

GOD.

BY JOHN DENMARK.

I WAS musing the other night by the fire while the pine logs crackled musically. . . .

There came a very gentle tapping at the door. I thought at first it was our pet dog gotten loose from the stable where he sleeps at night, but when I went to the door and opened it, the cold November wind blew in without any dog. Startled, I looked into the darkness and saw an old, white-haired man crouched by the doorway. There was an expression of real terror on his face and, as I opened the door farther, he slipped in and crouched in the corner.

"What is the matter?" I asked in some astonishment. "What are you doing in those rags on such a night?"

"They are looking for me," he whispered. I noticed that he was trembling violently.

"Who is looking for you?" I asked.

"Everybody," he replied. "I guess I am what you call a criminal. I have committed more crimes than any other person in the world, and wherever I go somebody is trying to kill me."

As the door blew shut, he jumped as if he had been shot. Then he stared at me so unblinkingly that I thought he must be suffering from some mental disease. Finally I pulled a chair up to the fireplace and asked him to sit down and tell me his story. He was suspicious at first, but after we had warmed our hands together he seemed to thaw out. Then he told me this strange tale.

"I am God." I jumped a little, but he looked at me unperturbed. "That is what everybody does when I tell them my name," he said, "but you see they don't understand."

I smiled and waved my hand for him to go on.

"I am very old," he said. The deep wrinkles in his face and the long white hair falling to his shoulders bore evidence of the fact.

"I don't know when I was born, but it was a long time ago. For a good many centuries I lived in big trees and mountains and clouds where I had a delightful time. Then I went up above the clouds where it is cold, very cold. Occasionally I came down to special celebrations like miracles and earthquakes, but most of the time it has been very lonely. I was glad when they brought me down to earth and I hoped at first that folks would make friends of me, but they didn't. They don't seem to know how human I am. In almost every spot in the world now I am subject to hanging or electrocution."

"But my friend," I asked, "what are all the terrible things you have done?"

For answer he pulled out from his bosom a long white printed bill. It was so long that it seemed to unroll itself for miles and miles before I saw the end. He noted my surprise with evident pride.

"Read it," he said, "and you will see why I am wanted at every bar of judgment in the world."

I took it eagerly and began to read:

Wanted—A person who calls himself God.

Variouly described as a tree, a cloud, ether and a man,

When last seen was on top of Sinai.

He is wanted by the criminal court of humanity for the commission of the following crimes:

He created Adam, and then tempted him to destruction.

He drowned several million innocent people for disagreeing with some of his bigoted Hebrew prophets.

He wanted to destroy the world but was prevented from doing so by the sacrificing charity of Jesus.

He made Judas a betrayer and then sent him to hell for playing true to his part.

He has murdered many millions of his children by famines, fires, earthquakes and plagues.

He has been the leader of every gang of national murderers from the first tribal blood feud to the recent European holocaust.

He has made the human race ignorant, diseased and hateful—

"Yes, yes," interrupted God, pointing a long bony finger at the last indictment I had read. "That at least is true."

His finger touched my hand and it seemed to burn with a terrible sting. I jumped up in my agony.

My wife was laughing at me, for a spark from the fireplace had fallen upon my hand while I was asleep.

Since that dream I have thought a good deal about God and found the subject rather profitable. The religious teacher often scorns the simple, common-sense questions about God which occur to any man when he begins to think. The idea of the fatherhood of God is usually treated with the obscurity of philosophical terms or the soporific of personal raptures. If a preacher ever recovers from these evasive treatments of the subject of God, he asks some strangely naive but strangely penetrating questions.

If God is my Father, why does he leave me alone at so many crises of my life?

If God is my Father, why does he not want to live on more intimate terms with his children?

If God is my Father, why does he allow one half of the world to kill the other half in his name?

To put our questions in the words attributed to Sydney Smith, "Damn the solar system—bad light—planets too distant—pestered with comets—feeble contrivance—could make a better with great ease."

