

Chapter 5

The Self-existence of God

Lord of all being! Thou alone canst affirm I AM THAT I AM; yet we who are made in Thine image may each one repeat **I am,** so confessing that we derive from Thee and that our words are but an echo of Thine own. We acknowledge Thee to be the great Original of which we through Thy goodness are grateful if imperfect copies. We worship Thee, O Father Everlasting. Amen.

God has no origin, said Novatian and it is precisely this concept of no-origin which distinguishes That-which-is-God from whatever is not God.

Origin is a word that can apply only to things created. When we think of anything that has origin we are not thinking of God. God is self-existent, while all created things necessarily originated somewhere at some time. Aside from God, nothing is self-caused.

By our effort to discover the origin of things we confess our belief that everything was made by Someone who was made of none. By familiar experience we are taught that everything **came from** something else. Whatever exists must have had a cause that antedates it and was at least equal to it, since the lesser cannot produce the greater. Any person or thing may be at once both caused and the cause of someone or something else; and so, back to the One who is the cause of all but is Himself caused by none.

The child by his question, **Where did God come from?** is unwittingly acknowledging his creaturehood. Already the concept of cause and source and origin is firmly fixed in his mind. He knows that everything around him came from something other than itself, and he simply extends that concept upward to God. The little philosopher is thinking in true creature-idiom and, allowing for his lack of basic information, he is reasoning correctly. He must be told that God has no origin, and he will find this hard to grasp since it introduces a category with which he is wholly unfamiliar and contradicts the bent toward origin-seeking so deeply ingrained in all

intelligent beings, a bent that impels them to probe ever back and back toward undiscovered beginnings.

To think steadily of that to which the idea of origin cannot apply is not easy, if indeed it is possible at all. Just as under certain conditions a tiny point of light can be seen, not by looking directly, at it but by focusing the eyes slightly to one side, so it is with the idea of the Uncreated. When we try to focus our thought upon One who is pure uncreated being we may, see nothing at all, for He dwelleth in light that no man can approach unto. Only by faith and love are we able to glimpse Him as he passes by our shelter in the cleft of the rock. ¶¶¶ And although this knowledge is very cloudy, vague and general, ¶¶¶ says Michael de Molinos, being supernatural, it produces a far more clear and perfect cognition of God than any sensible or particular apprehension that can be formed in this life; since all corporeal and sensible images are immeasurably remote from God. ¶¶¶

The human mind, being created, has an understandable uneasiness about the Uncreated. We do not find it comfortable to allow for the presence of One who is wholly outside of the circle of our familiar knowledge. We tend to be disquieted by the thought of One who does not account to us for His being, who is responsible to no one, who is self-existent, self-dependent and self-sufficient.

Philosophy and science have not always been friendly toward the idea of God, the reason being that they are dedicated to the task of accounting for things and are impatient with anything that refuses to give an account of itself. The philosopher and the scientist will admit that there is much that they do not know; but that is quite another thing from admitting that there is something which they can never know, which indeed they have no technique for discovering.

To admit that there is One who lies beyond us, who exists outside of all our categories, who will not be dismissed with a name, who will not appear before the bar of our reason, nor submit to our curious inquiries: this requires a great deal of humility, more than most of us possess, so we save face by thinking God down to our level, or at least down to where we

can manage Him. Yet how He eludes us! For He is everywhere while He is nowhere, for ~~where~~ has to do with matter and space, and God is independent of both. He is unaffected by time or motion, is wholly self-dependent and owes nothing to the worlds His hands have made.

Timeless, spaceless, single, lonely,

Yet sublimely Three,

Thou art grandly, always, only

God is Unity!

Lone in grandeur, lone in glory,

Who shall tell Thy wondrous story?

Awful Trinity!

Frederick W. Faber

It is not a cheerful thought that millions of us who live in a land of Bibles, who belong to churches and labor to promote the Christian religion, may yet pass our whole life on this earth without once having thought or tried to think seriously about the being of God. Few of us have let our hearts gaze in wonder at the I AM, the self-existent Self back of which no creature can think. Such thoughts are too painful for us. We prefer to think where it will do more good - about how to build a better mousetrap, for instance, or how to make two blades of grass grow where one grew before. And for this we are now paying a too heavy price in the secularization of our religion and the decay of our inner lives.

Perhaps some sincere but puzzled Christian may at this juncture wish to inquire about the practicality of such concepts as I am trying to set forth here. ~~What bearing does this have on my life?~~ he may ask. ~~What possible meaning can the self-existence of God have for me and others like me in a world such as this and in times such as these?~~

To this I reply that, because we are the handiwork of God, it follows that all our problems and their solutions are theological. Some knowledge of what kind of God it is that

operates the universe is indispensable to a sound philosophy of life and a sane outlook on the world scene.

The much-quoted advice of Alexander Pope,
Know then thyself, presume not God to scan:

The proper study of mankind is man,

if followed literally would destroy any possibility of man's ever knowing himself in any but the most superficial way. We can never know who or what we are till we know at least something of what God is. For this reason the self-existence of God is not a wisp of dry doctrine, academic and remote; it is in fact as near as our breath and as practical as the latest surgical technique.

For reasons known only to Himself, God honored man above all other beings by creating him in His own image. And let it be understood that the divine image in man is not a poetic fancy, not an idea born of religious longing. It is a solid theological fact, taught plainly throughout the Sacred Scriptures and recognized by the Church as a truth necessary to a right understanding of the Christian faith.

