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GOD-WHO IS HE?

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GOD: WHO IS HE?

An Exposition of the Nature of God

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Today there is but one religious dogma in debate: What do you mean by God? And in this respect, today is like all our yesterdays.

PROFESSOR ALFRED WHITEHEAD, *Harvard University.*

THE central problem facing mankind today is: What do you mean by God? While that question has been of perennial interest since man first wrestled with the meaning of life and the destiny of the human soul, it is of paramount importance today.

The complexity of modern industrial civilization, tearing man from his ancient moorings in the soil and concentrating him in congested urban communities, is unsettling him. Living at the bottom of a mountain of artificial gadgets, which make up the pattern of his daily life, imprisoned in apartment cells of concrete and steel, nature's landscape and the feel of the soil in his hands and under his feet have become but nostalgic memories. As the neon lights in the city's streets dazzle his eyes with their blinding glare, his vision of his goal becomes more obscure.

The uprooting of man from his ancient moorings in the soil has had its spiritual counterpart in the profound changes which have occurred in the intellectual climate of the twentieth

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century. The war has ravished the globe and has heaped agony and death upon man and destruction upon all his works. In consequence he finds himself reaching out desperately for some pillar of support. Unless there is a Being who gives meaning to human striving, life becomes a blindman's buff, a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

With his world tumbling to pieces around him—with the atomic bomb hanging like the sword of Damocles over his head—man is frantically seeking contact with the one Being who can rescue him from his self-made madhouse and restore his sanity and serenity. But how can he find God if he does not know Him? He has been waylaid by false guides and false prophets. Now he must find God or he will perish.

This little book seeks to aid man in his desperate plight today. Against the background of the groping uncertainties and confusions of our day, confusions made worse confounded by the grotesquerie of some of our contemporary metaphysicians, the pamphlet sets forth the nature of God as disclosed by reason and divine revelation and rendered pellucid in the character of Jesus, the untarnished mirror of the Most High.

The answer to man's groping uncertainties, the anodyne for the spiritual distemper of our day, and the balm for his wounded spirit are to be found in the clearer vision of God. With that vision will come unfailingly the efforts to bring God into one's life. Walking always in the presence of God, clasping His outstretched hand, uniting himself to God in deeds of love and service, man will find the answer to his restless questing in the Love that knows no ending and in the Light that never fails.

Sources of Our Knowledge

From His footprints upon the earth and His handwriting upon the illuminated manuscript of the skies we come to the knowledge of the supreme architect of the universe—almighty God. By a rigorous process of metaphysical reasoning, it may be demonstrated that God is a Being infinitely perfect. The personality of the God-man, Jesus Christ, takes these qualities of perfection out of the blue of the skies and renders them incarnate before our very eyes. When we read of the mercy, tenderness, humility, compassion and love of Christ, who with His dying breath utters a prayer for the pardon of His crucifiers, our hearts, like those of the Apostles who walked with Him to Emmaus, burn within us.

The homage of our minds and the love of our hearts go out to the divine Master who is the perfect model for all mankind. In the measure in which we approximate His goodness and His love, do we rise in perfection. All who wish to know God and to grow into His image and likeness will do well, therefore, to study the character and life of Christ as revealed to us in the Gospels.

We can further supplement that knowledge by availing ourselves of the revelation contained in the other books of the Bible. We can do this with logical propriety now, for we have already established the fact of God's existence from reason, science and philosophy.¹ Because the picture which these latter give us, however, is somewhat blurred and wraithlike due to the

¹ See the author's *God: Can We Find Him?* The Paulist Press, 401 West 59th Street, New York 19, N. Y. (15c.)

limitations of the human mind, it is well for us to fill in that outline with the revelations which the inspired writers of the Old and of the New Testament give us.

The increased insight thus achieved will make God a more potent influence in our lives. He will become for us in very sooth the beginning and the end of all our striving. Our love will mount with our knowledge, and our loyalty with our love.

Language Falters

We begin our task by pointing out how feeble and inadequate is human language to express the inexhaustible riches and the infinite perfections of God. Words are but slender and fragile bridges upon which we carry from mind to mind the light cargo of human thought. Try to place upon them a heavier burden and they collapse. They are like footbridges made of trellised vines, scarcely able to support a single traveler together with his knapsack for the day's journey. Burden him with the equipment and provisions for a journey into a far country and you find that the trellised bridge groans and reels and is unable to support the added weight. So the language even of the inspired writers groans and staggers and is unable to bear fully the burden of divine revelation.

Perceiving this, the writer of *Ecclesiasticus* says significantly: "We shall say much, and yet shall want words"; but struggling bravely under his burden, he continues, "the sum of our words is: He is all."

Our difficulty is further increased by the finite character of the human mind in seeking to grapple with the infinite. God

is infinite in all His perfections. Thus does He outstrip in all directions the reaches of our limited understanding.

