

THE PROBLEM OF GOD

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Those of us who are concerned to interpret the Christian belief in God in an understandable manner to people in our day know there is a problem of God. But the problem is a many-sided one, which is by no means simple either to define or solve. This paper is an attempt to clarify the nature of the problem, and indicate precisely where the chief issues lie.¹

The importance of this issue cannot be easily exaggerated. The doctrine of God is the most fundamental concept in the entire range of theological ideas. All other issues logically secondary to this one. If God is a problem, then strictly speaking he is the only problem there is. There is certainly no Christian faith without God. Ogden was right, Paul van Buren notwithstanding, when he wrote,

“However absurd talking about God might be, it could never be so obviously absurd as talking of Christian faith without God.”²

Important as the subject is for theology, it is hardly less so for Western culture. For the loss of God perhaps more than any other single factor is responsible for the crisis of human values which plagues our civilization. The most formidable problem which our intellectual leaders face is how to shape their life and work in a universe no longer seen as created and controlled by God. Human existence, devoid of religious commitment, lacks any ultimate aim or motivation, and has become for many meaningless. God is not a problem then only for the church and for theology. God, if he is truly absent, is the decisive problem of our culture.³

The problem of God is multi-dimensional. We will examine three of those dimensions: the theological, the cultural, and the philosophical.

1. THE THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION

(a) In a real sense, the problem of God arises directly out of the nature of the concept ‘God’—defined in Christian terms as the infinite ground of all being, as having reference to reality which is transcendent of and not locatable within finite being. The prophet Isaiah admitted that, in the last analysis, there was nothing that could be compared to him (40:18, 25).

1. We agree with Kaufman that the problem is immensely subtle and complex, but dissent from his resolution of it. See Gordon D. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).
2. Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) p. 14.
3. Charles I. Glicksberg skillfully traces the consequences of unbelief in *Modern Literature and the Death of God* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966) and *Literature and Religion* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1960).

Therefore, we can say at the outset that the problem of God is not in its entirety the fruit of modern scepticism. But, at the same time, since this particular problem has been known for millennia, and solved to the satisfaction of the vast majority of Christian thinkers, there must be some new factors on the scene which have sparked the current crisis.

(b) It is safe to assume that the uncertainty over God is due to the same cause that has placed theology generally in ferment. With the massive impact of secular modernity upon theological thinking, the historic Christian confidence in objective and cognitive special revelation has been badly shaken. In the face of a barrage of humanistic ideas, liberal theology elected to surrender traditional convictions, including especially the belief in propositional divine revelation, and began to search for alternate foundations for theology. In order to sustain belief in God, for example, Schleiermacher turned to universal religious experience, Ritschl utilized the moral dimension in human sensibility, following Kant, and Hegel awarded God a choice position in his idealistic philosophy, an dubious honour in view of the rapid demise of that metaphysical system. The problem of God in liberal theology then is wrapped up with the fact that, having turned away from the solid basis of God-talk in special divine revelation, no other solid foundation has yet been located.

Sensing this, neo-orthodox theology sought for relief in the autonomy of faith. 'God' was the assured possession of the Christian community, and needed no defense or rational support. But this refusal to explain the epistemology of faith only left belief in God more uncertain than ever. It was a short step, as William Hamilton pointed out, from the otherness of God to the absence of God. Unhappy with liberalism, and yet unwilling to return to orthodoxy, the new movement settled for ambiguity and inevitable decline, now visible.⁴

It does not require great profundity to perceive what is needed to solve the problem of God at this level. The biblical writers were confident about God because they possessed a lively confidence in God's gracious self-disclosure.⁵ Clarity will not return to belief in God today until a similar confidence grips our minds as well.

(c) Most of us have contributed to the problem of God by the way we have separated the cognitive from the existential. So long as God is treated as a theoretical construct, an explanatory hypothesis, which does little to transform and illumine human life, we cannot expect to convince people of his reality. The depths of God, Paul tells us, are revealed to man by the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:10). Where the church languishes apart from the fulness of the Spirit, there will be no effective communication of belief in God. There will be a breakthrough when believers surrender themselves to the free operations of God's Spirit.

