

The Moral Significance of the Evolution of Religious Faith
From The Idea of God As An Occasional Visitor
To The Idea of God As the Indwelling Goodwill

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Quite naturally we are inclined to forget the vast change that has taken place in the minds of men during the last few hundred years as regards their idea of the world and the universe in which we live. Looking at the universe as we now do, in light of what the astronomers and scientists have taught us, it is almost impossible for us to realize that the time ever was when men could think that the earth was a flat surface surrounded by a great flowing ocean. Still more surprising does it seem when we learn that the heavens were something like an inverted bowl, on the inner surface of which were attached the stars and the planets. That idea of the world has become for us now only a kind of intellectual antique, which interests as a curiosity of cosmic philosophies to be put away in our museums of intellectual relics. How strange it all seems when compared with what we now regard as a much truer idea of the world.

But this change is not less remarkable and not less radical than the change that has taken place in man's idea of the unseen spiritual world and universe in which he lives. I wish briefly to recall to your minds that change, and to point out the significance of it as touching our religious faith, and our moral conduct as men and women, living in a social order. It is not an easy thing to point out this change briefly, either from the intellectual or the moral point of view. But possibly it can be presented by contrasting the religious and the moral idea as they appear in the Old Testament writing ascribed to Moses with the religious and the moral ideas as they appear in Jesus' teaching.

To state as simply as possible the idea of god as he appears in the Old Testament, one would say first of all that he was

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regarded as a person. He was a big man. He was not the only god. But he was the only God of Israel, and his name was Yahweh or Jehovah. When we read in the ten commandments, "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me," we are not to understand that this commandment means that there is only one God. It simply means that the children of Israel shall worship only the God of Israel, and shall give up all obedience and allegiance to the gods of other people. God was a person, similar to them in all ways, subject to fits of anger, jealous of the honor paid to him, punishing his enemies, rewarding his friends, entering into conspiracies, leading the armies of the children of Israel, winning victories for them. In short, this person, Jehovah, was just like any of the leaders of the tribes of Israel, differing only in this, that he was more powerful, greater, and had powers and capacities so great that he could accomplish things that the leaders of the tribes were helpless to bring about. Their God came to earth occasionally. Moses went to see him on Mt. Horeb. He met Moses and delivered to him the ten commandments. He appeared to Moses and told him to go down into Egypt to free the children of Israel. In fact, everywhere we have this great mysterious person, the God of Israel, who was their champion and their leader.

But in no place does the nature of god appear more clearly than in the religious services, of the feasts and the sacrifices. These are largely centered about their festivals and celebrations. Their God was a man, like themselves. When they had a big celebration over some victory, or some important event, they desired their god to be present with them and enjoy their feast. So they brought to the feast not only the food and the oil and the wine, necessary to satisfy their own appetites, but they brought their choicest breads and grain and burned them on the altar. They killed best and most perfect beast and burned them on the altar. Oil was also added, and spices to make them more palatable. Then the best of their feast wines were poured out on the ground to satisfy the thirst of Yahweh. By this method his presence was assured, and his good fellowship in their pleasures added to the merriment and the fun of their great festival days. Whenever they were about to depart upon some undertaking, they prepared a feast for their god, and thus gained his cooperation in their undertaking by giving him a good time with their grains, choice meats, rich oil, and invigorating wine.

Such in rough was the idea of God which the Children of Israel had in the early days, when they were building up their nation, and becoming powerful. But as the centuries passed on and the people changed, new ideas began to appear. They learned by the terrible experience of the downfall of Israel, and in the long years of the exile that their God was not only a God of power and might whose cooperation was to be gained by lavish feasts and magnificent temples. But he was a god of Justice as well; that he demanded mercy and loving kindness and just treatment instead of sacrifices and burnt offerings, and wine. As they saw their nation's existence threatened, and their children lead away into years of humiliating and cruel service under another nation that worshipped another god than Jehovah, it began to dawn upon their minds that their God was not only the God of the Jews, but of the Gentiles as well; that there was but one God in the universe, and that he had given to the Jews the great task of proclaiming his power over all the nations, and his will that all nations should serve him according to the law that had been delivered to the Jewish people.

