

A second characterization of basic reality, exceedingly evident in the categories of biological science, is appetency, or desire, or in more philosophical language — value. We live in a world where choices are made, appreciations developed, beauty experienced. Value exists. Our world is characterized not only by creation, but also by consecration. God makes possible, creates, sustains not only a man's body, but also man's soul: his capacity for aestheic appreciation, for morality, for consecration; in short, for art, for ethics and for religion.

Value exists all the way from a duck "enjoying" a swim on a pond to a man listening to a symphony. A duck responds with desire to food needs and sex needs and survival needs and he probably likes to swim; but man responds to spiritual needs—to the music of Beethoven and Brahms, to the art of Rembrandt and Picasso, to the dedication of Jesus and Gandhi. Just as God is the physical world the creative ground of star systems and atoms, so is God in the realm of life-emotion-mind the fact of possible value, the fact of created value, and the living order in which values are sustained and preserved. It would appear that modern science is affirming God not only as

creation, but also as consecration. Quite as much as He is the source of matter, He is, also, the source of value. And for the first time we have referred to God with the personal pronoun. We have referred to God as "He." And with this we introduce the question of whether God is a personal Thou, or an impersonal It.

VI

Is God a process only, or may we refer to God properly as a person?

In answering this question the field of comparative religion will be of little use to us for the religions of the world in historic perspective are about evenly divided, some affirming anthropomorphism, some using an impersonal system. Our own Christian tradition we must hold suspect because it is constructed upon the presupposition of Divine Personality. Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, affirms personalism; it does not prove it. Philosophical speculation seems to offer a better approach to our immediate problem, and modern Liberal Protestantism, in its philosophical dimension, has sufficiently elaborated the arguments for and against personalism for us to grasp them quickly and briefly.

Liberal Protestantism may be defined briefly and inadequately as that religious movement in the twentieth century which (1) has attempted to accommodate Christianity to the modern, scientific world, and (2) has attempted to establish religious knowledge by using the scientific attitude and methods in the areas of religious history, life, and experience.

The ranks of Liberal Protestantism are divided roughly into what we will call Theism (or personalism) and Immanentalism (or impersonalism). The nature of the division is thus obvious. The thinkers involved part company in their interpretation of the evidence available for personality (i.e., mind, self-consciousness, will, etc.) as a characteristic of God.

Both groups agree that religious experience is experientially real. Men are obviously self-unified through their devotion to a vision of creative goodness, truth and beauty. This experience must have a causative source in the vast cosmos. And this causative source is by definition God. To this point all are in agreement, but at this point the Immanentalists become cautious. They tend to slow down and come to a speculative halt. But the Theists forge ahead bravely. They say that that which gives rise to an effect is surely not less than the effect produced. God is at least what man is, namely personal, namely a person. But, say the Immanentalists, this is no longer the logic of scientific empiricism. It is the logic of New-Platonic rationalism, the logic of Emanate Cause; the notion that a basic cause must contain at least what is found in the effect. For example, you cannot have more water in a bucket than you had in the well. This appeals to commonsense, but the Immanentalists point out, it does not square with the concept of evolution, wherein you can most certainly have more in the effect than was in the cause.

Other Theistic arguments are equally suspect by the Immanentalists. Some Theists following Aristotle argue that there is a telefinalism operating in all history guiding it towards its ideal perfection (as evidenced empirically in evolution, the ideal-end is already real. Thus God is at least the conceptual entertainer and consumation of the moral and religious involvement thus far attained in life, and the perfection yet to come. Again, the Theists may join the Pragmatist William James and argue that where live choices are involved and there is no conclusive evidence to the contrary, we have a right to believe that we have a "will to believe." With a Kantian flavor Borden Parker Bowne argued, "Whatever our total nature calls for may be presumed as real in default of positive disproof." (**The Philosophy of Theism**, 1889). And

our total nature calls for an I-Thou relationship with God, not an I-It relationship.

Theists know that their arguments are not air-tight proof of the fact of Divine Personality, but they believe these arguments cumulate persuasively in that direction. Immanentalists, however, are exceedingly aware of the weaknesses involved in Thomistic, Kantian, and Pragmatic logic. So they choose to be, as James called it, "tough-minded," preferring to live with less that is sure than with more that is unsure.