4. Gilkey's analysis of the nature of liberal and neo-orthodox theology can scarcely be surpassed. See *Naming the Whirlwind. The Renewal of God-Language* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969) pp. 73-106.

5. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), I p. 98.

2. THE CULTURAL DIMENSION

(a) A much heralded cause of the crisis of God-language is the alleged mood of secularity that engulfs our culture. The modern spirit, we are told, is radically this-worldly. What it considers real is only the profane, contingent, blind causes that have produced the world. The sacred dimension has all but disappeared for modern man. If this were true, as the secular theologians assure us it is, the meaningfulness of God-talk would be seriously threatened.

However, we are entitled to be sceptical as to the extent of this *Geist*. The actual sociological facts do not bear out the contention. Of the American population it would seem that only a tiny percentage has been affected by hard-core secularism. America may be pluralistic, but is certainly not secularistic.⁶ To understand this remark we need to distinguish between *secularity* and *secularism*. *Secularity* indicates a concern for this world, without making metaphysical judgments. Such a stance may even imply belief in God, since nothing less can sustain it. *Secularism*, on the other hand, is emphatically this worldly and nontheistic, and thus a foe of belief in God. But secularism is not all that wide spread. Indeed, it cannot be, since its two commitments, world-affirmation and the denial of God, are mutually destructive. The denial of God is not the friend of world-affirmation, but its enemy. Insofar as secularistic man denies God, he denies at the same time the only ground that could make his secular commitment meaningful. Evangelicals ought to regard *secularity*, not as a threat to faith, but as a stepping stone to it.

If we are to deal adequately with a generation which, although not *secularistic* is nonetheless pre-occupied with this worldly reality, then we will need to place belief in God in an unmistakable relation with actual lived-out human experience. We will have to undertake a hermeneutic of secular experience in which belief in God can be shown to be meaningful.⁷

(b) One aspect of secularism which has had profound effects on theologians is naturalism. The strident anti-supernaturalism of Rudolf Bultmann may serve to epitomise this attitude. In the opening pages of his epochal essay on 'The New Testament and Mythology' he lists more than a dozen different biblical concepts which must be demythologized in keeping with the standards of naturalistic science.⁸ Because of its resemblance to 19th century positivism, and classical rather than modern physics, we consider this factor of naturalism to be a cultural rather than a truly scientific influence on theology. It does not seem to us to bear an authentically 'scientific' character.

6. See Andrew M. Greeley, *Religion in the Year 2000* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1969); Guy E. Swanson, "Modern Secularity; Its Meaning, Sources, and Interpretation" *The Religious Situation* 1968 ed. by Donald R. Cutler (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968) pp. 801-834.

7. In this respect at least the tradition of Schleiermacher, Tillich, Gilkey, Ogden, and Berger has much to teach us. They construct a most useful prolegomenon to theology, which because of their defective view of special revelation they are unable to exploit to the full.

8. R. Bultmann, in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. H. W. Bartsch, (New York: Harper & Row, 1961) pp. 1-8.

Nevertheless, as a widespread modern myth, it is enormously influential, not least among modern theologians.⁹

One of the many curious things about Bultmann's theology is the fact that he entirely fails to see the bearing of his naturalism upon his theistic belief. He realizes that it rules out the atonement, the resurrection, and the parousia, but seems oblivious to its relevance to the most supernatural element of biblical revelation, belief in *God*. Evangelicals, at least, should not fail to see that relevance. Central to the biblical understanding of the world is the notion of God's purpose, and his acts in pursuance of that purpose. Creation, providence, and eschatology are the three principal moments in the outworking of that plan and purpose. Yet, if naturalism is true, these are the very areas which are now taken over by 'science.' Men today expect to account for everything in terms of mundane causes immanent in the world. In that case, God is out of work. There is nothing for which he is the needed explanatory hypothesis. There can be no doubt that naturalism is to a large degree responsible for the serious erosion of belief in the biblical God.