Thus during the centuries the Jewish people had learned by the varying experiences of personal and national life one of the greatest truths that man has learned. Gradually absorbing the best of what their experience had taught them, as they tried to explain the mysteries of human life, and the relation of human life to the universe in which we live, they had arrived to the [conclusion] that there is a great all-powerful ruler of the universe, whose will and purpose is made known to men in the Jewish system of social and religious law. They had also come to the conclusion that the one great duty of life was to obey this law in all its detail. Thus would man be happy and live the happy life.

But even now new forces were at work, and new thoughts were stirring in the minds of men that were to give to this great truth that the Jewish people had learned a deeper meaning and a richer significance. In the thought, in the teaching of Jesus, and more especially in his life, we find these new ideas taken up and personalized. If we state as briefly as possible the turn which Jesus gave to the great religious ideas which he had received from his people, we shall see that he opened a new chapter in the evolution of Man's ideas of god and life.

In his interview with the Samaritan, we find a good point of departure in understanding the way in which Jesus faced these great problems of life. The ancient idea of God as a person, which had been a part of the Jewish idea all through its history still obtained. God was to be worshipped either in the mountain, as the woman of Samaria said that her father had worshipped, or in the temple at Jerusalem, as the Jews said. But "Jesus saith unto her,"

Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem shall ye worship the Father. ... But the hour cometh and now is when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in Spirit and in truth: for such doth the Father seek to be his worshippers. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.²

Considering the circumstances under which this is said, and the remark of the woman of Samaria to Jesus, the idea which he intends to convey to her is plain. You still worship a god who is a big person, to be found on some mountain, or in some temple. But that is not the true worship; God is not a person to be worshipped in the temple or on the mountain. But God is a spirit to be worshipped as a spirit and in truth. This, I say, is the new turn given to the idea of God in the time of Jesus. God is not a person but a spirit.

But what kind of spirit was this God whom Jesus worshipped in spirit and in truth? If we read the parables and the other teachings of Jesus, we shall discover that what Jesus knows about the spirit, he has learned in his everyday life among the common people of the towns in which he lived. God is a spirit, but he is that spirit who could teach Jesus the meaning and the depth of life, not alone through the law and the prophets, but as well through all the manifold wonders and beauties of the luxuriant life of nature which he saw about him, and from which he drew one of his choicest truths. The lilies of the field, the birds of the air, the cornfields, the life of the sea of Galilee, all spoke to him of the spirit whom he worshipped in spirit and in truth.

But still more, in the manifold interests of human life, the same spirit spoke to him, opening to him the secrets of the human soul, and through the secrets of the human soul, the

² John 4:21-24.

secrets of the great spirit whom he worshipped in spirit and in truth. In the life and the experience of the common people of Palestine, shot through and through with thoughts, feelings and aspirations, in which Jesus saw disclosed the nature of the spirit, did he find the faith that made his life sublime.

The form and the source of what by many is regarded as the essence of his whole teaching is simply an incident of everyday life which he knew and saw. In the story of the prodigal son where all the great forces of human life are brought into play, the father who had cared for his children, worked for them, watched over them, provided for them, staked his whole interests upon their well-being: the younger son, full of adventure, impulsive; anxious to tread upon the adventurous paths of a strange life; his mistakes, his errors, his ultimate loneliness and his want, his thoughts of the old home, its simple love, its tender solicitations for his well-being; his return, and the whole-souled hearty joy of the father at the return; all this is a picture of common life, parallels of which we may find in our everyday experiences. Here in this simple human tale we find the deepest of all the religious truths that Jesus uttered. The great spirit life of the universe is like the great and generous nature of this father of the prodigal son. Just as the Father cared for his son, provided him with the means of living his own life, and then gave him the free opportunity of living as seemed to him best, rejoicing when he did right, sorrowing when he did wrong, waiting patiently for his return to the father's house; so also is this great spirit like the human father. It gives life, it equips with powers of living, it gives freedom, it watches tenderly and carefully and rejoices at the awakening of the great nature of man, and his return to the life of which he has the possibilities. Like unto this father of the prodigal son, was the spirit whom Jesus worshipped in spirit and in Truth. Because he saw here in this human spirit of parental love and care, the highest and the deepest feelings of human life, childless though he was, he turned to the great spirit with whose power he saw that the whole earth and all life was saturated, and uttered the simple word, so full of the deepest of human feelings, Father.

Perhaps it was because he had never heard the word Father used by a child who looked into his eyes, and could understand its full meaning only as he entered into the lives of others with

abounding sympathy, that he loved the more to speak of God as Father.

