

## CHAPTER THE THIRD

### THE LIKENESS OF GOD

#### 1. GOD IS COURAGE

Now having set down what those who profess the new religion regard as the chief misconceptions of God, having put these systems of ideas aside from our explanations, the path is cleared for the statement of what God is. Since language springs entirely from material, spatial things, there is always an element of metaphor in theological statement. So that I have not called this chapter the Nature of God, but the Likeness of God.

And firstly, GOD IS COURAGE.

#### 2. GOD IS A PERSON

And next GOD IS A PERSON.

Upon this point those who are beginning to profess modern religion are very insistent. It is, they declare, the central article, the axis, of their religion. God is a person who can be known as one knows a friend,

who can be served and who receives service, who partakes of our nature; who is, like us, a being in conflict with the unknown and the limitless and the forces of death; who values much that we value and is against much that we are pitted against. He is our king to whom we must be loyal; he is our captain, and to know him is to have a direction in our lives. He feels us and knows us; he is helped and gladdened by us. He hopes and attempts. . . . God is no abstraction nor trick of words, no Infinite. He is as real as a bayonet thrust or an embrace.

Now this is where those who have left the old creeds and come asking about the new realisations find their chief difficulty. They say, Show us this person; let us hear him. (If they listen to the silences within, presently they will hear him.) But when one argues, one finds oneself suddenly in the net of those ancient controversies between species and individual, between the one and the many, which arise out of the necessarily imperfect methods of the human mind. Upon these matters there has been much pregnant writing during the last half century. Such ideas as this writer has to offer are to be found in a previous little book of his, "First and Last Things," in which, writing as one without authority or specialisation in logic and philosophy, as an ordinary man vividly interested, for others in a like case, he was at some pains to elucidate the imperfections of this instrument of ours, this mind, by which we must seek and explain and reach up to God. Suffice it here to say that theological discussion may very easily become like the vision of a man with cataract, a mere projection of inherent imperfections. If we do not use our phraseology with a certain courage, and take that

of those who are trying to convey their ideas to us with a certain politeness and charity, there is no end possible to any discussion in so subtle and intimate a matter as theology but assertions, denials, and wranglings. And about this word "person" it is necessary to be as clear and explicit as possible, though perfect clearness, a definition of mathematical sharpness, is by the very nature of the case impossible.

Now when we speak of a person or an individual we think typically of a man, and we forget that he was once an embryo and will presently decay; we forget that he came of two people and may beget many, that he has forgotten much and will forget more, that he can be confused, divided against himself, delirious, drunken, drugged, or asleep. On the contrary we are, in our hasty way of thinking of him, apt to suppose him continuous, definite, acting consistently and never forgetting. But only abstract and theoretical persons are like that. We couple with him the idea of a body. Indeed, in the common use of the word "person" there is more thought of body than of mind. We speak of a lover possessing the person of his mistress. We speak of offences against the person as opposed to insults, libels, or offences against property. And the gods of primitive men and the earlier civilisations were quite of that quality of person. They were thought of as living in very splendid bodies and as acting consistently. If they were invisible in the ordinary world it was because they were aloof or because their "persons" were too splendid for weak human eyes. Moses was permitted a mitigated view of the person of the Hebrew God on Mount Horeb; and Semele, who insisted upon seeing Zeus in the glories that were sacred to Juno,

was utterly consumed. The early Islamic conception of God, like the conception of most honest, simple Christians to-day, was clearly, in spite of the theologians, of a very exalted anthropomorphic personality away somewhere in Heaven. The personal appearance of the Christian God is described in The Revelation, and however much that description may be explained away by commentators as symbolical, it is certainly taken by most straightforward believers as a statement of concrete reality.

Now if we are going to insist upon this primary meaning of person and individual, then certainly God as he is now conceived is not a person and not an individual. The true God will never promenade an Eden or a Heaven, nor sit upon a throne.

