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CONCERNING GOD, MODERN MAN AND RELIGION

Mortimer J. Adler

♦ Part 1 of 2 ♦

If theology and religion are living things, there is nothing intrinsically wrong about efforts to modernize them. They must be open to change and growth like everything else. Further, there is no reason to be surprised when discussions such as those about the “death of God”—a concept drawn from Nietzsche—stir popular excitement as they did in the recent past, and could do so again today. Of all the great ideas, the idea of God has always been and continues to be the one that evokes the greatest concern among the widest group of men and women.

Yet if it is to be expected that efforts to modernize theology and religion will always cause a stir, several special aspects of the case in the 1950s and 1960s—which are still at work among us—are worth noting.

To start with a question, have any great intellectual events been ushered in by the new and “radical” theologians such as Clarence Hamilton, Paul Van Buren, Thomas Altizer and Gabriel Vahanian? Any new truths in theology? None. Any new insights into the nature of religion? None. Any new insights into the nature of religion? None. Any new advances for the reform of religion? None. One could apply to this sterile spectacle the sense of Emerson’s remark when he looked from afar at the 1848 Revolution in France and wondered aloud if the results were worth the trees that went into the barricades.

The authors who gave currency to the notions of the new “radical theology” supported their assertions with nothing more substantial than the kind of proof that would satisfy the bellman in Lewis Carroll’s *Hunting of the Snark* who cried: “What I tell you three times is true!” There was, however, a close accord between the ambiguous language they used and their purpose. Their purpose was to transform atheism into a new theology—“the religionless Christianity,” “atheistic religion,” “secularized Christianity”—to preserve some of Christianity’s religious teaching while secularizing and combining it with atheism.

So the question emerges again. What is new about the new theology? Again the answer is nothing. Atheism is not new, nor is irreligion, nor is secularism. These are very old even when they sounded in the work of the eminent modern predecessors of the new theologians—in the work, for example, of men such as Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. All, at bottom, denied the existence of the supernatural. Yet all persisted in talking about God.

For my part, I respect the honest clear-minded atheist who denies that God exists and tries to offer thought out reasons for the denial. I respect the honest, critically minded agnostic who denies we can ever know whether God exists or not, and treats religious belief as a pure act of faith, incapable of being supported or challenged by rational analysis or empirical knowledge of the world. I respect the person who, in his horror of the superstitions and persecutions that have attended the practices of religious institutions, rejects the whole of religion as something from which man should emancipate himself. But I cannot respect those who corrupt the integrity of words in the very act of addressing matters of central importance in theology and religion. I cannot respect those who instead of

calling atheism by its right name, contrive a peculiar set of excuses for atheism (as in the “death of God movement”) and then—in spite of laws against false labeling—call the result a new theology.

On Calling Things by Their Right Name

A namesake, but not a relative of mine, Dr. Felix Adler, was the founder and head of the Ethical Culture Society. I knew him slightly. In the early twenties he was a senior professor of philosophy at Columbia when I was a junior instructor there. On Sundays, the day usually devoted to religious observances and the worship of God, the members of the Ethical Culture Society forgathered, but there were no ceremonies or rituals, no prayers, no services. Instead there were some very weighty lectures on moral philosophy and strenuous exhortations to do good. I knew many members of the Ethical Culture Society. All were morally exemplary persons who took these exhortations seriously and indulged in a kind of ethical athleticism and a frenzy of moral “do gooding.”

A young friend of mine went to the Ethical Culture High School. After he had been there a while, I ventured to find out if he understood what the principles of Ethical Culture stand for? Without even a slight pause for reflection, he straight-away answered: “No God, no religion, and plenty of exercise.”

Mortimer Adler

The Nature of this Essay

In much the same way as a path through a forest becomes clear when the sun starts to set, the loss of light that has marked the radical new theology points up the need for the tasks I have set in the pages lying ahead.

I must try to explain what is entailed in the pivotal conception of God—pivotal because it is *that* conception which is denied by the atheist, affirmed by the theist, believed by the religious, and thought by the agnostic to be beyond the grasp of our knowledge. Further, I must note the old source in Protestantism for some of the errors that underlie the contemporary movement of radical theology. I must then come to grips with what I believe to be the most difficult subject of all—the meaning of religion itself.

Directional Signs

In what I have to say about these matters, I will speak not as a man of religious faith or as a dogmatic theologian, but as a philosopher

or a natural theologian. Natural theology is a branch of philosophy which stands on a plane apart from faith and dogma. I will not speak as an apologist for Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, though what I will have to say philosophically, which bears on an understanding of God, will accord with the traditional conception of God in the three great monotheistic religions of the West. As a philosophical theologian, I will confine myself to only three notions that are essential to the conception of God.

They are that God is transcendent, that God is a necessary being in contrast to the contingent being of all other things, and that God is the cause of the being of everything else that exists. I will not go beyond these three notions, nor will I try to prove that God, so conceived, exists. My intention is simply to make clear what is affirmed by those who affirm the existence of God, and what is denied by those who like the new theologians deny it.