Thus did Jesus speak to the inquiring men and women of his time. You want to know about God? God is a spirit; and we must worship him in spirit and in truth. He is in the life of nature, in the life of man, in your life. Through your experiences as men and as women, you, as children playing in the fields, as lovers tender and true, as fathers and mothers, as workers in the world, you come to understand the great truth and meaning of human life, disclosed in you and through you by the spirit of the infinite good will.

But there is still one other way in which Jesus learned to understand the deeper meaning of life. Not once but often, not as a duty, but as a necessity, he turned aside from these objects and the people whom he loved and in whom he saw the spirit of God, to go into the mountain and in the infinite stillness of the night alone with the great spirit, to meditate, to see things as they are, to understand them in all their relationships, to find out and to understand one's duty. Only he who has been perplexed by some great problem, and who has been driven by necessity to solitude so that he may get his bearing, and see things as they are, can realize what it means to find truths and the spirit of the great good will speaking to the human soul in the stillness of the night and out of the very depths of one's nature. Then one feels that god is a spirit.

Such was the point of view and such the worship and communion which Jesus Knew.

Now I tell you that in so far as the Christian Church has been true to the spirit of Jesus' life, it has maintained this free open natural interpretation of the relationship of the human personality to the great spirit of the universe. In response to the subtle commands we have made our ways as a race of people over the pathways of eighteen hundred years of history. In so far as we have made progress, we have followed along the pathway pointed out to the son of a carpenter centuries ago. In the deep and secret pool of the human soul, made by the minute stream of the infinite life flowing into the life of man, we see mirrored the nature and the character of the infinite. Him we worship in spirit and in truth.

But the great significance of this open way of life appears in its bearing upon the meaning of life as you and I live it. It is like the combined effects of the rain and the sun upon the vegetation, making them to grow and unfold the full capacity of their nature with such leaps and bounds and to make one fear that he may hear their triumphant shout of joy, as leaf after leaf unfolds itself to make beautiful the world, as tiny bud burst forth into the full beauty, sending forth its fragrance broadcast over the earth; as the flower fades away and gives place to the fruit, and then best of all comes the rich and bounding harvest. So also is he who knows the meaning of the life ordered in the great good will. Every act is full of bounding joy, every thought teams with goodwill and noble purpose. Selfishness and cruelty become impossible. One drinks in the beauty and richness of life and becomes great in life's possibilities that he may give the more and with the greater lavishness of that wealth of the things of the spirit that feed and satisfy the hunger and the thirst of man for the truth, for the truth and its fulfillment. Once get a glimpse of the meaning of the meaning of life, as it really is, and all the relationships of life change, and life itself becomes a new thing. You no longer awake to the activities of the day with the burden of labor before you. You no longer wait with impatience for the hour of pleasure in which you may forget the heavy tasks that duty and necessity demand of you; you no longer look forward to the deep sleep of night as a blessed release from the burdens that [you] are only too anxious to lay down; you no longer fret and worry through the days with heavy heart and no joy and enthusiasm. The whole of life changes. You are no longer driven from pillar to post by the irritating demand of pressing duties and distasteful work. You outstrip duty itself in your very joy of life. You awake to the activities of the day with a full mind eager to accomplish all you can of the great ideals that forever beckon you the utmost expression of the best that there is in you. You take your hours of relaxation and pleasure among your fellow workers with the keenest joy and delight, because being full of the joy of life yourself, you can hardly wait for the opportunity of sharing and giving and talking about things that are real with people who are living real lives. When the time comes for rest you lie down to sleep, happy in the thing of the day, looking forward with a keen delight for what the next day may bring. And in the peaceful hours of the night, you quietly and almost imperceptibly drink in the strength of the infinite spirit, even as the tiny flower drinks the moisture

of the night air and at the rising of the sun finds itself refreshed by the tiny drops of dew. Does life seem unreal, do things seem to be unsatisfying, are you discontented, do the days drag wearily? Go to the beauty of nature and learn her lesson. Go to the life of man as imperfect as it is, and find there the revelation of the infinite spirit, in its actual accomplishments perhaps, in its unrealized possibilities certainly. Go alone in the quiet of the nighttime to some secluded spot and there in all simplicity and in all naturalness seek and ye shall find the peace and the joy of that life that belongs to him who knows the life of the spirit.