

The Democracy of God

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There are two sentences, neither of which is very clearly understood, but which are often on the lips of men, that I wish to use this morning to suggest what I have to say. One is, "God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."² The other is, "Ye cannot worship God and Mammon."³ The Greek word which is translated "spirit" is "PNEUMA." It means breath. We get our word "pneumonia" and several others of the same nature from it. It does not signify a spirit entity, or a spirit being, but breath, or life. The Greek phrase, "APHIENAI PNEUMA" means to give up the ghost, to spend one's spirit, or to spend one's life, or to die. The Greek word, which is translated, "in truth," is "ALATHEIA," and means, "without reservation." The Greek word, "MAMÔNAS," which is translated "mammon," is the name of the Syrian God of riches, and is equivalent to the Greek God Plutus, or the God of wealth. So the meaning of these two sentences is this: God is life, and they that worship him must worship him in life without reservation. Ye cannot worship God and Mammon. Ye cannot worship life and riches. One of these must be the master.

Each age has made its own God into whose nature and character it has attempted to embody its own culture, development, and standard of civilization. Men in all ages from the crude savage to what we are pleased to call the modern civilized man, have felt the baffling challenge of the mystery of life and the relation of men to each other and the universe in which they live. During all those years, centuries or ages, we have no reason to think that the real nature of the universe, seen or unseen, has changed. But we note as we study the records of the past, that there has been a constant change in the nature and the character of the gods that men have made and worshipped as

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #5"—that includes sermons from January 2, 1910 to January 15, 1911.

² John 4:24.

³ Matthew 6:24.

the embodiment and the interpretation of life. Each succeeding generation or age has faced the same ultimate fact of reality, has passed through certain life experiences, has reflected and meditated upon those experiences, and out of them has carved its image to serve at once as the symbol and ideal of its interpretation of the deeper and permanent meaning of human life. So, we have a clearly defined evolution of gods, beginning with the crudest conception of places and things inhabited by good or evil spirits and continuing through the varied changes in the evolution of human society up to the present. In the early unorganized society, men placed their faith in a myriad of good and evil spirits; and [tried] to court the favor of the good spirits. As, out of these vague chaotic beginnings of organized society, there gradually developed the tribe, with its natural leader, so side by side with this growth in new social relations, there developed a similar change in the idea of gods. One powerful spirit gains control over the many spirits, and becomes the leader. As the tribal life gave way to the kingdom with its powerful and absolute leader, different from other men whom he ruled, so the idea of a one tribal god took the place in the minds of men and of the old idea of many good and evil spirits. The history of the evolution of the Jewish idea of God is a good illustration of this change. It is all reflected in the various stories and traditions of the Bible. It is often said that to the Jews belongs the credit of first coming to the idea of one universal God of all mankind. That is probably true, but it comes to the front at the time when the children of Israel were dominated by that tremendous idea of the superiority of their people over other tribes and races, and their ultimate destiny as rule of the world. Here, as in all other cases all through history, the Jewish God, Jehovah, is much more interesting as a mirror of the genius of the Jewish people, and the image of their idealism, than he is as the true revelation of that ultimate mystery and power of life, which in all ages men have signified by the use of that symbolic word, "God." This is the point that I wish to bring out, not for its intellectual value, but for its practical value, that in all ages, including the same process that is going on in our own age, men, in the face of this ultimate life mystery, have fashioned the God of their own times. Into his character, into his nature, and his power, they have woven the wisdom and the ideals of their life, coloring the fabric thus made with their deepest and most secret purposes. These gods thus made, and the interpretation of their relation to human life, reflect in a very faithful manner the

social and moral ideals of the people who made them. It follows from this fact as a practical corollary for our own problems that the nature and the character of Jehovah as pictured in the Jewish Bible is of value more as a revelation of the real genius of the children of Israel, than he is as a faithful and trustworthy revelation of the nature and mystery of the universal life spirit which he suggests. Only as we accept the principle that the experiences and reasonings of human life tend to approach the ultimate truth, can we conclude that the Jewish idea of God was in any way an adequate interpretation of the nature and essence of the real life spirit.