At one point, I will raise the question (without trying for an answer) whether the conception of God shared by the three great traditional religions of the West is present also in the religions of the East—or indeed, whether the very term “religion” stands for the same thing in the Far East as it does in the West.

The First of the Three Basic Notions

As noted, the view that God is transcendent is the first of the notions in the concept of God. The meaning of “transcendent” can perhaps be more dearly seen when it is viewed through the focusing lens of a conjectural question. If God exists, what is God like? The three possible answers are exclusive and exhausting. They are that:

—God *is totally unlike everything else* in nature that we know or are able to know.

—God *is totally like everything else* in nature that we know or are able to know.

—God *is both like and unlike everything else* in nature that we know or are able to know.

There is no fourth possible answer. Rather, what comes into play is the rule in logic which holds that if answers to a question are confined to three alternatives, and if two of them are untenable, the one that remains must be the right one. So we must now determine which two among the three answers given a moment ago must be rejected, and which is the one left that we must accept.

What are the consequences of saying that God is *totally unlike eve-*

rything else in nature that we know or are able to know? “God” then becomes a word devoid of meaning. Why? To convey a meaning, a concept must have something in common with other concepts we have in mind when we use other understandable words in our vocabulary. The concept of “animal,” for example, has something in common with other understandable words such as “lion,” “bear,” “dog,” “horse,” “cow.” But if the concept of God has nothing in common with anything else we can intelligibly describe, it is as senseless to deny the existence of God as to affirm it. Atheism becomes as meaningless as theism. In fact, the only question that would then be worth asking about God is how men ever came to use so meaningless a word and why they still everywhere continue to use it, as they do in the new theology and all current forms of atheism.

What are the consequences of saying that God is *totally like* everything else in nature that we know or are able to know? God would then have to be conceived as corporeal, finite, sensible, mutable, contingent, along with all the other attributes that we ascribe to the natural things we know. But if those attributes are ascribed to God, are they knowable in the same way as other things we know? Can God, for example, be investigated in the manner of the natural sciences where a hypothesis in physics, chemistry, and biology can derive its validity from the outcome of controlled tests and experiments? It is enough merely to ask the question to see that God cannot be known in the same way we know the attributes of other things. So we must rule out as false the proposition that God is totally like everything else in nature.

If the first two answers are not tenable, then we are left with the third one—that God is *both like and unlike* everything else in nature that we know or are able to know. It is like everything else in that it must be thought of as *a being*. I am not here asserting God exists. I am only saying that God must be conceived as *a being* about which we can meaningfully ask whether or not it exists, just as we must conceive of a mermaid or Hamlet as a being about which we can ask that existential question.

While God, conceived as a being, is thus like all the other things about which we ask whether or not they exist, God *is* unlike everything else with respect to this *mode* of being. We conceive of everything else in nature as *material* or *corporeal* beings, as *mutable* beings, as *sensible* beings, as *finite* beings. All the italicized words refer to their mode of being. But if God were like everything else in mode of being, God would be totally like everything else, a proposition we have already rejected.

What is meant by the “analogy of being” is central to an under-

standing of the concept of God as a being who is at one and the same time like and unlike everything else in nature. Two things are analogous if, in any given respect, they are at once the same and diverse.

Take, for example, the analogous meaning of the word “sharp.” When we say a “sharp” sound, a “sharp” point, a “sharp” taste, all three things are “sharp,” but they are diversely so. Furthermore, you cannot say what it means to be sharp apart from your understanding of what it is to be a sharp sound, a sharp point, a sharp taste. You cannot abstract the meaning of “sharp” from the diverse sensory qualities of taste, sound, and touch. In the same way, you cannot understand what being is, apart from your understanding of mutable and immutable being, material and immaterial being, finite and infinite being. These are analogous in being, just as a sharp taste, a sharp sound, and a sharp point are all analogously sharp.

The failure to understand the analogy of being has been the pivotal inadequacy of Protestant theology from Luther’s time to the present. The Protestant Reformation itself, I must quickly add, was very good on the side of the reforms of ecclesiastical abuses and the removal of the superstitions that are always parasitic encrustations on religion. Much that is good in the modern ecumenical movement also draws some of its spirit from the Protestant Reformation. The bad side of the Protestant Reformation, beginning with Luther, was its violent anti-intellectualism. This lost to the modern world the great achievements in theology that accumulated from the fourth to the fourteenth century.

A striking example of the failure of modern Protestant theology is the book of Ludwig Feuerbach written in the 1840s, and titled *The Essence of Christianity*. He noted that the attributes of God and of man appear to be the same. We say that God lives and that man lives, that God knows and that man knows, that God wills and that man wills, that God loves and that man loves. Feuerbach then pointed out quite rightly that when two objects have the same attributes, they must be identical. God and man have the same attributes, hence they are identical. This calls for the reduction of theology to anthropology and gives rise to an anthropocentric humanism that is a deathblow to Christianity or any other religion.