Now the common-sense reply to these queries is almost too simple to record, but I have never heard it effectively combated. If I call any man my father, I assume that he is something like me, that he belongs to my race and family. I assume that he cares enough for me to guard me as much as possible from disease, crime and disaster. If an American father who had the power to save his son from dying in a burning house allowed him to be destroyed without an attempt to save him, he would be branded as a legal and moral criminal. Yet God took the flower of my family and burned her to death one day in a cellar because she inadvertently tipped over a kerosene lamp.

The popular attitude after such a disaster is to "cling bravely to my faith." In that way millions of Russian peasants clung to faith in their czar after he had shown himself utterly heedless of their welfare. For myself I cannot dodge the issue. I cannot continue to believe that God is my father or the father of the human race when he betrays so little care for the lives and welfare of his poverty-stricken, diseased and helpless children.

When the evils of the world weaken our faith in the fatherhood of God, there comes with the weakening a reaction toward optimism. We pass in review the many splendid privileges of the modern man, the delights of nature's beauty, and the friendship of kindly and

honest souls who make life rich and happy by their unselfishness. "How," we ask in this optimistic mood, "how can a God who is careless or cold give mankind all these blessings?"

But the truth is that the blessings which God bestows upon humanity are not half so prolific or beneficial in proportion to his supposed power as the kindnesses which the average earthly father bestows upon his child. The earthly father sacrifices himself to keep the child warm and well-fed and happy. The earthly mother goes into the valley of the shadow to bring the soul of her child into the world. Where outside of the fatuous fictions of theology can we find the love of God manifested as superior to this? If a child is suddenly left to the exclusive mercies of a heavenly father, how clearly superior the earthly father appears!

We cannot evade the truism that a good father will not make some of his children wealthy and some of them diseased and poor, if he has the power to make them all happy. If God is the all-powerful father of the human race, he must be referred to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

There is current in some quarters to-day a certain brand of agnostic optimism which passes for faith in the fatherhood of God. Our healthy animal natures will not allow us to be pessimistic all the time. We are surrounded by people who have strong religious convictions and whose convictions unconsciously influence us in our judgments. So, when we are asked to believe in the fatherhood of God, we are honest enough to say that we do not know anything about God and we do not believe anything in particular about him, but we hope for the best. We are agnostics but not cynics. Whatever is the Power that controls the universe, we are bound that we shall deal with It (or Him) cheerfully and without distrust. The world is a pretty good place to live in in spite of all the earthquakes and fires. You can call this faith if you want to.

This determination to be cheerful plays an amazingly large part in the faith of the people. Tennyson in his *In Memoriam* reaches anti-religious conclusions and then sinks back from sheer exhaustion to a cheerful and innocuous faith. The desire of his heart is so strong that all else is forgotten. He dare not look into the darkness of the night and declare, "I do not know." He loves human life and human hope too much to be so cruelly candid. He allows the tremendous emotional power of a great desire to bring him into a mood of exaltation, and the power of that desire he calls "faith."

Is it not so with the preacher? He does not stop to analyze the idea of the fatherhood of God. He is embarked upon the task

of finding a solution for the world riddle, a solution that shall make him and the world happy. In the joy of doing effective work his critical faculty is dulled and forgotten, so far forgotten indeed that he comes to regard any hostile criticism of religion as indecent. The inexpressible yearning which he has to "know God" is exalted to the level of faith, and imparted with all the power of his being to his fellow men. He prays "Our Father" so often that the habit becomes an unshakable belief.

He does not stop to reason that if this world were really conducted by a beneficent father he would not have to pray at all, and there would be no unutterably horrible pain to explain away.

But a new generation of clergymen is arising which insists on discussing candidly the problem of God. Many sturdy-minded preachers of our own day are trying to adjust the idea of the fatherhood of God to the facts of science and common sense. They are seeking to put a new content in the term "Father," and still ally themselves with the Christian Church. What they have really done is to take over two conceptions of God which are quite foreign to Christianity.