Whitehead might be named among the "tough-minded." He equates God with the process of reality which both creates and conserves. God both creates and saves. God is value producing, value conserving, valuable; but never does Whitehead identify God with the value called personal. God may be called God, or Deity, or even Eros (as Whitehead does in his **Adventures of Ideas**), but God is called "He" only for literary reasons, only because there is no supra-personal pronoun. God is never called He by Whitehead for ontological reasons. God for Whitehead is a principle of creative process, not a personality.

Elton Trueblood, a Theist, voices his distress with the Immanentalist brethren in his **Philosophy of Religion.** With true Quaker gentleness he writes:

> Wieman describes God as follows: "God is understood to be the power more than human which saves man from ultimate disaster and transforms him into the best that he can become." It is obvious that the man who writes such a statement is trying desperately to be honest and not to go beyond his evidence. He is saying that God so described is actualy known in experience because we do find help in our moral endeavor. There is a power that sustains us on life's darkest as well as life's brightest days. . . . We must be grateful for the superlative honesty of those who refuse to go beyond their available evidence. But it is difficult to see how such thinkers can come so close to ascribing personality to God without taking that important step. (p. 264.)

Many Immanentalists feel poignantly for the fellowship of God as a person. But those who are true to the "fellowship of the tough-minded" cannot take this desired step on faith alone. For them only upon the painstaking grounds of evidence and verification can God ever stand forth as a Person.

There is, as Trueblood observed, a kind of heroism about Immanentalism, a lonely heroism, as it stubbornly insists on redeeming the faith with plodding hypotheses, rather than with soaring dialectics. But hypotheses do not always have to plod. They too can soar, and sometimes they must if they are to encompass a wider scope of conflicting facts.

Theories in conflict are not always theories in contradiction. Their opposition may be not so much a matter of exclusion as a matter of tension. They may be actually the poles of a larger whole not yet recognized. With this thought in mind we might begin to explore the possibility of defining the personal and the impersonal as the extreme poles of a single identity. We might hold out the thesis that God is in fact both Thou and It. In a different context Paul Tillich has something to offer of what appears to be of exceedingly germinal character. With a quotation from his first volume of **Systematic Theology**, we will close this effort Towards a Definition of God.

> God "is the name for that which concerns man ultimately. . . . The phrase 'being ultimately concerned' points to a tension in human experience. . . . The more concrete a thing is, the more possible concern about it. The completely concrete thing, the individual person, is the object of the most radical concern—the concern of love. On the other hand, ultimate concern must transcend every preliminary finite and concrete concern. It must transcend the whole realm of finitude. . . . But in transcending the finite the religious concern loses the concreteness of being-to-being relationship. It tends to become not only

absolute but also abstract. . . . This is the inescapable inner tension of the idea of God." (211).

It points ambivalently to that which is specifically in reality, and to that which transcends reality as its ground and source.

Anthropomorphic symbols are adequate for speaking of God religiously. Only in this way can he be the living God of man. But in even the most primitive intuition of the divine a feeling should be, and usually is, present that there is a mystery about divine names which makes them improper, self-transcending, symbolic. . . . Man symbolizes that which is his ultimate concern in terms taken from his own being. From the subjective side of the polarities he takes . . . the material with which he symbolizes the divine life. He sees the divine life as personal, dynamic and free. He cannot see it in any other way, for God is man's ultimate concern, and therefore he stands in analogy to what man himself is. But the religious mind . . . always realizes implicitly, if not explicitly, that the other side of the polarities is completely present in the side he uses as symbolic material. God is called person, but he is a person not in finite separation but in an absolute unconditional participation in everything. . . . The symbol "personal God" is absolutely fundamental because an existential relation is a person-to-person relation. Man cannot be ultimately concerned about anything that is less than personal. . . . Personal God does not mean that God is person. It means that God is the ground of everything personal and that he carries within himself the ontological power of personality. He is not a person, but he is not less than personal. (242-245.)

As ultimate ground of being and creative process God is an It; but as the concrete object of true worship, God is and must be Thou.

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