

THE REALITY OF GOD

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THE REALITY OF GOD.

A WARTIME QUESTION.

PRINCIPAL FORSYTH.

I.

IN our attempts to discuss the nature of God it might be well to cease using the old and wayworn language of substance and its attributes. For it removes us into a speculative region where we may wander without end, as we have no guide either in direct revelation or in experience. We might well follow here the modern trend, refusing to think that it is a decadence, and greeting it as an advance. We might speak accordingly not of attributes and substance but of values and reality. For such categories bring us to contact with a God of personal energy and not of Brahmanical repose; with a God whose energy has both the purpose of a holy Kingdom and the motive of a holy love; who, therefore, comes out to meet our experience and our need, and does not simply wait to be inquired of by our thought. We have a God who takes, by His search for us, all the initiative also of our search for Him. We seek because we have been found. We love Him because He first loved us. We know as we are known. We think His thought after Him. We have a Reality who comes knocking at our door, and even sits to sup with us amid the concrete values of life. He does not inhabit a storm-free centre of abstract substance with attributes playing round it; - nor is His great miracle, in the new creation of us which is at the centre of our worship, a change of substance within attributes that are still there, and still at work, ignorant of the new proprietor. That were too Antinomian.

For Christians, Christ has the compendious value of God. That is, all values we hold divine are focussed, are latent, in Him. He produces on us the effect of God. But it is

impossible for us to stop there without changing Christianity into a religion which has ceased to be creative and become but impressionist. What is the eternal, the objective, value of these values and impressions from Christ, which means so much subjectively for us? How are we sure they are not illusions? How do we pass from the one world to another? Many are suggesting to-day that there is no such passage, that we are victims of auto-suggestion. How do we reach and rest on a reality within our impressions? What is their value to God? What is the relation of the Christ we revere to God? Can we say in any sense that God Himself died? How do we pass from Christ, as value for us, to God as the absolute reality of us and all things? How ascend from subjective experience to objective faith? How, for instance, can our personal experience of Christ and His effect on history warrant a faith in what must be beyond every mere stage of experience—the actual and final consummation in history of the Kingdom of God? How shall we know that the love so intense, so moving, in Christ is equally eternal, that it has power adequate to its passion, that it may not one far day succumb to some dark but mightier fate behind all? Is that love of His the love omnipotent? Can it for ever overcome the last death that works in the Universe? Is it through Him identical with the last reality? Is it enough for us that He so felt it? Is the intensity of His conviction but the greatest of aids to our wish to believe the same? Is—our faith but a smaller replica of His? Or did He *do* something which is not merely His witness to love's eternity, but the act which secures it by beating down, in principle and in advance, every Satan under the feet of God? Was the Cross the real act and cosmic victory of love eternal?

This is not a piece of academic theology. It is the last question of the religion of the hour, when evil is loose as it never was before in our time, and when the religious consciousness has taken a form to which the theological phrasing of it that carried the old heroisms has ceased to appeal. The questions I have put represent the modern form of the problem which the Cross has to answer. It is not so much question about the satisfying of divine justice, or the revelation of divine love, but about the securing of righteous love as the holy and absolute kingdom, as at once the final destiny and the last ground of all history and all things. The revelation we need is not simply, God is love: it is the invincibility of that love by any other power that might rise against it; it is its ultimacy as the last reality. That is, to put it in an old

way which Mr Wells has made current for many. Is the kingship of God a limited monarchy, or is He the Master of every Fate? No answer is really Christian till it establish God's absolute reign as holy love. That is the Christian interior and principle of Christ's death. It is love's destruction of the last enemy, which enemy is something more than our mere mortality. Or can we put it in another modern form? Where is the religious *Authority* within the religious value? How should the love of Christ constrain us absolutely?

To that question there is no answer in the way of demonstrative thought. No process of thought can give us this certainty or security, no movement of the idea reverberating in our mind. For that were to rationalise God amid an age which has reached one of our best values in the conviction that life is at once too great and free to be explained by any rational process alone, or any movement of an idea. The answer to the last question of religion must be a religious answer. Our religion is not an assent to a noetic answer. The answer must be in the religious sphere, in the inner nature of a religious experience autonomous though not isolated and independent. The religious life is of all the forms of life most autonomous. Its principle is in itself; it is not applied from without it, from a process of thought which gives leave for faith. Only the religious understand religion. To rationalise it and to idealise it are equally inadequate. The thing that eludes such treatment is the very thing that makes the religious life what it chiefly is, what it is distinctively. The rational treatment of spiritual reality is like that treatment of the Bible which lays it out in schemes—mapping the Bible instead of mining in it—mapping the Bible that covers a developing millennium of history and opens the depths of Eternity. It is what might be called the topiary treatment whether of faith or Scripture, which lays them out in beds, trims them to artificial shapes, and makes a lifeless peacock out of a living tree. The result may be a curiosity rather than a piety.

