

# MAN AND HIS NATURE

*Broadcast talks in  
Religion and Philosophy*

SCM PRESS LTD

56 Bloomsbury Street, London, W.C.1

1949

## PERSONALITY IN GOD AND MAN (I)

By H. H. Farmer

When Christianity says that God is personal it asserts three things. First, it asserts that the creative power which has brought everything, including ourselves, into existence, and holds everything together in unity and order, is not a blind, mechanical force like electricity or atomic energy. It is intelligent purpose. In creating the world, God knows and intends what He is doing. Second, it asserts that this mind and purpose of God are wholly good, and wholly directed towards what is good, so that all that is good in our experience is in some measure a revelation of Him. Third, it asserts that part of God's good purpose has been, and is, to bring into existence men and women who in some measure share His nature as personal and so are able to have personal relations with Him.

We are now to think about this matter of God being personal and having personal relations with men. I shall speak first of some of the difficulties which people sometimes feel in this idea of God being personal. Then, in the next chapter, I shall try to say something about how, according to Christianity, men come to know that God is personal and to enter into personal relations with Him.

First, then, some of the difficulties. Some people feel that to think of God as personal *must* be wrong, because, they say, it is really to think of God as though He were merely a magnified man, and that they feel is absurd. Perhaps there floats

before their minds a picture of a bearded old gentleman somewhere up in the sky, very wise and very powerful, no doubt, but still in all essentials just a man. Such a picture of God they feel at once to be foolish and childish, as indeed it most certainly is. But the presence of such a picture in the mind has nothing whatever to do with the rightness or wrongness of thinking of God as personal. To think of God as personal does not in the least necessarily involve thinking of Him as having the shape and form of a man—head, body, limbs, sense organs—and as sitting on a throne in a palace called heaven. The Bible—in the forty-fourth chapter of Isaiah, for example—has some very scornful things to say about that sort of thinking, and Christian theologians and philosophers have been very clear about it, too. No doubt our minds are very apt, when we think of God, to form a vague picture of a wise old king on a throne, just as they are very apt, when we think of atoms, to form a picture of little hard pellets; but just as nobody who knows his science supposes that when we say "atoms" we *mean* little hard pellets, so nobody who knows his Christianity supposes that when we say "the personal God" we *mean* a wise old gentleman in the sky.

But, it may be said, granted all that, it still remains true that in thinking of God as personal we are thinking of Him as having intelligence and will and goodness, and these are all human qualities. So that we really are thinking of Him as just like ourselves, even though we avoid the absurdity of giving Him a bodily form located in the sky. Surely the infinite, mysterious power which has brought forth and sustains this overwhelmingly vast and tremendous universe cannot be like us at all. Would it not be better, more modest and humble-minded, to be what is called agnostic, that is, to say that after all we can form *no* idea of what God is like,

and there leave it? The answer which Christian thinking gives to this raises some important points which will occupy the rest of this chapter.

In the first place, it is important to realise that Christian thinking does not deny that God in many ways utterly surpasses our comprehension and powers of expression. Christianity has always taught the necessity for a reverent attitude in the presence of God, and the danger of ascribing our merely human attributes to Him. St. Paul, in the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, cries out: "How unsearchable are God's judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord?" And there are many similar passages in the Bible. Nevertheless, Christianity certainly does deny that we cannot know or say anything at all about God. Indeed, I think it would regard the completely agnostic attitude which I have just described as itself a form of arrogance, and possibly a manifestation of laziness and cowardice also. After all, it is saying a good deal to say that we can know nothing whatever about God. It amounts to saying that not even the highest and holiest things in our experience afford the least clue to the nature of the power that has made the world and us. And it is a very easy thing to say "we don't know and can't know", and so shelve the whole matter. The difficult and demanding thing is to *think*, to think hard, to think continuously, to think adventurously, in the light of the highest and best in our experience, about this incomparably important matter, namely, the nature of God and of His relations with mankind.

Perhaps it sounds self-contradictory to say at one and the same time, as Christianity does, that God utterly surpasses our thought and powers of expression and that He is personal intelligence and will and can be known as such. But is it

really as self-contradictory as it sounds? Do we not often find ourselves in that sort of position—knowing something, really knowing something about a reality which nevertheless surpasses, and must always surpass, our powers of knowing? Take physics for example. There is no doubt that physics tells us something true and reliable about matter. The simplest practical application of physics, such as switching on the light shows that. But there is no doubt also that there is at the heart of matter an impenetrable core of mystery which completely eludes our grasp. What exactly is this atomic energy about which we are all speaking, and whence comes it? I am not a scientist, but, so far as I can make out, science, in seeking to penetrate nearer and nearer to the ultimate secret of matter, has only succeeded in dissolving the thing out into a number of highly abstract equations. Well, the equations certainly tell us something truthful about the atom: they express, correspond to, something that is really "there"; yet does anybody really suppose that all this stupendous material universe, "all the furniture of earth and choir of heaven", has at its heart nothing more than a ghostly dance of bloodless mathematical equations? The equations express, symbolise, sum up, some aspects of the reality of matter, but the total reality is infinitely bigger and more mysterious than equations.