Man is a created being, a derived and contingent self, who of himself possesses nothing but is dependent each moment for his existence upon the One who created him after His own likeness. The fact of God is necessary to the fact of man. Think God away and man has no ground of existence.

That God is everything and man nothing is a basic tenet of Christian faith and devotion; and here the teachings of Christianity coincide with those of the more advanced and philosophical religions of the East. Man for all his genius is but an echo of the original Voice, a reflection of the uncreated Light. As a sunbeam perishes when cut off from the sun, so man apart from God would pass back into the void of nothingness from which he first leaped at the creative call.

Not man only, but everything that exists came out of and is dependent upon the continuing creative impulse. ¶¶¶ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... All things were made by him and without

him was not any thing made that was made.††† That is how John explains it, and with him agrees the apostle Paul: †††For by him were all things created, that are in heaven and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him; and he is before all things, and by him all things consist.††† To this witness the writer to the Hebrews adds his voice, testifying of Christ that He is the brightness of God's glory and the express image of His Person, and that He upholds all things by the word of His power.

In this utter dependence of all things upon the creative will of God lies the possibility for both holiness and sin. One of the marks of God's image in man is his ability to exercise moral choice. The teaching of Christianity is that man chose to be independent of God and confirmed his choice by deliberately disobeying a divine command. This act violated the relationship that normally existed between God and His creature; it rejected God as the ground of existence and threw man back upon himself. Thereafter he became not a planet revolving around the central Sun, but a sun in his own right, around which everything else must revolve.

A more positive assertion of selfhood could not be imagined than those words of God to Moses: I AM THAT I AM. Everything God is, everything that is God, is set forth in that unqualified declaration of independent being. Yet in God, self is not sin but the quintessence of all possible goodness, holiness and truth.

The natural man is a sinner because and only because he challenges God's selfhood in relation to his own. In all else he may willingly accept the sovereignty of God; in his own life he rejects it. For him, God's dominion ends where his begins. For him, self becomes Self, and in this he unconsciously imitates Lucifer, that fallen son of the morning who said in his heart, †††I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God... . I will be like the Most High.†††

Yet so subtle is self that scarcely anyone is conscious of its presence. Because man is born a rebel, he is unaware that he is

one. His constant assertion of self, as far as he thinks of it at all, appears to him a perfectly normal thing. He is willing to share himself, sometimes even to sacrifice himself for a desired end, but never to dethrone himself. No matter how far down the scale of social acceptance he may slide, he is still in his own eyes a king on a throne, and no one, not even God, can take that throne from him.

Sin has many manifestations but its essence is one. A moral being, created to worship before the throne of God, sits on the throne of his own selfhood and from that elevated position declares, **I AM.** That is sin in its concentrated essence; yet because it is natural it appears to be good. It is only when in the gospel the soul is brought before the face of the Most Holy One without the protective shield of ignorance that the frightful moral incongruity is brought home to the conscience. In the language of evangelism the man who is thus confronted by the fiery presence of Almighty God is said to be under conviction. Christ referred to this when He said of the Spirit whom He would send to the world, **And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.**

The earliest fulfilment of these words of Christ was at Pentecost after Peter had preached the first great Christian sermon. **Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? This What shall we do?** is the deep heart cry of every man who suddenly realizes that he is a usurper and sits on a stolen throne. However painful, it is precisely this acute moral consternation that produces true repentance and makes a robust Christian after the penitent has been dethroned and has found forgiveness and peace through the gospel.

Purity of heart is to will one thing, said Kierkegaard, and we may with equal truth turn this about and declare, **The essence of sin is to will one thing, for to set our will against the will of God is to dethrone God and make ourselves supreme in the little kingdom of Mansoul. This is sin at its evil root. Sins may multiply like the sands by the seashore, but they are yet one. Sins are because sin is. This is the rationale**

behind the much maligned doctrine of natural depravity which holds that the independent man can do nothing but sin and that his good deeds are really not good at all. His best religious works God rejects as He rejected the offering of Cain. Only when he has restored his stolen throne to God are his works acceptable.

The struggle of the Christian man to be good while the bent toward self-assertion still lives within him as a kind of unconscious moral reflex is vividly described by the apostle Paul in the seventh chapter of his Roman Epistle; and his testimony is in full accord with the teaching of the prophets. Eight hundred years before the advent of Christ the prophet Isaiah identified sin as rebellion against the will of God and the assertion of the right of each man to choose for himself the way he shall go. ¶¶¶ All we like sheep have gone astray, ¶¶¶ he said, ¶¶¶ we have turned every one to his own way, ¶¶¶ and I believe that no more accurate description of sin has ever been given.

The witness of the saints has been in full harmony with prophet and apostle, that an inward principle of self lies at the source of human conduct, turning everything men do into evil. To save us completely Christ must reverse the bent of our nature; He must plant a new principle within us so that our subsequent conduct will spring out of a desire to promote the honor of God and the good of our fellow men. The old self-sins must die, and the only instrument by which they can be slain is the Cross. ¶¶¶ If any man come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me, ¶¶¶ said our Lord, and years later the victorious Paul could say, ¶¶¶ I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me. ¶¶¶

My God, shall sin its power maintain

And in my soul defiant live!

‡ Tis not enough that Thou forgive,

The cross must rise and self be slain.

O God of love, Thy power disclose:

It is not enough that Christ should rise,
I, too, must seek the brightening skies,
And rise from death, as Christ arose.

Greek hymn