Christianity is the religion of moral redemption, and its story is the evolution of a new creation pouring from a historic point. Its characteristic thing, its divine thing, is its dealing at this point with the distress, the tragedy, of human sin. But sin is a thing absolutely irrational. By its very nature it is incapable of explanation—not only beyond it but, alien to it. Therefore that which masters sin is likewise so at the core. Redemption is as extra-rational as sin is. Forgiveness, which for Christian faith founds all, is not a rational process. The element of freedom in both free sin and free grace makes them

intractable to scientific system. Their relation is not to the mechanism of nature but to its vaster organic life and destiny. The intractability lies in their nature and quality, and not only in method or degree. The freedom in history has nothing analogous in nature. It is *sui generis*. In a word, we cannot believe in the God of Christ except by a miracle, whose prelude in the course of evolution is the emergence of moral freedom. We believe by the kind of miracle that is involved in moral action and is not primarily defined by its relation to mechanical law; which may recombine mechanical laws but does not break or suspend them; which is provided for in the total organism of nature's life and not prescribed by nature's machinery. We believe by that in miracle which lifts it above mere mystery or riddle; by that new and original element in personality which must consummate in *action*; by that which defies research, as the will's creative freedom does, because it transcends, like nothing else, the idea of mere spiritual immanence and its *process*, and carries our experience beyond impression to regeneration. It is the experience not of an impressive power but of the new creator. We hold Christ to be God because He does on us what God alone can do—He forgives in His own right. That miracle of experience changes our mere impression to contact with reality. The ground of the step is what some would call no ground: it is a moral miracle. In all consciousness, indeed, there is the *mystery* which is one basis of miracle. How does contact produce consciousness, or at least stir it? How do I come to feel as I do when the tip of my finger meets with any energy the point of a pin? Who can say? But mystery is not miracle; which we do not meet till we enter the region of such action as culminates in a new life and not merely a new way of living.

It is by such a miracle of experience that we pass from Christ's value to God's reality, and find the one in the other. No rational account can be given of that step, which is the greatest the soul can take. Indeed, all real belief in a God of holy love is miraculous. All action of the *Holy Spirit* is miraculous. The humblest man's faith is miraculous according as it is real. That is the region where the whole miracle question must begin to be solved—the region of the Kingdom of God. All the miracles of creation and providence run up to the historic miracle of salvation into that Kingdom. And it is in that idea, which ruled Christ from first to last and from height to depth, that we must start to command the idea of miracle. We cannot wait to go through the miracle

of conversion till we have adjusted the possibility of miracle to the lower level of natural law. We do not believe in God because we believe in miracles; to believe in miracles we must first believe in God and His kingship—believe, that is, really, religiously, personally. Personal religion is miraculous religion. It is by a miracle we pass from death to life, . . . which is the nature of Christian faith—at least in the classic cases, where its true genius is to be sought. Everything produced in us by the Holy Spirit is produced by miracle. The Spirit of God acts plentifully without miracle; Pilate had that power. But miracle is the world of the Holy Spirit.

If personal faith in Christ's redemption depended on believing the miracles, then we should have to start from some satisfactory adjustment of the miracles to natural law or scientific intelligence, and go on, in the strength of that belief, to believe in a revelation so guaranteed. But that is exploded apologetic. There is no adjustment of miracle to natural law which is so satisfactory as science that we could build religion upon it. We must begin at the other, the religious end. The secret of God's miracles is with them that fear Him. It is in the religious experience, and in its experience as action and not only emotion, that the true nature of miracle is to be found. It is in an experience of action between God and us which breaks the chain of moral causation and the fatality of our past. It is in the experience of God as cause, and more than cause, as will, surmounting and even reversing cause. The key to the miracles we can examine is the miracle we have undergone. "Miracles which used to be the foundation of apologetic became in time only its crutch, and now they are its crux." It takes all our faith in the miracle of salvation to believe the miracles of the Saviour.

If it is asked how we pass from subjective miracle to objective, the answer is that we do so in an experience which is not a flash of subjective sensibility and wonder, but a response in kind to God's moral gift of a new creation. There is a certain analogy in our sense of will power, which we transfer to construe the action on us of a real external world. Only, in our sense of forgiveness the action is far more intimate, certain, and real. For sin is sin against an absolute holiness; hence the action of its forgiveness on us is not that of an objective power only (like the external world) but of the absolute One, with all the reality of the moral and holy. I read in a review of Professor Percy Gardner's new book on the *Evolution of Doctrine*, that what theology

needs most is to be *psychologised*. Is that not a mistake? Psychology is a science, and science can give no reality, but only values. It cannot give revelation. What is most needed by both theology and religion is to be *moralised*.