But in reply to this, the man who believes in a supernatural religion, supernaturally revealed, will say that our knowledge comes not from experience and reflection upon experience, but through supernatural channels, and is marked with the trademark of authority. To this, all we can say is that such a supernatural religion, which is beyond our wisdom and experience, is also beyond our use, for that knowledge, which we cannot think, that truth, which we cannot experience, neither can we use.

In the various stages of Christianity also this same process of God-making has been going on. While we have maintained the continuity of form in the use of the word, "God," we can by no means assert that the God as pictured by the pious man of the middle ages with his long army of heavenly lackeys, saints and other accessories, is the same as the hard cruel God of Calvin or Luther, or the maudlin commercialized bribe-taking God as pictured in some of the ecclesiastical thought of our own time, and set up as an appeal to the decent and self-respecting manhood of our times as an object of worship. Strive as hard as one may, he cannot draw a picture of any of these, and make any one of them, or all of them together, look like the picture painted by the human-loving carpenter of Nazareth as his ideal of the great life mystery to which he conceived it to be his mission to bear witness "in life and without reservation." Each age has made its own God in its own image, as its explanation of the life spirit.

But what is the great human need, the great human faith, that is back of this age-long process of the making of gods? Some will tell you that it has simply been the insidious work of self-seeking priests, who were thus striving to gain a living in

the world and to gain control over the popular mind. That may be urged with some plausibility against those priests whose efforts have been expended in the vain attempt of holding up dead gods, or trying to make the dying live beyond their allotted time. But when it comes to [the] fashioning of new gods, to the embodiment of new ideals into new interpretations of life, we have another situation. That task calls for men, not men who are after power and an easy living, but men who are after the truth. Do you think that Christ was seeking priestly power? Do you think that Savonarola was seeking priestly power?⁴ Do you think Darwin, brave worker in the making of the God of our own times, was seeking for bread and meat?⁵ Do you think that Theodore Parker, or Emerson were seeking bread or courting popular favor or power?⁶ Any man who knows anything of the history of life, knows that such an explanation of a process that has been going on through all the known history of man is simply absurd.

But I will tell you what the real human need, the real human conviction is behind all this great dramatic process, and is working in human life today as it never worked before. In spite of the fact that the long-faced theologian will tell you that this world is a vale of tears, and that this life is a thing evil and vile, and that we must free ourselves from its ensnaring allurements, in spite of the fact that the belated survival of a bygone age will tell you that humanity is under the curse of sin, and is entirely depraved, that it can hope for nothing short of an eternal punishment as a reward for having been thrust into a godless life, in spite of all this unwholesome, morbid, offensive remains of a great and vigorous

⁴ Girolamo Savonarola (1494-1498) was an ascetic Italian Dominican friar. He denounced clerical corruption, despotic rule and was an advocate for the poor. He played a role in the expulsion of the Medici in Florence and the establishment of a republic in their place. He refused to join Pope Alexander VI's Holy League against France, and continued to preach while under a ban, including processions campaigning for reform with bonfires of the vanities. He was condemned, hanged and burned on May 23, 1498. Martin Luther, among others, considered Savonarola to be a precursor to the Reformation.

⁵ Charles Darwin (1809-1882) author of the *Origin of Species*, 1859, and the theory of the evolution.

⁶ Theodore Parker (1810-1860) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) were founders of the American Transcendentalist movement. Parker was a Unitarian minister.

people, humanity as a whole laughs in their caricature-like faces, and dares to believe that life is not all a mockery, dares to believe that all these great human forces—these great dreams, these great hopes, these great sorrows, these great strivings, these great loves that fill the soul of humanity with a resistless power—are in us because they belong there, that they have been born in our beings, and are growing and maturing in the human soul, because they are the legitimate fruit of human life, because the universe in which we live nurtures and nourishes such as these in our conscious lives, because the great life spirit calls for them, and they have grown up out of the soil of the infinite past in response to the alluring warmth of that which we dare to call the spirit of the living God. The pathways of history are strewn with the remains of dead Gods, but each one in his own time has been the living embodiment for a people or a race of this great conviction that the world in which we live is a world of integrity, and that the longings and hungerings of the human soul for a satisfying life shall be realized. Working from that same great human conviction today we are painting today our God of democracy, fashioning it in the lines and colors and forms of our own hopes, ideals and purposes.