The remarkable fact is that six generations of German Protestant theologians from Schleiermacher to Karl Barth and down to the present day, all knew that this was a deathblow to Christianity. Yet none was able to answer Feuerbach by correcting the basic error he made. His basic error was his failure to see that while God and man have the same attributes, “living,” “knowing,” “willing,” and

“loving” when said of God and man are said *analogously*, not *univocally*—as “animal” is said univocally of human beings and of pigs and cows. They are all “animals” in the same sense of the word.

The strange inability of German Protestant theologians after Feuerbach to perceive this error, led some of them to Christian humanism, which is the complete abandonment of Christian religion; it led others such as Karl Barth to put God beyond the reach of the human mind in order to avoid Feuerbach’s attack.

The Second of Three Basic Notions

The second notion of the conception of God is that God must be thought of as a necessary being. There is no space here to trace the evolution of this concept from the time it was first formulated by St. Anselm in the eleventh century, through its amendments by St. Thomas Aquinas, Immanuel Kant and other critical writers. Without putting too fine a point on the matter, something maybe gained on the side of understanding by means of the following statement.

St. Anselm pointed out that when we think about God, we must have in mind a Supreme Being than which no greater can be thought of. We must also think of God as existing necessarily, because if we did not, we could think of a greater being. God, therefore, must be conceived as the only being that *cannot not exist*, though the question would remain whether the necessary being we have thus conceived does in fact actually exist. In other words, we must still discover whether there is in reality—outside our minds—anything that corresponds to the concept of God we have formed in our minds.

The Third Basic Notion

The third basic notion in the conception of God is that God is the cause of the existence of whatever else that does in fact exist. No natural causes ever cause the existence of anything; rather, they are causes of change or becoming. The simplest way to grasp the point quickly is to consider animal progenitors or human parents. These do not cause the *existence* of their offspring, but only *their coming to be*—their generation.

Now the existence of whatever exists in the world must have a cause—must have a reason for its existence, either in itself or in another. The point being made here is reinforced by the principle of parsimony which governs all our scientific and philosophical thinking, including our thinking in natural theology. The principle says that we cannot affirm the existence of anything we conceive

unless we can show how its existence is needed to explain what we already know exists. More immediately, the same principle says that unless God is conceived as the *only* cause of the existence of whatever exists contingently, and so needs a cause of its existence, we cannot prove that God exists. The proof depends on the truth of the factual proposition that this cosmos as a whole exists contingently—which is another way of saying that it is capable of not existing at all. If the latter proposition is false, there is no valid argument for the existence of God.

The Question of Atheism

The question about atheism, or disbelief in God, as it was raised by Bishop Robinson in *The New Reformation* is, in my judgment, the only clear and sensible question raised by any of the new theologians. Bishop Robinson phrased the question as follows. Can a truly contemporary person not be an atheist? A fuller articulation of the question would go like this. Must a truly contemporary person, one who is fully acquainted with all the genuine advances in science and philosophy, who has lived under the conditions of contemporary life with its holocaust, its nuclear weapons, its moral corruption—must not such a person be an atheist in order to be honest and clear-headed?

In this fuller form, the question subdivides into two parts. One refers to the incompatibility of the belief in God with the present state of our scientific and philosophical knowledge. The other refers to the incompatibility of the belief in God with the present state of our lives in the world as it is today. I will comment on the two parts in reverse order.

The State of Contemporary Life

It is true that immense changes have taken place in this century, especially in all the external features and arrangements of our human environment. It is true that this is the century in which such changes have taken place at an accelerated pace and in ever increasing volume. It is also true that the multiplication and swift pace of change in the external aspects of life are discomfoting, upsetting, certainly challenging and perplexing. But it is not true that the essential features of human life have been greatly altered, or that life is any more difficult to live or to live well than it ever was in the past. In some respects, it is much easier than ever before, and in other respects, it may be harder. On balance, however, we cannot say that the problem of how to make a good life for ourselves is more difficult now than it ever was in the past. Nor can we say that it has now become an impossible problem to solve, or that we are doomed to defeat before we even try.

A person would have to suffer from otosclerosis—the most common cause for deafness—not to hear a familiar cry that life has become meaningless, purposeless, absurd, vile, intolerable. All around us we are assailed by voices full of self-pity, almost despair over the torment of having to be alive and to carry on in the world as it is today. Yet for all this, there is nothing about the conditions of contemporary life that calls for atheism as the proper response. I claim that life is no more difficult to live well now than it ever was in the past; and if belief in God ever played a role in living a good life on earth, that role is unchanged at present. Even if life were now more difficult, that would not require a contemporary person to become an atheist. On the contrary, it might more reasonably lead him in the opposite direction, for if God does exist, belief in Him might help man to overcome the difficulties he now confronts.

The crux of the matter must rest, therefore, with the present state of our scientific and philosophic knowledge. Perhaps Bishop Robinson had the state of that knowledge in mind when he suggested that a truly contemporaneous person cannot avoid being an atheist. Let us look at this part of the picture.

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