It is related that St. Augustine was walking along the shore, trying to comprehend the infinite nature of God. A little boy was digging a hole in the sand. Then filling his little pail with water from the sea, he would pour it into the hole.

“What are you trying to do, my child?” inquired the saint.

“I’m trying to empty the ocean into this hole,” replied the child.

“You can’t do that. The ocean is much too big to be put into such a tiny hole.”

“Neither can you with a finite mind comprehend the infinite,” answered the child, who was thus revealed as an angel sent by God to teach St. Augustine this fundamental truth. Whether the incident be legendary or not, the lesson it teaches is authentic and all-important.

While we can attain only a fragmentary knowledge of God, even that fragment is of supreme importance and practical value. The least knowledge of the highest things, observed Aristotle thousands of years ago, far transcends in value the most detailed knowledge of the lowest things. God is the highest in the scale of value. He is the *Summum Bonum*, the highest good, the supreme truth, infinite beauty, unutterable love. Even a partial knowledge of Him is the pearl that passeth all price. Realizing then the inadequacy of language and the limitations of the human mind, we begin humbly and reverently to try to peer even a little way into the infinite perfections of God.

The Infinitude of God

God is revealed to us as a spirit, all-wise, all-powerful, eternal and omnipresent. "God is a Spirit," says our Lord, "and they that adore Him, must adore Him in spirit and in truth." God is a *simple* Spirit. By this we mean that His divine nature is not composed of parts and in it are no unrealized potentialities. For only that which is material has parts, and God is immaterial. Furthermore there is no combination of being and attributes, such as exists in creatures. The divine nature is one and the same with its attributes. Thus God is what He *has*, i.e., He *is* life, beauty, goodness, love. In man these qualities exist in a fragmentary and partial manner. In God they exist in their plenitude.

The infinitude of God surpasses the finite understanding of man. "The things that are of God," says St. Paul, "no man knoweth, but the Spirit of God."² "We know in part," the Apostle tells us, "and we prophesy in part."³ "It is impossible," declared St. Augustine, "thoroughly to grasp and comprehend God, for couldst thou comprehend Him, he would not be God."⁴

Since the mind of man is incapable of comprehending fully God's infinity, it is likewise incapable of devising a name to express His greatness. Hence God is said to be *ineffable*. Whatever name be used for God is inadequate, since it designates only one aspect of His divine being. The most sacred and significant name used by the ancient Hebrews

² 2 Cor. ii. 11.

³ 1 Cor. xiii. 9.

⁴ Serm. 41, de V. D.

is Jahve, meaning *being*. Something of the eternal being of God is reflected in the answer given to Moses who asked God to tell him His name. "I *am who am*," replied God. "Thou shalt say to the children of Israel: He who *is* hath sent me to you." ⁵ Unlike our existence, which is a series of consecutive states, God's is a perpetual *now*. "Before Abraham was made, I *am*."

Time and Eternity—What?

What is time? What is eternity? These are both difficult questions. Philosophers have long struggled to ascertain the essential nature of time. Yet probably none of them would claim to have penetrated to the core of its being. We get some inkling of its nature when we think of it as a way to measure motion. Thus the measure of the earth's motion on its axis around the sun is the universally accepted time we use as a measure for every other motion. This motion is comparatively stable. It is continuous and, like all motion, successive.

Hence we divide it up into days, months, years and into hours, minutes, seconds and fractions of a second. It is these latter measures of motion which our watches indicate with their hour, minute and second hands. While the astronomer encounters many motions far faster than that of the earth, he measures them in terms of the earth's motions.

Were it not for motion, we would have no idea of time. A man, sound asleep, is unconscious of the passing of time. On the other hand, a person tossing sleeplessly on his bed, hears the clock strike every quarter and wonders why the

⁵ Exod. iii. 14.

⁶ John viii. 58.

seconds move with feet of lead. How interminable does a minute seem to a basketball team struggling to protect a narrow lead, while the opponents have possession of the ball. They are acutely conscious of the slow passing of the time because they are acutely conscious of every movement of their opponents, fraught, as it is, with danger to them.

Let us scrutinize now more closely the relation between time and motion. Here is a football player who has broken loose for a long run, speeding with the ball from the fifty-yard mark down toward the goal line. He is now at the twenty-five yard mark. The motion of his legs that *has* carried him there no longer exists. The motion that *will* carry him to the goal does not yet exist. What does exist? Only the motion that occurs on that twenty-five yard line, speeding him from there to a point one step ahead.

So it is with time. The past exists no more. The future is not yet born. All the reality of time, philosophers tell us, is found in the present moment, the "flowing now," the present instant that bridges the past and the future. The fundamental reason why this is so is because change cannot take place in an instant. Like the feet of the football player, moving one after the other toward the goal, change has parts which come one after the other in regular succession.