All real belief in a holy God is miraculous. The whole maintenance of the deepest spiritual life is, unless we only float in a mystic sea. It rests not only on spiritual mystery, but, at last, on moral miracle. The facts that serve us here are not evidential but sacramental. They do not clear things up; they break open and give access to a new world with new dominants. Their impressive value in us becomes, in moral depths beyond our psychology, the vehicle of reality from beyond us. The fact Jesus becomes the Son of God in power—not simply as throned in heaven, but as new creative within life; not in royal power, abstract and spectacular, at the switch-board of the moral Universe in a distant heaven, but in power which remakes me within. He remakes me, not by a royal fiat from His far heaven, but by becoming in my thought and reason the real conative power, active purpose, and effectual call. The new Creator “liveth in me.” He becomes, not the object of my thought or even worship, but its energy and its very quality. We have the mind of Christ. We think Christ’s creative thoughts. That is the miracle of Paul’s inspiration as he himself understood and believed it (1 Cor. ii. 16: “I think the thoughts of Christ”). Such was the apostolic thinking that created the Church, and the new Humanity of which the Church is the earnest.

The miracle which lifts experience into faith is the advanced stage, not of the mystery which makes our nature spiritual, but of the miracle that makes our will free. It is evangelical in its nature more than mystical. It belongs to the region of our sin rather than our sensibility, of our forgiveness more than our hunger for God. For saving faith is an act of reciprocal wills. It is an act meeting act. However deeply mystic or deeply moved it may be in the immediate form of experience in which it transpires, it is, at its core, an act of spiritual will. Such is the psychology of it; which must rest on a metaphysic of its own kind, a metaphysic of ethics, not of substance but of subject. And in a mysticism it may float, also of its own kind—the mysticism of conscience, of the Kingdom of God and its righteousness, of our mystically moral Redemption into that Kingdom, of our holy salvation.

So also, if we put the matter in the terms of the last authority, that is experienced before it is admitted. It is a visitation and not a verdict. It comes home, it is not “con-

cluded." And it does not come home in a mystic experience so much as in a moral, in a region of reciprocal action, in which God makes Himself ours, and we respond by making ourselves His. It can be but owned, not explained. Its corporate value must come home to each; we cannot impose it on any. It is not a matter of deeper intuition but of new life, new action, or new creation. The only foundation for Christian authority is nothing that appeals to people of culture in as such. It is the evangelical experience. It is Christ as Redeemer. The only external authority really valuable is that which flows from such faith, serves it, and is owned by it.

The evangelical experience of the gift of eternal life in forgiveness is the middle point between the extremes of Rome and rationalism; and it is there the Christian centre of gravity falls. Not that the experience is prescribed for every Christian soul, but that it is the classic and distinctive Christian experience, giving the principle for those by whom the question of authority is studied and is acute. It is the experience characteristic and distinctive of the corporate consciousness of the Church of the true saints, whether of the canonical or not.

II.

As a matter of fact the access of the Christian soul to reality has been a religious access. It has been in a historical and experimental way through Jesus Christ, especially as crucified. For the moment I am not stopping to argue whether this is an illusion or not. I am only dealing with it as a matter of fact, attractive as would be a discussion of the merits of the case. The Church, though it has done much in the way of philosophical underpinning to its position, has not founded it so, nor rested there. And I submit that current thought is not doing full justice to that historic fact as carrying the widest, the most influential, and the most permanent society on earth. The soul of the Church (and it is the nucleus of the New Humanity) has been made and stayed on the conviction, however won, that it is Christ's conquest of death in connection with guilt that plants the soul on practical reality, grounds mankind for eternity on God's Kingdom, and saves faith from the collapse of old values in the most dreadful calamities of time. It was in this power that Augustine wrote his *City of God* amid the wreck of the Empire and the sack of Rome by the northern barbarians. But all that could only be if it was the soul's belief that Christ in His death and resurrection

not only surmounted in heroism but exploited for righteousness eternal a calamity and a crime the greatest that history could present or Eternity feel. The Church took that measure of the Cross, and it has produced its effect on the world by doing so. It held (rightly or wrongly) that man's treatment of the holy Son of God, coming for his blessing in what God's holiness saw to be his last distress and knew to be His own deepest wound, was a greater moral enormity than anything man could do on man, or nation on nation. Faith went down to the last moral reality, to the last reality of all, in a way to see that the issue of that event settled all spiritual values, all moral issues, all human sin, all historic conflict, in principle and in advance for ever.