"God," says the modern liberal thinker, "is Universal Life inspired with purpose and moving forward toward better things. All things are a part of God and in various degrees inspired with his purpose."

Such a belief comes naturally to the man who realizes that the old tribal God of the Jews is too small for our modern world and contradictory to the teachings of evolution. Obviously some mighty force is working in nature and in human life, bringing things into a rough unity, creating and destroying human life and keeping rigid the great natural laws. The existence of that force is necessary to explain the largeness of life and its multitude of complexities.

So when the modern thinker describes God as the Life Force and each one of us as the "children of the universal God who is not separate from material life but directly identified with it and expressing Himself through every manifestation of life," we feel that we have found a belief that can agree with our common-sense judgments and what little we know of science.

But is this kind of God our father? Only by the most inexcusable distortion of the term. The fact that I am a part or product of God does not prove that I am his son. I cannot claim that the Life takes any special interest in me or that I am a more significant part than other parts. The Life is also the father of monkeys and toads and volcanoes.

When we are children, we think of God as a great, white-bearded man, or as the enlargement of our father. When we are older, we still think of him as a man with certain powers of "spiritual" extension. But the reflection of maturity will bring us inevitably to this conclusion, that we have no more right to call God a man or a person than the orange has the right to call the orange-tree "The Great Orange." The relation of part to the whole is not the relation of child to father. Only our animal limitations lead us to think of the universe as human.

So the first idea of God which the modern man naturally accepts it too large for fatherhood. The universe no doubt contains qualities of love and friendship, but those qualities are buried deep and quite lost sight of in the great mass of mechanical forces that compose nature. The blind men who felt the elephant described it variously as a wall, a rope and a tree. The Christian enthusiast who takes a few characteristics of the World Force and considers them apart from the blind and unmoral course of life is feeling only part of the elephant. God as Universal Being has even less of fatherly qualities than the elephant has of rope. To describe him as father shows an unforgivable weakness in allowing our wishes to blind our reason. He is not "good" any more than he is green. He is not our father any more than the air we breathe.

My gentle reader will be shocked by these views, for you are no doubt accustomed to very skilful word-juggling about the personality of God. It is a subject easy to becloud by a few skilful phrases. To satisfy the average congregation the preacher must at least seem to reconcile the Christian idea of God as a personal being in the sky who came down to beget a child by a Jewish virgin, with the modern idea of a Progressive World Force. The beclouding and the fusion are done in this way:

"We see in the universe Unity, Thought and Feeling. These are the great characteristics of personality and cannot be manifested apart from personality. So the Universal God must be personal. He is the Father of us all, for from Him we gain all the elements of our being. Our religious consciousness is valid for He manifests consciousness in the evolution of the world-process."

Now the thinness of this reasoning can be seen when we record its opposite.

"We see in the universe Chaos, Ignorance and Cruelty. These are the characteristics of an Insane Devil and cannot be manifested apart from the phenomenon of personality. So the Universal Devil must be personal. Our religious consciousness is invalid because

the Universal Devil does not reveal in the course of evolution any consciousness akin to our own."

And we arrive exactly where we started.

Whether a man believes in the goodness of Life or its essential devilry depends upon the condition of his digestion and the place he occupies in society. If his digestion is good and his place in society is secure, the preacher has little difficulty in persuading him that the Great Power which he vaguely believes in is the personal Father of Jesus Christ.

But for myself I must recognize that the Universal Power indicated by the findings of modern science, whether that Power is divine or devilish, does not fit the description and does not accord with the prophecies of Jesus. It would be studiously inaccurate and evasive if I sought to convince the people that the moving force of the solar system is the same God who was about to destroy the world between 25 and 50 A. D. and set up a kingdom for His son Jesus.