It is said that those who make two bails of grass grow where one had grown before has lived a life worthwhile. Much more may it be said that he who buries a dead god, and builds another and a better has done a great service. Since the coming of the age of science, the old gods have died, and humanity is building a new God as its picture today of its deepest and most sacred hope of the nature of the universal life spirit. Slowly, quietly, persistently that work has been going on these many years. It is at once a symbol of human achievement, and a witness to the ultimate integrity of humanity. But many who have seen the shrines of the old gods deserted, and have felt the power of the priest slipping from them, have broken the divine stillness of the work by their cries of infidelity and atheism. The Catholic Church has pronounced officially that all this work that is going on, all building [that] does not recognize its claim to be the master of ceremonies, is error, irreligious, atheistic, and a menace to society. The good Calvinist is of the same mind, and likewise the pious one of the evangelistic type. I do not want to say thing about them, but I do want to say that if atheism consists in refusing to worship a God who crushes the power of reason from the soul of man, I cannot worship such a God, I do

not believe that it gives any right idea of the real life spirit. Nor can I give my allegiance to that God that dooms the millions to eternal misery for no fault of their own. I do not believe that I live in a universe dedicated to such a preposterous mockery. Nor can I believe that the God of the church of commerce, who accepts the bribe of buildings and charity and endowment funds as a propitiation for wrongs inflicted upon man is a true picture of the life spirit. I do not believe that a God who accepts a bribe of any kind is a correct picture of the real nature of the great life spirit. I cannot believe that a God fashioned by the people of slavery⁷ or a God fashioned by the people of feudalism, or the God fashioned by the people of commercialism, or the God fashioned by the people of industrialism, is a correct image of the deepest and truest spirit of our times. I have no faith in those gods, they disgust me, as I believe they disgust you. But I do believe in the God which is true to the spirit of our times. I believe in the God of democracy. I believe in the democracy of God. I believe that men today who have the faith that we may answer the age-long prayer for our daily bread, men who have faith that we may yet attain our eternal longing for justice, that we may yet deliver ourselves from evil, men who have faith that human life is divine, and that the deepest riches possibilities of the human soul shall be attained, I believe in them, in their faith, and their unmade God. When I see humanity looking up from its toil, it's want, its misery, its evil, and, with a look of hope on its face and the ring of faith in its voice, send out its challenging call to the building of the God of democracy according to the principles of the democracy of God, I feel as if I must take the shoes from off my feet for I know that the place whereon I am standing is holy ground.

No, I do not believe in a far-off God who rules the world of men, as a king rules his empire. No, I do not believe in a God who has made us ignorant without the capacity of learning, or evil without the power of God. No, I do not believe in a God who has filled our beings with longings, hopes, dreams and loves, only to have us learn through the experiences of life that they are hollow mockeries. But I do believe that our hunger for a rich satisfying life is rational. I do believe that our dreams

⁷ This phrase, "people of slavery" is confusing in this context. A better phrase to capture what Davis very likely meant would be "people supporting slavery."

of justice are right. I do believe that our cravings for wholesome whole-souled human fellowship are founded on the nature of our beings, and shall be satisfied. I do believe in the eternal sanctity of human life in all its relations. Yes, and when I sometimes get discouraged over some of the shallow mockeries of life, and long for humanity to leap forward to its own, I am strengthened and given courage by the inexplicable conviction that in and through all the surging, boiling turmoil of human life, the great life spirit is working toward the consummation of those very hopes and loves that are dearer to us than life itself. Call that great mystery what you may, law, life, matter, force, tendency, or God, there it is. We are the fruits of its manifold workings, children of its spirit, filled with the essence of its nature. As I marvel over the strange vicissitudes of human life, the tremendous products of the human mind, and the baffling mystery of it all, I am fain to say that God is life, we, who worship him, must worship in life without reservation.