I venture to suggest that that is the question still, and it should be kept in the front in all our discussions about the reconstruction either of the Church, or its belief, or its message. If such a war as this do not make us face reality, what will? What is the relation of Christ and His moral victory to the reality laid bare by the dreadful moral situation of our own time, and especially to its revelation of evil? It is not denied by any that Christ's life was a moral victory. And it was the moral victory of a soul which was something more than a mere saint. It could not have affected the world as it has done if it had been merely the self-conquest of an individual piety or genius. It was more than the message of a passing prophet, or the visitation of a spiritual splendour. Its significance was historic, universal, radical, creative, for the moral soul. It was the crisis of the world's righteousness and the world's fate. What, then, is its bearing on the present crisis, which is now moral even more than political or historic, and bound up with a world righteousness far more than a diplomatic situation? *Was* the death of Christ a greater event, a more appalling moral tragedy, than the present war? To say so will seem to many but a pulpit extravagance. And yet the Church at least cannot shrink from saying it without making a present of its faith to our common hours, our common sense, the spirit of the age, or the principle of the world. The Church's faith may not survive this dreadful trial; but if it do, it can only be if the extravagance is not merely believed, but taken as the foundation of belief, the residual reality from the evaluation of all values.

But it is a conviction which rational evidence cannot carry. It involves a moral miracle. If we eke out the defect of logic by mysticism, which goes no further than wonder, we do

not do justice to the element of miracle, which is equally an element in all religions; for mysticism is not action. I mean not only that what is believed is such a moral miracle—God's forgiveness of *such* enemies—but also that the belief in it is such a miracle in its nature. Faith delightedly believes in miracles, being itself miraculous. This is not the refuge of impotence, the asylum of ignorance. It is action — the elenchus of the last religion, the logic or method of the unseen (Heb. ii.), the action of the moral will in its last crisis and committal. It is only by a miracle that we could believe the fundamental miracle of the world, the paradox of the recreated soul, of a life by death, of seeing the invisible. It is by this *saltus* that we solve Plato's riddle and pass from his shadows to his realities. We are turned round, converted in the cave; we do not just advance into the light. It is not a mere matter of education, as Plato solved it. That would make faith but a branch of religious culture (which is the German heresy) and not a moral crisis. God has broken in and roused men to break out. The new life, because it is moral, is *per saltum* without being *salex*. If the Cross of Christ was what the Church exists by believing it to be, the greatest of all moral miracles, then that belief is *ejusdem generis*. It is an act of faith, miraculous in the humblest and simplest believer who is sure that Christ is as real a presence to him as if two thousand years were not,—little as he may realise that it is so, or that his faith is a "function" and not a mere sequel of Christ's resurrection. Again, I am not arguing the merits of the case, but rather indicating the magnitude of it. And I am humbly urging on the Church especially that its discussion should be duly ample and deep. It cannot be settled by the journalistic touch, or the engaging *causerie*. It draws on the whole volume of the consciousness of the Church on the one hand, or of Humanity and its tragedy on the other. And the fly in the ointment is rarely so unpleasant as when charming essays or talks on the character of Christ are blotched by repeated jibes at the theology of His action by amateurs in that line. Christianity does not rest on the teaching of Christ but on His Cross, which is to His precept as creator is to prophet.

III.

Apart from the Church's interpretation of Christ's death, this war is the greatest crisis of the world righteousness that history has known. If we who believe that we stand for that

righteousness as our last and inmost cause were defeated, could we go on to believe in a righteous God in and over all history? It is very doubtful. Of course, there is nothing more tenacious than religious belief, and the public in a mass might long go on with the old creed and worship. But it would slowly have the heart taken out of it, as for many, that heart has long been gone. Those who penetrate things, and whose unbelief is of the radical kind, could say more than they had said before. And they would gnaw away the public belief in due course. Revelation would be unequal to question. We should be reduced—the thin to Mr Wells's limited God, the thorough to Mr Hardy's "It"—to "the Great Foresightless," to "the Inadvertent Mind," to the "Spirit of the sinister and ironic," with an undertone of all the "Pities," hoping against hope that the Grand Force might become conscious and compassionate at last.