One of the most urgent items on the agenda of historic Christian theology today is to restore men's confidence in the theistic understanding of the world in which God is constantly at work and which is pliable in the hand of its Maker.¹⁰

(c) An important contributing cause to the crisis of faith in God is the painful experience of evil in the twentieth century. In the face of hydrogen bombs, concentration camps, natural disasters and the like, how can we say that God, if indeed he is the creator and sustainer of this world, is good? The intensity of the evils which we have witnessed of late has unquestionably added to the problem of God. Like J. S. Mill before him, Bertrand Russell was convinced that the evil and suffering in the world constituted an unanswerable objection to belief in a God believed to be both omnipotent and good. It was this same reason which made it impossible for William Hamilton to go on believing in a God who ruled over nature and history. It is the theme also of Rabbi Richard L. Rubenstein.¹¹

It would, I think, be next to impossible to handle such an agonizing problem on the basis of a theology of strict determinism. If God were understood to be directly responsible for every detail of every event (e.g. Hiroshima), he would hardly deserve our respect or worship. If things are now exactly the way he decreed them to be, there is no absolving him of responsibility in the matter of evil. Fortunately, there are other options than that. It is possible, and in view of this problem mandatory, to under-

9. See Langdon Gilkey, *Religion and the Scientific Future* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), ch. 1.

10. See C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (London: Collins, 1947); R. Hooykaas, *Natural Law and Divine Miracle* (Leiden: Brill, 1959).

11. On Russell, see F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* volume VIII part II, p. 241; and William Hamilton, *The New Essence of Christianity* (New York: Association Press, 1961) pp. 63f; Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966).

stand the relation between God and his world dynamically so that the full significance of creation is upheld and the responsibility of moral evil at least placed on man where it belongs. God is not lord of history in the sense of its all-determining cause. Rather he allows the world to exist as a second kind of reality alongside himself, entering into a free dialogue with it and leading it persuasively, but non-coercively, toward the redemptive goals which he has for it.

3. THE PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSION

(a) Until quite recently, Christian metaphysical thinking was a respectable science, and served to sustain belief in God. Since Hume and Kant, however, confidence in metaphysical thinking has declined, adding significantly to the contemporary uncertainty regarding God.¹² Historically, natural theology has always accompanied revealed theology as a compliment to it. Inevitably, with its decline, belief in God is threatened. In many circles valid knowledge is scientific knowledge, although dogmatism is beginning to fade.¹³ The replacement of logical positivism by the ordinary language school was made it possible to discuss again freely many of the concepts so crucial to theology.

What is needed, and what seems to be in the offing, is a rebirth of robust metaphysical thinking. Working from Wittgenstein's concept of 'seeing as,' it is possible to understand metaphysics as a map-making operation with regard to the universe. Man is confronted with numerous areas of experience which cry out for a theistic explanation and settle for nothing less. Even the grand old argument, the cosmological argument, has re-emerged in the current discussion as a weighty possibility.¹⁴ Evangelicals who will not admit metaphysics onto their agenda are not likely to solve the problem of God satisfactorily.

(b) Finally, we should mention a fairly strong attack presently in motion against traditional theism by the forces of process theology and philosophy. It is being claimed that a self-sufficient, absolute God cannot satisfy the existential needs of man, nor enter into significant relations with the world.¹⁵ This particular challenge calls for two types of response. First, we need to engage in careful rethinking of several traditional concepts which adhere to Christian theism, such as timelessness, immutability, and impassibility, so that having understood them correctly we can deliver the doctrine from caricature and unfair criticism. Second, we must give ourselves to work in the philosophy of theism, so as to expose the serious in-

12. James Richmond presents the situation clearly, and points a way beyond the impasse: *Theology and Metaphysics* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

13. See R. S. Heimbeck, *Theology and Meaning: A Critique of Metatheological Scepticism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969).

14. See Bruce R. Reichenbach, *The Cosmological Argument*, Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1972).

15. Ogden, *Reality of God*, pp. 17f, 48 passim.

adequacies of such an alternative as process theism which cannot claim to be viable biblically or rationally.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

There is much work to do answer satisfactorily all the questions on our agenda. It will take the wholehearted dedication of a family of evangelical scholars to restore men's confidence in objective divine revelation, and to impress them once again with its solid metaphysical underpinnings. In view of the pressing nature of the problem and the critical place it occupies in the Christian system of truth, it is urgent that many heed the call and devote themselves to its resolution.

16. A book which combines an acute presentation of traditional theism, together with a trenchant refutation of various alternatives including process theism, is H. P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971).