This succession of steps, characteristic of time and of human life, does not apply to God, to whom the whole of existence is the eternal present. Hence eternity is defined by Boethius as "the simultaneously whole and perfect possession of interminable life." More briefly it has been described as the "*now*

standing," in contrast to the "now flowing" which is the nature of time.⁷ Man achieves a measure of perfection through a succession of actions, living his life piecemeal, second by second. God, however, has always possessed the complete perfection of His Infinite Being. Eternity is not something external to God, whereby we measure His duration. It is inherent in the nature of an infinitely perfect Being.

Not only is God eternal, without beginning and without end, but He is also *immutable*. By this we mean that the infinitely perfect Being undergoes no change. Any change involves either increase or diminution which would be impossible in a Being possessing every perfection in its fulness. "With God," says St. James, "there is no change nor shadow of alteration."⁸

God is likewise *immense* or immeasurable. By this we mean that He has no limitations in space. God does not merely exist in the universe and with it, but also beyond and above it. This is the truth which Solomon expressed at the dedication of the Temple: "If heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain Thee, how much less this house which I have built!"⁹

The attributes of God's being or existence are then *eternity*, *immutability*, *immensity*, and *ubiquity*. In reality these perfections are identical with the divine essence. The limitations of our human intelligence, however, prevent us from understanding how these attributes or qualities constitute in God a unified essence. Yielding to that limitation, we undertake to

⁷ The statement of Boethius, which has become a classic, is: *Nunc fluens facit tempus; nunc stans facit aeternitatem*. It is a model of conciseness and brevity.

⁸ James i. 17.

⁹ 3 Kings viii. 27.

consider these attributes separately. We have already *discussed* the first three.

We come now to a consideration of God's ubiquity or omnipresence. As this consideration' is, we think, of enormous practical importance and furnishes strong motives for rectitude of conduct in all the changing circumstances of human life, we propose to treat it at some length.

God is *omnipresent*. By this we mean that He is everywhere, in heaven, on earth, and in every place. God is present everywhere in three ways: by His essence, by His knowledge, and by His superintending power.

Present by His Essence

God must be present wherever His action is because He is a being of such infinite perfection that His substance and His action are one and the same. God's action extends throughout the universe, governing the fall of the raindrop and the swing of the farthest star. As the wind is present with the ship which it propels, so God is present with every creature, holding it in existence by His conserving power. The relation of a mover to motion, of fire to heat, is not more intimate than God's relation to everything that exists. Well does St. Paul declare: "In Him we live and move and have our being."¹⁰ Just as our soul permeates our whole body, so does God pervade the entire vast universe.

Herein we perceive an essential difference between a human architect and the divine architect. When an edifice is completed, it stands without the aid of the builder. The works of

¹⁰ Acts xvii. 28.

God, however, continue to lean upon Him for support. Unable to subsist without Him, they depend upon Him as much for their conservation as they did for their creation. As a glass bulb, held in my upraised hand, would, if I withdraw my hand, fall helplessly to the floor and break into fragments, so every creature brought into being by the creative power of God would, if He withdrew His conserving power, fall into the abyss of nothingness.

Look up at the star-studded sky and realize that God is there. Look through the telescope into the vastness of interstellar space until you discern stars so dim in the far distance that they eluded your naked eyes, and realize that God is there. Descend with the diver into the ocean depths and there too you will find God. Peer with the eyes of science into the mysterious depths of a molecule of matter, and amidst the whirling of protons and electrons in their unplumbed orbits, you will find God. In the sublime words of Isaias, "Thus saith the Lord: Heaven is my throne, and the earth my footstool." ¹¹

While God fills all space, He is circumscribed by none. He is not dismembered nor divided. He is not partly here and partly there, but entire everywhere throughout the universe. "He is higher," says, Job, "than heaven. He is deeper than hell. The measure of Him is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea." ¹²

What a source of comfort and of strength is it for us to realize that God is present always and everywhere. Nature abhors a vacuum and the human heart dreads loneliness. It

¹¹ Isaias lxvi. 1.

¹² Job ii, 8, 9.

shrinks from the thought of being imprisoned in a solitary cell of matter, with no mind to know its hunger, and no heart to beat in unison with its throbbing. God is the answer to the cry of every heart for companionship and life and love. God is present with us wherever we go. If we mount on the wings of an airplane high into the fleecy sky, God is there. If our labor takes us down into the inky blackness of a mine to dig coal from the bowels of the earth, God is there. He envelops the chair upon which we sit. He dwells within our throbbing heart. He interpenetrates our very being with His divine presence more completely than water penetrates a sponge. He envelops us more thoroughly than the waters of the sea its finny denizens, more intimately than the air surrounds the bird in its flight. The Apostle crowds this spacious truth into brief compass when he says: "In Him we live and move and have our being."

Present by His Knowledge

God is present with us not only by His essence, but also by His omniscient intelligence which extends to the movement of the farthest star, to the fall of every leaf from its tree, and to the stirring of every living creature. Since God is infinitely perfect, He must possess omniscience—all knowledge. If there were anything which God did not know, no matter how small or how hidden, His knowledge would be only finite. But God is infinite in every respect, in His power, in His righteousness, and in his Knowledge.