Unless—unless power were given the prophets of the Church to reach and convey, as the certainty of the moral world, that the Cross of Christ still leads the generations on, that it was at its heart a vaster crisis for history than the present, that its value lay nearer reality; nay, that it was the last moral crisis of the world truly real, and that it was, within all the values we feel in it, the final victory of the God of love holy and eternal, the real establishment in a slow history of His endless kingship against every Fate. This, of course, the Church might be unable to do in due force. It might remain so entangled, not in the past but in the amoral controversies, creeds, traditions, and sentimentalisms of the past, as to lose the penetration of the moral soul, and the *Holy Spirit's* discernment of the time. It might keep cultivating the note of piety, spirituality, and facile love till it lost all answer on a world-scale to the note of righteousness which ruled Christ; till its truncated mind called the seers, with sneers, the court chaplains of a commonwealth of sectaries. But any Church and any theology worth keeping is the moralised Church or theology which can commend itself to the soul broken by the moral problem of a whole civilisation wrecked, and a whole world in international collapse.

That is the situation the Church and its beliefs is challenged to meet to-day. It is not at last the challenge of the havenots, nor of the comfortables, nor of the savants, nor of the aesthetes. It is the challenge of the whole moral situation. If the Church, handling the greatest moral act in history, declares it to be the moral act final and decisive for a whole historic world, then it must make it relevant not merely to the spirit of the age, *nimum lubricus adspici*, but to the supreme historic junctures, and especially that juncture in which we live, and

where our faith is tried for its life. The Church, escaping from the old jurisms and philosophemes which served their day, must return to construe its charter and trust, not in the light of the ages when theologians were lawyers or metaphysicians, but by Christ's own purpose of the historic Kingdom of God, which ruled His every word and deed, and chiefly ruled His last and greatest deed of all. It must commend its Gospel as it came home to the chief apostle—as the practical revelation and establishment of God's righteousness? Can it retranslate the old power of its Cross into these terms, as moral as they are modern? In the Kingdom of God and its righteousness as established there, can it find the last reality both of its own creed and of human destiny? It is not new values we most need, it is nothing so impressionist, but, within them all, the last reality and its power of regeneration. Amid the broken pitchers of old values it must show the light of the real powers. It must adjust its fundamental belief and address its creative Gospel to the moral problem of the historic hour, both between nations and within them. That is a problem which all men feel but few can gauge. It is not a problem in theology as apologetic, but of theology as a moral Gospel. It is not a curious theology we need, nor a scholarly construction, but an evangelical theodicy as the only theodicy there is. The old evangelicalism is dead; is the new powerless to be born? Mere civilisations end in moral crisis always; can we find at a creative point in time that reality and power which seem to fade in the evolutionary career? Is the Church's real capital an historic crisis that transcends all the crises of the career, and reclaims them for a regenerate realm of God which they go to enrich and glorify? Is the Cross of Christ, beyond" all the values it has for individuals or stages, the insertion into history of a world where the real is the moral raised to the power of the holy? Does all history with its struggle for righteousness turn at last on the issue of righteousness .at that historic point? Does the Church realise that it does? I am speaking of the Church's realisation of its own fonal belief. Can it commend that faith to a moral world, to a public world where love takes the form not of kindness but of righteousness or even judgment, and where righteousness is a greater passion than ever before in history, a world which feels as never before the friction between an ideal ethic and a kind of progress which has been really suppressed war? Or has the Church lost the element which makes the Gospel the salvation of nations and the glory of societies as well as souls? Has it the power to draw from its Cross and drive into the world

such a faith in a moral, righteous, and holy consummation of history as can survive what seems the last dereliction, and pluck the flower of public salvation out of the nettle of the last social danger? Can it relate the Cross of God's righteousness, which it calls the greatest thing in history, to the greatest moral crisis of history and the greatest challenge to belief? Germany is that challenge, as being not only the enemy of Christianity but its betrayer from within. Can the theology which "places" Judas in providence so place Germany, and enable us to believe that such a Satan which wills the evil still works the good? For the living generation that is the supreme challenge which the public situation offers to Christian faith. Never mind for the moment the cause of the trouble; can it be made to serve the Kingdom of God (John ix. 3)? Is it true, as the Church says, that there has been a historic judgment still greater, which, already effected, works out in a swaying history, and carries the eternal secret of a new-creating reality? Can the Church so say that as to make men feel that it is true? As the old values subside, do they leave upstanding clear the last reality as the Saviour whose passing sacraments they were? Can the Church, by moral miracle, transubstantiate to the soul, within all the accidents of time, the reality of an Eternity as holy as it is kind, and as kind as it is fair? Can it make good to the world a religion of emotional thought, not only crystallising on a moral core but created by that moral regeneration which more feel we need than are sure we have?

P. T. FORSYTH.

LONDON