But current Christianity, modern developments of Islam, much Indian theological thought--that, for instance, which has found such delicate and attractive expression in the devotional poetry of Rabindranath Tagore--has long since abandoned this anthropomorphic insistence upon a body. From the earliest ages man's mind has found little or no difficulty in the idea of something essential to the personality, a soul or a spirit or both, existing apart from the body and continuing after the destruction of the body, and being still a person and an individual. From this it is a small step to the thought of a person existing independently of any existing or pre-existing body. That is the idea of theological Christianity, as distinguished from the Christianity of simple faith. The Triune Persons--omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent--exist for all time, superior to and independent of matter. They are supremely disembodied. One became incarnate--as a wind eddy

might take up a whirl of dust. . . . Those who profess modern religion conceive that this is an excessive abstraction of the idea of spirituality, a disembodiment of the idea of personality beyond the limits of the conceivable; nevertheless they accept the conception that a person, a spiritual individual, may be without an ordinary mortal body. . . . They declare that God is without any specific body, that he is immaterial, that he can affect the material universe--and that means that he can only reach our sight, our hearing, our touch--through the bodies of those who believe in him and serve him.

His nature is of the nature of thought and will. Not only has he, in his essence, nothing to do with matter, but nothing to do with space. He is not of matter nor of space. He comes into them. Since the period when all the great theologies that prevail to-day were developed, there have been great changes in the ideas of men towards the dimensions of time and space. We owe to Kant the release from the rule of these ideas as essential ideas. Our modern psychology is alive to the possibility of Being that has no extension in space at all, even as our speculative geometry can entertain the possibility of dimensions--fourth, fifth, Nth dimensions--outside the three-dimensional universe of our experience. And God being non-spatial is not thereby banished to an infinite remoteness, but brought nearer to us; he is everywhere immediately at hand, even as a fourth dimension would be everywhere immediately at hand. He is a Being of the minds and in the minds of men. He is in immediate contact with all who apprehend him. . . .

But modern religion declares that though he does not exist in matter or space, he exists in time just as a current of thought may do; that he changes and becomes more even as a man's purpose gathers itself together; that somewhere in the dawning of mankind he had a beginning, an awakening, and that as mankind grows he grows. With our eyes he looks out upon the universe he invades; with our hands, he lays hands upon it. All our truth, all our intentions and achievements, he gathers to himself. He is the undying human memory, the increasing human will.

But this, you may object, is no more than saying that God is the collective mind and purpose of the human race. You may declare that this is no God, but merely the sum of mankind. But those who believe in the new ideas very steadfastly deny that. God is, they say, not an aggregate but a synthesis. He is not merely the best of all of us, but a Being in himself, composed of that but more than that, as a temple is more than a gathering of stones, or a regiment is more than an accumulation of men. They point out that a man is made up of a great multitude of cells, each equivalent to a unicellular organism. Not one of those cells is he, nor is he simply just the addition of all of them. He is more than all of them. You can take away these and these and these, and he still remains. And he can detach part of himself and treat it as if it were not himself, just as a man may beat his breast or, as Cranmer the martyr did, thrust his hand into the flames. A man is none the less himself because his hair is cut or his appendix removed or his leg amputated.

And take another image. . . . Who bears affection for this or that

spadeful of mud in my garden? Who cares a throb of the heart for all the tons of chalk in Kent or all the lumps of limestone in Yorkshire? But men love England, which is made up of such things.

And so we think of God as a synthetic reality, though he has neither body nor material parts. And so too we may obey him and listen to him, though we think but lightly of the men whose hands or voices he sometimes uses. And we may think of him as having moods and aspects--as a man has--and a consistency we call his character.

These are theorisings about God. These are statements to convey this modern idea of God. This, we say, is the nature of the person whose will and thoughts we serve. No one, however, who understands the religious life seeks conversion by argument. First one must feel the need of God, then one must form or receive an acceptable idea of God. That much is no more than turning one's face to the east to see the coming of the sun. One may still doubt if that direction is the east or whether the sun will rise. The real coming of God is not that. It is a change, an irradiation of the mind. Everything is there as it was before, only now it is aflame. Suddenly the light fills one's eyes, and one knows that God has risen and that doubt has fled for ever.

### 3. GOD IS YOUTH

The third thing to be told of the true God is that GOD IS YOUTH.

God, we hold, began and is always beginning. He looks forever into the future.