We can get some glimmering of how God can be present by His knowledge from our own experience in listening to the

radio. When we tune in to a symphony concert, and secure from the broadcaster a vivid picture of the opera hall, the musicians, the audience and then listen to the music, we feel that we are present. We know all that is occurring there. We hear the great melodies of music from their gentle beginnings to their soaring and roaring climaxes. So too when we listen to a speech, a drama, a baseball game, we have such detailed knowledge, simultaneous with the event being broadcast, that we feel we are present.

Indeed, listening to a radio while undergoing an exciting experience elsewhere gives one the sensation of enjoying the power of bilocation—of being in two different places at the same time. This was the writer's experience in flying in a plane traveling 150 miles an hour over the English Channel. Down below were throngs of ships looking like large splinters on a glassy surface, with the English coast just appearing on the horizon. With the plane soaring through the heavens at tremendous speed, battling head winds and gusts of storm, suddenly the pilot slipped over my ears the head-phones of a radio.

In came the soft melodious voice of a concert singer from the Opera House in Vienna. It was so clear that I felt as though I were present in that audience. Here I was with the shores of France fading and the green fields of England coming into my view, while the scene in the Vienna Opera House was equally vivid and clear. Thus did I seem to be present at both places, in spite of their distance, through the knowledge that was coming through my different senses of sight and hearing. If man with his limited knowledge can thus achieve a sense of

being present simultaneously in different places, how much more easily can an infinite God, who knows the smallest detail of every happening, achieve through such knowledge a presence throughout the universe.

The Eternal Present

The past, the present, and the future are all spread out before God, like a vast panorama. He sees them all, as it were, in one view. Strictly speaking, there is no past or future to God. He lives in the eternal present. The division of time into successive moments of duration is necessitated by the finite character of the human mind. But God's eternal knowledge, evident from His infinity, excludes successive moments, excludes past and future. Succession necessarily involves a loss and a gain, the abandoning of one moment's experience for that of the next succeeding moment. The infinite, however, experience no increase or diminution, no loss or gain.

As every aspect of the infinite surpasses the capacity of man's finite mind thoroughly to understand, so God's infinite and eternal knowledge stretches beyond man's complete comprehension. An illustration or two, however, will help. The explorer, climbing up the stately Jungfrau, sees one side of the mountain at a time. As he crosses over to a different side he perceives new contours, new vistas of its massive bulk, towering up into the Swiss skies. If he were, however, in an airplane poised high above it, he could with a single glance perceive the snow-crowned summit, and all its sides stretching down to the lower earth. The mighty vista he is able to secure from his

exceptional vantage point helps us to get at least a glimmering of the all-embracing vision of God.

Let us take another illustration. Two great football teams, unbeaten and untied, meet to decide the question of supremacy. Battling with fury, desperation and abandon, they send alternate fevers of hope and chills of fear, thrills of joy and pangs of dismay, into the vast crowd of spectators. For about two hours they hold the spectators breathless and spellbound. The battle is filmed.

Now suppose that instead of a few feet of the film being thrown on the screen, all of it were thrown simultaneously on a tremendously wide screen. If our vision were adequate, we would see the final play simultaneously with the opening kick-off. This will help us to see how an infinite and omniscient God perceives all things, not in a succession of moments but in a single eternal *now*. It is well to keep in mind God's reply to Moses: "*I am who am.*" Thus did God bring out the sublime truth that with Him there is no succession of time, that He lives and sees and knows in the eternal present.

God's Knowledge and Human Freedom

Consequently it is inaccurate and misleading to speak of God's *foreknowledge*. God does not foreknow. He knows. Difficulties which are based upon the use of such a misleading term fall to the ground when we remove this incorrect term when referring to the eternal and infinite knowledge of God. True, the term may be employed in discussing the matter in a popular manner with people untrained in metaphysical reasoning. Care should be taken, however, to point out that it is

merely an accommodation to our customary way of speaking and to the limitations of our finite mind and that any difficulties arising from such usage are merely *verbal* difficulties, and do not flow from the operations of the divine powers or attributes when properly stated.

Such a difficulty is the one raised in connection with God's knowledge and the free actions of man. If one speaks of God *foreknowing* the actions of man, the implication may be unwittingly conveyed that such actions are foreordained and necessary and that free will plays no part. The difficulty collapses, however, when we remove the misleading term, *foreknow*, and point out that God does not foreknow. He knows. Thus God's knowledge may be viewed as a mirror of the free actions of man.

As I look out of my window, I see students playing tennis. They are playing because they want to play. My knowledge of their actions is not the cause, but the result of the exercise of their free will in the manner described. So may God's knowledge of all the actions of humanity be said to be.

This is the solution given by some of the greatest Christian thinkers to the objection of infidels. "Things do not happen," declared Origen back in the third century, "because God foresees them in the distant future; but because they will happen, God knows them before they happen." Similar is the observation of St. Jerome in the fifth century: "Not because God knows that something will happen, must it therefore happen. But God, knowing the future, foresees it, because it is to happen." We cannot point out too often that what we call past and future stand before God as the eternal present.