But what of religious experience? Thousands of honest men and women have gained a "personal knowledge" of God, and there is a growing desire among all variety of thinkers to explain this experience in rational terms. That experience ranges all the way from the hysteria of a Pentecostal camp-meeting to the personal prayers of a great philosopher.

To meet this necessity there has grown up a different idea of God. Instead of making God omnipotent and universal we must make him intimate and tangible. God is made up of the combined spirit of the faithful believers. He is the group spirit of the mob. He is the medium of consciousness, the inclusive consciousness which binds our minds together. He is the finite god whom we feel in the enthusiasm of the great revival, in the onward rush of a mighty army, even in the mad blood-lust of an infuriated mob. There is something more in every group of people than the individual mind of each person. That something is the Common Spirit with which men commune when they have religious experience.

"Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." This promise of Jesus is taken up by the believer in the new god and a new meaning put into it. Where two or three are gathered together, they create the god-spirit for themselves. They are reborn in the realm of a new existence, larger and nobler than their old life.

This god is union-made. He is spelled with a small g. He fires the heart of the agitator with passion for redeeming his class.

He thrills the soul of the Fifth Avenue rector with a like passion for preserving all the niceties of upper-class morals. He is the spirit who makes new decalogues on the Sinai of Public Opinion.

This god is the social conscience of the people. He expresses his will in the moral laws of man. He grows with men, suffers with them, and saves them through the tangible forces of social communion.

He is not responsible for the world's earthquakes, fires and murders, for he does not control the solar system.

It does not take a moment's thought to decide that this god of modern reflection is not our father. He is a child of humanity whom we have made out of the texture of our own consciousness. He cannot be omnipotent and he cannot explain the meaning of life. But he can explain those heart-yearnings and vague communions which we have learned to call religious experience. He is our spiritual confessor in a very real sense, for to him we take our judgments, sorrows and sins, and by communion with him we purify our souls of selfish ways.

With us the personality of this god has been associated with the personality of Jesus because Jesus has been identified with all the best ideals of our common life. But the association has been purely accidental. The same kind of god leads the pilgrims to Mecca and stirs the spirit of the Hindu fakir, and like the Christian, the Mohammedan and the Buddhist believe that this god is necessarily associated with their favorite prophets. But when the world has passed beyond the worship of any one prophet, this god will still reign.

The transition to belief in the god of common spirit has already been partly accomplished. The truth is that the world for a long time has been giving only a lip profession to God the Father. There is a hopeless confusion in our thinking of God as Universal Force and god as common spirit. The average man shakes up the mixture and affixes the Christian label "Father," but only in the wildest moments of evangelistic rapture does he assume that any spirit is taking personal charge of his life.

Bernard Shaw has pointed out that what men really believe can be discovered not from their formal creeds but from the assumptions on which they act. The test when applied to the human race shows that we have long ago abandoned the idea of the fatherhood of God and have adopted a double idea of God as Universal Force and God as personal spirit. In the natural course of our thinking I believe we have hit upon the truth.

I believe in both of the Gods I have described above, for both of them are necessary to explain life. Science points the way to a Universal Force which makes order possible. Personal experience and the teachings of modern psychology indicate the existence of a god of group-consciousness. These Gods bear some relation to each other but that relation is not an intimate one. They cannot be consolidated into one by a trick of intellectual gymnastics.

When we have thus escaped from the idea of God's fatherhood, there should be no pretense of being Christian. Jesus Christ has not given us our God nor will we ever be able to go back to the God of Jesus. Little Judea, alive with Oriental imaginings, shut in from mighty Western currents, has given us many mystical treasures, but she cannot give us a God adequate for the world of modern knowledge. Each era must choose its own Gods, and the time has at last come when we are ready to acknowledge the people's part in the choice.

For myself, the only God who means much to me will be the god of our common opinion. He tells me what is right and wrong. He is made in my image. With him I am willing to go into the future ignorant of the Great Riddle but still unafraid.