

Is Your God Dead?

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In your life and in mine, in the life of every individual as well as in society as a whole, there is being waged constantly the irrepressible conflict between what has been and what shall be. Or perhaps it would be more true to say that the dynamic of what has been is forever trying to establish what shall be. With unspeakable toil we have been working heretofore until now to accomplish, and to establish, what is, at this moment. But even before that which is, has been attained, the voice of that which shall be is crying out to us from the unexplored seas of futurity. This is the very essence of us and of life. The child shall lead us here. From his spontaneous wonder working little life, as naturally as the spring gushes to the surface driven from beneath by the unseen powers, come the questions from the mind of the child. Not contented with being what he is, his mind ever wanders to futurity, dreaming, speculating, imagining on that which shall be. The child longs to be the big boy; the big boy longs to be the youth; the youth longs to be the young man; and the young man longs to become the man. Thus do we build more stately mansions for our souls as the swift seasons roll. It is the law of life, the law of growth, the law of progress, the great fundamental impulse of all that has been, of all that is, and of all that shall be.

Behind it all is the implicit faith that childhood shall attain to boyhood, and boyhood to manhood. That which shall be already is in the untainted mind of the healthy robust child. You ask if the child is religious and the upwelling impulse to life that throbs in every particle of his being burns your question to cinders ere it leaves your lips. Does he not have faith that that which he dreams of shall be? Is not the hero that he worships, the drawing that he is making of things as he sees them, for the God of things as they are? Each day that he lives, is he not making his God that shall be his, and that

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shall lead him through the slippery paths of youth that bring him up to man?

But day by day the child learns, as all men must learn, that we do not leap from childhood to manhood, but that we build the ladder by which we climb. The mere dreaming is not the attainment, the prayer that flows from our being, expressing the vision of things that shall be, is not answered by some charitable God, but is attained by us through toil and effort. The faith of the child, and our faith, consists in this, that, as we keep our minds intent on that which shall be, and fearlessly in the unexplored seas of futurity, the ideal that we have drawn for the God of things as they are, shall lead us unto truth, and life.

These are the great principles and the great lessons of life. I want to take them up to apply them to ourselves and the conditions that we live in. For after all is said and done, we are but children, grown large, and society is but the multiplication of us. With these simple principles in mind, and these plain facts before us, I want to ask this question, Is our God dead? Are we living for the thing that shall be, or are we, grown to the age when we should be doing the real things of life, still playing and fondling over the toys of childhood, caressing the things that have been, but from whose lifeless forms all vitality has passed? That is the question, which is being asked of us and our age, as it has been asked of all men and all ages, each day that the sun rises to shed its warming light upon a growing world. Is your God dead, you ask? But what is your God? Have you ever seen him? Does he yet live? The whole great panoramic field of history is covered with the decaying remains of dead gods. Age after age man has made his gods, has gone forth to the world, proclaiming his nature and character, and declaring [that] his rule and dominion shall hold over all men and through all ages. But the on-sweeping rush of time has ruthlessly killed them, and, amid tears of bitter disappointment, their followers have laid them [aside], as the child sometimes reluctantly lays aside his toys. The God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, is dead. Are you sure that your God also is not dead? Are you sure that you are not wasting your time pouring the precious ointment of human life over the lifeless body of a dead God?

Listen. What is your God? Is he that pile of sand, made in the image of man, that you, in childlike joy, have molded upon the shore of time? But what is there lasting in that? Will not the incoming tide of human life wash it away, and there will remain of it only the vague picture in your mind of what you once conceived your God to be? Or is your God the picture that someone has told you, that someone made ages ago? But is he not also dead? Is your God the God that the Church has told you about? Ask the church where it got its God, and it will lead you to some remote shore of the past, and point to the spot where at some time, so the legend says, God spoke unto man. But ages and ages ago the flood tide of human life had swept away the last vestige of anything that is living, and that God, the god of the church, the god of tradition, is unto man today as the toy of childhood is to the full grown man, working in the heat and stress of human life. Is not that the trouble with churches today? They have no God. Have we a God?

What is your God? Your God is the image of our own inner life and convictions cast upon the blackness of an unexplored futurity. Man has made, men are making, and men will always make, gods because it is of their very nature to do so. Like the child, they have faith that that thing which they dream, shall become, and that all the universe will work together with them for its attainment. They have faith that, if, by chance, they have dreamed a foolish dream, or uttered a foolish prayer, that the same unfolding life will show them the true dream and the true prayer. The child, in his simplicity, believes that the world in which he lives is a world in which he may grow to manhood. So also does the man believe that the universe in which he lives, and in which the great hopes and aspirations of his life have come to being, is a universe in which those hopes may be realized, and shall have a place of honor. Not that he himself has created them alone, but that all the great flux of life has conspired together with him to bring them into being in his personality, and that all the great flux of life will conspire to make them, through labor and toil, the living reality. All through the ages the word God has been used to express his faith in the universal life as a life that works together with him for the attainment of things that shall be. I have a great vision of things that shall be, of the human life that shall be attained. I look about me, and view with despair the wide contrast between what is and what I have dared to hope shall be. Behold, I lift up mine eyes unto the hills, and I ask,

Whence Cometh My help? Then it dawns upon my mind, that the very forces that are at work there, have been at work in me. It is the voice of deep calling unto deep. My hope, my aspiration, my vision is in part a product of that which has been, and gives a faint hint of that which shall be. Lo, I have made my God. The image that I have made, forces that are working with me, that is my God. That becomes to me the symbol of my faith in this ideal achieving capacity of the Universe in which I live and move and have my being. Even as a child, I have drawn the things as I see them for the God of things as they are.