If you ask us how God knows all things in the perpetual now, we answer: We don't know. God is infinite, and no finite mind can comprehend the infinite. Otherwise it would not be finite. Our inability thoroughly to understand *how* God knows presents no difficulty to our acceptance of the *fact* of God's infinite and eternal knowledge. We do not know *how* a blade of grass grows, yet we experience no difficulty in accepting the fact that it does grow. If we meet with mysteries wherever our eyes fall upon finite things, why should we not be prepared to meet with mysteries when we are dealing with the infinite?

Practical Implications

Our reverence and awe are deepened when we reflect upon the all-embracing knowledge and the infinite wisdom of God. "He telleth the number of the stars," says the Psalmist, "and calleth them all by their names."¹³ There is not a star whirling its lonely way in the outermost stretch of cosmic space, not a bird winging its way across the trackless sky, not a blade of grass in the verdant carpets of the Western prairies, not a fish in the ocean's depths, not an insect burrowing its way in the bowels of the earth, not a grain of sand on the seashore, not an electron whirling in the unplumbed depths of a tiny atom, that escapes the all-seeing eye of God. Even "the very hairs of your head," the Saviour discloses, "are all numbered."¹⁴

How impossible it is to hide our thoughts or our deeds from the all-seeing eye of God. We may escape detection from the eyes of neighbors, and even from the prying eyes of officers of the law. But the deeds done in secret are as the pages of an

¹³ Psal. cxlvi. 4.

¹⁴ Matt. x. 30.

open book to the eyes of God. "Shall a man lie hid in secret places and I not see him, saith the Lord." ¹⁵ Similarly says St. Paul: "There is no creature invisible in His sight; but all things are naked and open to His eyes." ¹⁶ "The eyes of the Lord," says the author of the book of *Proverbs*, "in every place behold good and evil." ¹⁷

The utter futility of trying to escape from the all-encompassing vision of God is told with moving eloquence by the Royal Prophet: "Lord, thou hast known my sitting down and my rising up. Thou has understood my thoughts afar off, my path and my line thou hast searched out. And thou hast foreseen all my ways. . . . Behold, O Lord, thou hast known all things, the last and those of old . . . thy knowledge is become wonderful to me; it is high, and I cannot reach to it. Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy face? If I ascend into heaven, thou art present. If I take my wings in the morning and dwell in the uttermost part of the sea, even there also shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me." ¹⁸

Every law-maker as well as every student of human behavior realizes the importance of establishing proper *sanctions*, in the form of rewards and penalties, to secure the observance of laws. Without such teeth to enforce them, laws are scarcely worth the paper they are written on. What a magnificent sanction for the observance of the moral law is found in the fact that not merely a minor official but the

¹⁵ Jer. xxiii. 24.

¹⁶ Heb. iv. 13.

¹⁷ Proverbs xv. 3.

¹⁸ Psal. cxxxviii. 1-10.

Supreme Legislator Himself perceives every observance as well as every violation, and will mete out reward or punishment according to one's deserts. Here is a sanction which is worth more than all the skilled operatives in the F. B. I. and more than all the brass-buttoned policemen in all our cities.

This is the sanction which the inspired author of *Ec-clesiasticus* brings out so clearly. He pictures the sinner saying to himself: "Who seeth me? Darkness compasseth me about, and the walls cover me, and no man seeth me: whom do I fear? The Most High will not remember my sins. And he understandeth not that His eye seeth all things . . . and he knoweth not that the eyes of the Lord are far brighter than the sun, beholding round about all the ways of men and the bottom of the deep, and looking into the hearts of men, into the most hidden parts. For all things were known to the Lord God before they were created: so also after they were perfected, He beholdeth all things."¹⁹ The person tempted to sin would do well to reflect upon these words of the sacred writer. Surely the inclination to violate an ordinance of the Most High will speedily vanish if one realizes that the eyes of God are upon him and His hands are already fashioning the sinner's deserts.

Present by His Power

God is present everywhere not only by His essence, not only by His infinite knowledge, but also by His *superintending power*. Just as the soul pervades the body and is necessary for every movement I make, so God's concurring power is necessary for every move I make, for every word I utter, and for every

¹⁹ Ecclus. xxiii. 25-29.

thought I think. Just as God brought us into existence out of the yawning abyss of nothingness by His creative power, so He sustains us in existence by His conserving power. Were God to withdraw His sustaining hand from us for one instant, we would fall back into the nothingness from which we came. God is as necessary for our life as the air we breathe.