Most of the old religions derive from a patriarchal phase. God is in those systems the Ancient of Days. I know of no Christian attempt to represent or symbolise God the Father which is not a bearded, aged man. White hair, beard, bearing, wrinkles, a hundred such symptoms of senile decay are there. These marks of senility do not astonish our modern minds in the picture of God, only because tradition and usage have blinded our eyes to the absurdity of a time-worn immortal. Jove too and Wotan are figures far past the prime of their vigour. These are gods after the ancient habit of the human mind, that turned perpetually backward for causes and reasons and saw all things to come as no more than the working out of Fate,--

"Of Man's first disobedience and the fruit  
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought death into the world and all our woe."

But the God of this new age, we repeat, looks not to our past but our future, and if a figure may represent him it must be the figure of a beautiful youth, already brave and wise, but hardly come to his strength. He should stand lightly on his feet in the morning time, eager to go forward, as though he had but newly arisen to a day that was



still but a promise; he should bear a sword, that clean, discriminating weapon, his eyes should be as bright as swords; his lips should fall apart with eagerness for the great adventure before him, and he should be in very fresh and golden harness, reflecting the rising sun. Death should still hang like mists and cloud banks and shadows in the valleys of the wide landscape about him. There should be dew upon the threads of gossamer and little leaves and blades of the turf at his feet. . . .

#### 4. WHEN WE SAY GOD IS LOVE

One of the sayings about God that have grown at the same time most trite and most sacred, is that God is Love. This is a saying that deserves careful examination. Love is a word very loosely used; there are people who will say they love new potatoes; there are a multitude of loves of different colours and values. There is the love of a mother for her child, there is the love of brothers, there is the love of youth and maiden, and the love of husband and wife, there is illicit love and the love one bears one's home or one's country, there are dog-lovers and the loves of the Olympians, and love which is a passion of jealousy. Love is frequently a mere blend of appetite and preference; it may be almost pure greed; it may have scarcely any devotion nor be a whit self-forgetful nor generous. It is possible so to phrase things that the furtive craving of a man for another man's wife may be made out to be

a light from God. Yet about all the better sorts of love, the sorts of love that people will call "true love," there is something of that same exaltation out of the narrow self that is the essential quality of the knowledge of God.

Only while the exaltation of the love passion comes and goes, the exaltation of religious passion comes to remain. Lovers are the windows by which we may look out of the prison of self, but God is the open door by which we freely go. And God never dies, nor disappoints, nor betrays.

The love of a woman and a man has usually, and particularly in its earlier phases of excitement, far too much desire, far too much possessiveness and exclusiveness, far too much distrust or forced trust, and far too great a kindred with jealousy to be like the love of God.

The former is a dramatic relationship that drifts to a climax, and then again seeks presently a climax, and that may be satiated or fatigued.

But the latter is far more like the love of comrades, or like the love of a man and a woman who have loved and been through much trouble together, who have hurt one another and forgiven, and come to a complete and generous fellowship. There is a strange and beautiful love that men tell of that will spring up on battlefields between sorely wounded men, and often they are men who have fought together, so that they will do almost incredibly brave and tender things for one another, though but recently they have been trying to kill each other. There is often a pure exaltation of feeling between those who stand side by side manfully in any great stress. These are the forms of love that perhaps come nearest

to what we mean when we speak of the love of God.

That is man's love of God, but there is also something else; there is the love God bears for man in the individual believer. Now this is not an indulgent, instinctive, and sacrificing love like the love of a woman for her baby. It is the love of the captain for his men; God must love his followers as a great captain loves his men, who are so foolish, so helpless in themselves, so confiding, and yet whose faith alone makes him possible. It is an austere love. The spirit of God will not hesitate to send us to torment and bodily death. . . .

And God waits for us, for all of us who have the quality to reach him. He has need of us as we of him. He desires us and desires to make himself known to us. When at last the individual breaks through the limiting darkneses to him, the irradiation of that moment, the smile and soul clasp, is in God as well as in man. He has won us from his enemy. We come staggering through into the golden light of his kingdom, to fight for his kingdom henceforth, until at last we are altogether taken up into his being.