What is your God? Your God is your image of your true and secret aspiration for the things that shall be, for the human life that shall be attained. You have made him to help you do the work, whose very stupendousness staggers you, and yet the work in which you believe, as the child believes in manhood.

Now for the question, Is your God dead? The question is answered in your own inner life, whose secrets no one can penetrate. What are your purposes? Aims dominate your conduct. What considerations control your choices in the momentous issues of life, when you are called upon to cast the weight of your personality into the scales? Do you still fondly cherish the toys of childhood, while the handles of the working tools of mature life, wait for the warmth of your hand? Are you still coddling those dreams of years ago, without ever making an effort to realize them, without knowing that all creation is at your command to assist you? Do you still ponder over the gods that others have made, wondering whether they are true or not? Then your God is dead. You cannot worship or serve the God that another has made. He must be your own, bone of your bone, fiber of your nature, bearing the images of your own secret purposes, not the picture of yourself, but the image of yourself, stamped upon the universe, your own hopes and aspirations translated into the great universal life. Is there no great end and aim into whose realization you are casting yourself, and whose welfare depends, you feel sure, upon what you may do for it? Take the thing that interests us together in this church. Does this church stand for any great working force, any great aim, that must be attained, upon the success or failure of which much of the good of human life depends? If it does not, if it is merely a conventional thing, which you support simply because it is the thing to do, simply because many people do interest themselves in some church, then we have no God. Our God is dead,

and we are coddling toys while the working tools of mature life await the grip of our hand. But, on the other hand, if you have seen the vision of human life, which shall have been freed from the stifling load of tradition, and meaningless formality, that chokes the very soul's aspiration for true simple natural life, if you have seen the vision of a humanity that dares to throw off the bondage of authority, and dares to submit itself to the life under freedom, if you have seen the vision of a humanity that shall believe in itself, and in the natural beauty and sanctity of human life in all its relations; if, having seen this, we come together to realize that purpose, and to keep clear before us the vision that we have seen, and to keep constantly sharpened working tools that we shall handle in doing our work for that end; if having seen that vision, having caught a glimpse of what life may be, ought to be, and through us shall become, and we come here to understand the high values of human life, then we have made our own God, and our God is a living vital thing, working for us and with us in the realization of the great aims that are before us. The question of atheism or theism is not a question of philosophy, but of fact. We may make gods from now until the end of time, but we do not change the ultimate reality. The atheist, the man who has no God, is not he who says that the gods are dead, but he who pours the precious ointment of human life upon the remains of some dead god in whom we find the embodiment of men long ago. The true theist is the person who has an ideal, who is working for the things that shall be, and has faith that the universe is with him. He has made his own God, has drawn the thing as he sees it for the God of things as they are. I care not by what name he may call his ideal and his hope, but in that he has faith in its reality, and gives himself to its attainment, he has made, and has, a living god. Some of you have seen this week the great play, "The Servant in the House."² The real atheist in the play was the Bishop, and the man of faith was the drain-man, who, touched by the power of an ideal, was finding his work in the world, and lifting men up. The childlike daughter was true to human life when she saw in her father the real and abiding qualities of humanity, and the realization of her ideal of a man, brave, beautiful and good. Is your god dead? Yes, if you are facing the past, and clinging like a parasite to the empty shells in which

² Charles Rann Kennedy (1871-1950), Anglo-American dramatist. "The Servant in the House," was his first success, a play that premiered on Broadway in 1908.

there was once life. Is your God dead? Yes, if you fear to face the future and stake your all upon the unrealized vision of a world that shall be, and a human life that is vital and pulsating. Is your God dead? Yes if you are still lacking the childlike faith, that the boy may become the man, or that out of the imperfections of life today, a human life, noble, brave and true, may arise.

Our God is not dead. We have faith in the substantial integrity of human life, and we have faith in the substantial integrity and trustworthiness of the world in which we live. Everywhere comes the stifling groans of men and women who are being smothered beneath the burden of poverty, ignorance, oppression, and above all else, beneath the poisonous mass of dead Gods, thrust upon them by a godless and god-ridden ecclesiasticism. As Robert, in "The Servant in the House," says, "I mean as I have found my place."³ I see what must be done, and I know that it can be done, and I know that I can do it. Do you see that? Do you see that the world needs to know itself, needs to have faith in itself, needs to appreciate the true values of human life, needs the work that you can do. Do you come here, to this church, because you see that, and because you want to do your part and more, while you hear high in the dome the hammerings of the comrades as have climbed aloft. Do you not see in all this the great work of the ages sometimes going forward in deep darkness, sometimes beneath the burden of unutterable anguish, sometimes to the tune of a great laughter and heroic shoutings like the cry of thunder? When we find our place and see the outline of the world that shall be, and the vision of that which is not, becomes to us as real [as] the world in which we live, then our God lives, and life is real and life is true.

³ Charles Rann Kennedy, *The Servant in the House*, New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1908, p. 148.