While God is present throughout the whole universe by His essence, knowledge and power, He is present in the chosen members of the human family in a still more intimate manner. The prophet Jeremias tells of this mysterious indwelling of God: "Behold the days shall come, saith the Lord, and I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Juda: not according to the covenant which I made with their fathers. . . . But this shall be the covenant that I shall make with the house of Israel: I will give my law in their bowels, and I will write it in their heart: and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." ²⁰

Present in Intimate Manner

In the tabernacle of every faithful and devout soul God dwells in a particular manner. Attentive indeed are His ears to the prayers of the person who communes with Him within this living temple. It is of this divine Presence that St. Paul writes to the Corinthians: "Know ye not that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? But if any man violate the temple of God, him shall God destroy. For the temple of God is holy, which you are." ²¹ With Tennyson can the devout soul say:

²⁰ Jer. xxxi. 31-33.

²¹ 1 Cor. iii. 16.

Speak to Him, thou, for He hears, and Spirit
with Spirit can meet—
Closer is He than breathing, and nearer
than hands and feet.

God is present in an especially intimate manner in the soul that is filled with the love of God. Such a person is fulfilling the great commandment, in which are contained all the laws and the prophets. "If any one love me," said Jesus, "my Father will love him, and we will make our abode with him."²² It was in this manner that God abode with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; with Moses, Josue, and David; with the prophets, Apostles, and martyrs; and with all the holy souls who clung to Him in deeds of righteousness, in prayer, and in acts of love. God and one constitute a majority. When God is with one, he need fear no power in heaven, on earth, or under the earth.

The realization of the intimate presence of God in the souls of those who love and serve Him is a powerful bulwark against temptation and an incentive to strive constantly to make one's soul a more fitting habitation for the Most High. For this reason there are few exercises of the spiritual life more profitable than that of the practice of the presence of God, the constant recollection, even if only subconscious, of the indwelling of our maker, our best friend, and our ultimate judge. When we forget about God, and turn our backs upon Him, then danger stares us in the face.

Creatures can at times take on such a garb of attractiveness

²² John xiv. 23.

that, almost before we realize it, we find our hands stretching out to possess them. The experience of the race, sad and tragic as it is, shows us, however, that they are like Dead Sea apples that crumble at the touch. They do not yield the promised joy but only boredom, nausea and remorse. We shall be spared from learning by the costly method of painful experience, if we remember the all-important fact of God's presence. Thus sin becomes an offense not to a distant Being in the far-off firmament, but an insult to One present within us. Is it likely that an individual will deliberately insult a friend in his very presence?

Cannot Flee from God

Futhermore one cannot flee from God's presence, even if he would. He may depart from His friendship but not from His presence. Even though guilty, he must still face his maker and his judge. What experience in life is more embarrassing and painful than that of facing a friend with whom you have not kept faith? What gnaws more deeply into the marrow of your being than the agony which comes from the realization that you have shattered the high ideals that he has held of you? The shame you experience is hotter than a red-hot iron, more piercing than a serpent's tooth. How can one escape that bitter humiliation, that cup of gall, if one fails to keep faith with His Lord and Master who has deigned to make His abode within the individual's heart and soul?

The realization of God's abiding presence is helpful not only in resisting temptation but also in bearing with patience and even with joy the hardships and the pains which life in this

valley of the shadow of death inevitably brings. Is it not easier to bear sickness and pain when we know that we are in the presence of friends, doctors and nurses who will not fail to do all in their power to help us? So likewise the consciousness of the presence of our best friend will not fail to give us strength to carry our burden and to bear our suffering with patience and resignation.

God will not fail to make each moment of pain bear its rich fruition in the ineffable joys of life everlasting. Such tribulation as He permits to fall upon us is but the "shade of His hand outstretched caressingly." In all the vicissitudes of life, in times of joy, temptation, or suffering, the consciousness of the presence of God will not fail to give us the humility, the protection, and the strength which we need.

We have presented at some length the truth of God's abiding presence throughout the universe and throughout the whole of human life. We have done so because a realization of this important truth is bound to exercise an enormous influence in our lives. "The more we are penetrated with this thought," observes Cardinal Gibbons, "the more perfectly shall we possess interior freedom, indifference to human judgment, and a habitual disposition to rectitude of conduct."²³

When my students at Notre Dame came to me to say "Good-bye," before being sent to the far-flung battlefronts of World War II, I could think of no truth more comforting to propose to them than that of the constant presence of God.

"Remember," I was accustomed to say, "whether you are sent to the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific, or to the

²³ Cardinal Gibbons, *Our Christian Heritage*, J. Murphy Co., Baltimore, p. 70.

Aleutians in the far North, to Tunisia or to any of the countries of Europe; whether you are assigned to a submarine to prowl in the depths of the sea, or to an airplane to wing your way through the trackless skies, or to be encased in a mighty iron tank to penetrate to areas where no other vehicle can travel . . . remember that God is with you wherever you go."

It has not always been easy for youth to leave home and friends and native land to go out to face death in all its hideous forms in the far corners of the world. But what, perhaps more than anything else, nerved them for the difficult task which their country asked of them, was the realization that *God went with them all the way*. It is a truth, as helpful as it is comforting, for old and young. To clasp the outstretched hand of God in all our gropings and wanderings is to find a sure and a safe road.

Omniscience and Omnipotence

Thus far we have presented the principal attributes of God's being or existence. Now for a brief word about those belonging to His knowledge and to His will.

The attributes belonging to God's knowledge are *omniscience* and *wisdom*. By omniscience, we mean that God knows everything perfectly and has known it from all eternity. The past and the future, as we have already pointed out, stand before God as in the living present. God is also all-wise. By this we mean that He knows how to dispose everything so as best to accomplish what He wills. Wisdom in creatures is different from knowledge. Knowledge may consist of mere information. Wisdom is the ability to use that information to the best advantage.

The knowledge then of all that is contained in all the encyclopedias and libraries in the world would not necessarily indicate that such a man is wise. He might not know how to use such encyclopedic knowledge. In God, however, knowledge and wisdom are one with each other and with the divine essence. "How great," says the Psalmist, "are thy works, O Lord! Thou hast made all things in wisdom."²⁴

The chief attributes of God's will are *omnipotence, freedom, sanctity, justice, goodness, mercy, patience, fidelity*. By omnipotence, we mean that God can do all things and that nothing is hard or impossible to Him. God can accomplish whatever He wishes by a mere act of His will. "No word," the Angel Gabriel reveals, "shall be impossible with God."²⁵ With God, to will and to perform, constitute one and the same act. This follows from God's infinite perfection which includes boundless power and excludes the imperfections of effort, toil, fatigue and successive partial accomplishment.

Can God make a square circle? Can God make a rock so large that He cannot lift it? These are variations of the old question: What happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object? The answer is: These all involve contradictions and are therefore devoid of all reality. God can do *anything*, but the contradictions mentioned, and all others like them are *nothing*. Their intrinsic repugnance puts them beyond the sphere of both physical and metaphysical possibility and strips them of all being.

²⁴ Psal. ciii. 24.

²⁵ Luke i. 37.

"The Depth of the Riches . . ."

It is not necessary to develop each of the previously mentioned attributes of God's will. They and all the other noble attributes which the human mind can conceive, exist in their fullness, without an alloy of imperfection, in the infinite perfection of God. No catalog could list all His perfections. No litany could sing all His glories. We find ourselves exclaiming with St. Paul: "O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are His judgments, and how unsearchable His ways! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been His counsellor? . . . For of Him, and by Him, and in Him are all things: to Him be glory forever. Amen."²⁶

The formal language of philosophy and theology, while accurate as far as it goes, falters and collapses in the effort to reveal the heights and the depths of the unscaled and unfathomed being of the infinite God. We can secure, however, some feeble concept of the perfections of the Almighty, when we realize that the admirable and lovable qualities found in the noblest of human beings are all found in their plenitude in Him. These qualities can exist in only a limited way in human beings because their containers are limited.

Years ago the writer sat one evening at sunset looking out over the waters of the sea of Galilee along whose shores the divine Master had so often walked with His Apostles. Suddenly my reverie was broken by the arrival of a group of native women. They had come, as their forebears from time im-

²⁶ Rom. ii. 33, 34, 36.

memorial had come, to fill their vessels from the waters of the ancient sea. Then, placing their vessels on their heads, they returned to their homes. They come to a goodly lake, but they go away with such a tiny bit. Not because there is no more water to take, but because that is all their receptacles will contain.

How like a picture of humanity! We come from the illimitable ocean of the being and perfections of the infinite Creator. But we carry away only a few tiny drops of that vast ocean because that is all our finite human nature will bear. What the mighty expanse of the waters of the Pacific is to the thimblefull scooped out by a little child, the immeasurable being of the infinitely perfect God is to the finite being of man. We are a drop of water. He is the mighty sea. We are a grain of sand. He is the vast seashore. We are a splinter of time. He is the ageless sequoia. We are a farthing candle. He is the blinding sun.

"His Magnificence Is Wonderful"

The perception of the grandeur, the majesty, and the power of God in contrast with the puniness of man stirred many a prophet of old to reach the heights of eloquence. Listen to Ecclesiasticus as he wrestles with this mighty theme: "What shall we be able to do to glorify Him? For the Almighty Himself is above all His works. The Lord is terrible, and exceeding great, and His power is admirable. Glorify the Lord as much as ever you can, for He will yet far exceed, and His magnificence is wonderful. Blessing the Lord, exalt Him as much as you can; for He is above all praise. When you exalt Him put

forth all your strength, and be not weary; for you can never go far enough. Who shall see Him, and declare Him? and who shall magnify Him as He is from the beginning? There are many things hidden from us that are greater than these; for we have seen but a few of His works.”²⁷

Similar too are the sentiments uttered by the great prophet of divine unity, Isaias. “Praise ye the Lord, and call upon His name: make His works known among the people: remember that His name is high. Sing ye to the Lord, for He hath done great things: show this forth in all the earth. Rejoice and praise, O thou habitation of Sion: for great is He that is in the midst of thee, the Holy One of Israel.”²⁸

“The Light of the World”

There is no theme so worthy of our reverent consideration as that of God, His nature and attributes. “This,” says St. John, “is eternal life: that they may know thee, the only true God.”²⁹ We avail ourselves of the ripe thought of the greatest philosophers and theologians to peer a little way into the illimitable being of God. We supplement it with the insight of the prophets and inspired writers of the Old and of the New Testament. We lean upon the consideration of all the perfections found in human creatures to try to conceive what the result would be if they were all combined in their fullness in a single personality.

More authentically still do we see God mirrored in the winsome figure of Jesus. He is God incarnate, and reflects the

²⁷ Eccles. xliii. 30-37.

²⁸ Isaias xii. 4-6.

²⁹ John xvii. 3.

mercy, the compassion, and the love that fill the heart of God. Repeated and devout reading of the Gospels will make the personality of Christ a living influence in our lives and thus make us more Godlike. "Draw near to God," says St. James, "and He will draw near to you."³⁰ The more earnestly we strive to know God, to serve Him, and to love Him, the more intimately will God dwell in our souls and make His radiant presence known to us.³¹

God is the answer to the cry of every lonely soul for friendship and love. He is the end of our ceaseless quest for life and happiness. He is the end of the rainbow, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of all things. He is the light of the world, and they who follow Him do not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. He is love unutterable, and the only love that can still our restless hearts. "Our hearts," says St. Augustine, "have been made for Thee, O God, and they shall never rest, until they rest in Thee." The practice of the presence of God fills our heart with a quiet peace and makes our face to shine with a radiance which neither clouds can obscure nor grief banish. To know God is to love Him and to serve Him is to reign.

³⁰ James iv. 8.

³¹ For a more extensive presentation of these vital and supremely important truths, the reader is advised to secure a copy of the author's *Truths Men Live By*. Macmillan Co., N. Y. (\$3.00.)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

I

1. Why is the meaning of God of such paramount importance today?
2. What has uprooted man from his ancient moorings?
3. What are some of the changes which have occurred in the intellectual climate of the 20th Century?
4. What is the answer to man's groping uncertainties?
5. What are the sources of our knowledge of God?
6. How may we measure our growth in holiness?
7. Why does language falter in seeking to mirror the nature of God?
8. What does the writer of Ecclesiasticus say on this point?
9. Relate the incident concerning St. Augustine. What truth does the incident illustrate?
10. State and comment on the observation of Aristotle.

II

1. What do we mean when we say that God is a *simple* Spirit?
2. Why is God said to be ineffable?
3. How do we get some inkling into the nature of time?
4. Why would we have no idea of time were it not for motion? Illustrate your answer.
5. What do we mean by the immutability of God? By His immensity?
6. What are the four attributes of God's being or existence?
7. In what three ways is God omnipresent?

8. What is meant by saying that God is present by His Essence? Illustrate.
9. What is the essential difference between a human artist and the divine artist?
10. Quote Job on the presence of God.
11. Why is the omnipresence of God a source of comfort and of strength to us?

III

1. What do we mean when we say that God is present by His knowledge?
2. How can we get some glimmering of such presence? Illustrate.
3. What is meant by the eternal present?
4. What necessitates a division of time?
5. Illustrate how God's infinite and eternal knowledge stretches beyond a man's comprehension.
6. Why is it inaccurate to speak of God's *fore-knowledge*?
7. What is the problem of reconciling God's knowledge with human freedom?
8. How is that problem solved? Illustrate your answer.
9. Quote the observation of Origen. Of St. Jerome.
10. Do we understand *how* God knows? Why?
11. What are some of the practical implications of God's presence by His knowledge?
12. What does the Royal Prophet say on this point?
13. What is the meaning of sanctions? How does God's presence by His knowledge provide sanctions for man?

IV

1. What is meant when we say that God is present by His superintending power?
2. What does Jeremias say on this point?

3. Where is God present in a particularly intimate manner?
4. Quote the words of St. Paul on this point. Of Jesus.
5. What are among the most profitable exercises of the spiritual life? Why?
6. Why cannot creatures flee from God?
7. What does Cardinal Gibbons say on this subject?
8. What was the author accustomed to say to his students on leaving for military service?
9. What is meant by the omniscience of God?
10. Distinguish between wisdom and knowledge. Illustrate your answer.

V

1. What is meant by the omnipotence of God?
2. Can God make a square circle?
3. Quote the words of St. Paul on the wisdom and the knowledge of God.
4. What illustration is offered of the illimitable knowledge of God and of the finite mind of man?
5. Work out an illustration of your own on this subject.
6. What does Ecclesiasticus say concerning the majesty of God?
7. Quote the words of Isaias on this point.
8. What, according to St. John, constitutes eternal life?
9. Who is the authentic mirror of God?
10. Why is God the answer to the cry of every lonely soul?
11. Why shall our hearts never rest until they rest in God?