Or take the world of beauty which the poet or the musician apprehends—that is to say, both knows and appreciates—and then tries to give expression to. I am not a poet or a musician, any more than I am a scientist, but judging from what some of them have said, the great poet or musician knows all the time that he is apprehending, and trying to express, in his work a world of beauty and sublimity which in its infinite range and mysterious depth it will never be possible for him, or any finite mind fully to apprehend and

express. As one of the great poets put it, in terms which sound logically self-contradictory:

- O world invisible, we view thee,
  - O world intangible, we touch thee,
  - O world unknowable, we know thee,
- Inapprehensible, we clutch thee.

Well now, along the same lines Christian thinking would have us understand its assertion that God is personal. In saying that God is personal, Christianity believes that it is saying something really true about God. It believes that there really is likeness and continuity between God's being and man's being, in a way that there is not between God's being, and that, say, of a rock or a tree or a rabbit. There is real continuity because both God and man are personal, are, so to say, in the personal world together, God Himself having given to man what He has not given to a rock or a tree or a rabbit, namely, personal life. But Christianity also believes that there is real *discontinuity*, real unlikeness, since God after all is God and men are not, and never can be, God. Beneath and beyond, and as it were sustaining, all those qualities and attributes of God which men truly apprehend as personal, and which make it possible for them to have personal relations with God, there is always the infinite, unfathomable divine being, what one might call the sheer "God-ness" of God. This is sometimes expressed by Christian thinkers in the statement that God is *supra*-personal. He *is* personal, but in a way that is "supra", that is, above and beyond the limits of personal life as we know it, therefore above and beyond our comprehension and expression.

The way in which Christianity firmly holds to the truth that God is personal and yet at the same time insists that He is *supra*-personal can be illustrated by some of the central

Christian teachings concerning God's nature and attributes. For example, Christianity teaches that God is the Creator of all things; everything owes its being to His will and purpose. Now, that statement only has meaning to us because, to make things—tables, chairs, steam engines, books, poems, pictures, theories—is one of the deepest needs and satisfactions of our lives. If we cannot make things, our life becomes a morass of boredom, stagnation, and decay. To be a person and to want to create something are inseparable. But observe how Christianity, when it speaks of God as creator, immediately adds something which puts God's creativeness, just because it is God's, utterly beyond our comprehension. It says—this was pointed out by Mr. Christie—that God creates "out of nothing". What is the point of saying that? The point is, of course, that when men create they can only use raw materials which are already there to use—wood, metal, stone, canvas, paint; but God clearly must be thought of as bringing the raw materials themselves into existence, for otherwise He would not be God, the source and origin of all that is. So, in our fumbling words, we say that God "created out of nothing" or, in the words of the philosophers, His creativeness is *absolute* creativeness. But that sort of creativeness is utterly beyond our comprehension, for there is nothing like it in our experience. Thus in saying that God is creator we are not talking meaningless nonsense; it has meaning to us because God is personal and has bestowed in a limited and finite way personality on us; in making us creative persons He has made us in some degree in His own image. But we are also saying something which runs out into utter mystery, because we are saying it about God, who creates "out of nothing".

In a similar way, when Christianity says that God is omniscient, that is, grasps all things within His knowledge,

and omnipresent, that is, is actively present everywhere in the world He has made, we are once again saying something which has real meaning to us, but which nevertheless goes far beyond our understanding. It has real meaning to us because acting effectively through knowledge, like creativeness, is a very central and distinctive thing in our life as persons. An animal's action can go very little beyond the strict limits laid down by its inborn instincts and drives: but it is precisely the mark of a human person that he is continually increasing the range and effectiveness of his actions by increasing his knowledge of his world. This is true of even the stupidest and least gifted of us, but when you get a really great human mind in any sphere—a Shakespeare, a Newton, a Beethoven, a Gladstone—we lesser folk are overwhelmed and mystified by its range and power, so very far above and beyond our limited capacities does it seem. Think, for example, of the way in which Mozart was able to grasp the whole piece of music in a flash before he began to write it down. If, then, Christianity is right in thinking of God, the supreme power, as personal, it is reasonable for it to think of Him also as knowing all and acting everywhere, and such ideas have real meaning to us. But at the same time Christianity fully grants that we cannot even begin to understand or picture how God can hold this infinite, complex universe in an all-inclusive grasp of knowledge and action. It is completely beyond the range of even the greatest human minds, and is part of the mystery of God's personal being.

One of the chief reasons why people find it difficult to believe in the personal God has not yet been mentioned. It is that our Western minds are dominated and obsessed, far more than we realise, by material, visible things. Many reasons might be given for this. One of the chief has been the spectacular advances of modern physical, laboratory

science. This has created an unconscious bias in people's minds against believing in the reality of anything which cannot be seen, or pictured in the form of what can be seen, or investigated and proved by the bunsens, crucibles and balances of the science-block. Obviously if this be the unconscious bias of our minds, then belief in the personal God starts at a considerable disadvantage. For certainly if there is a personal God, He is invisible. As the Bible says, "no man hath seen God at any time". And certainly you cannot get God into a laboratory and experiment with Him there.

Yet a moment's reflection is sufficient to show how absurd it is to allow our minds to be dominated by such a prejudice. For in point of fact we do every day deal with realities which cannot be seen or handled or experimented with in a laboratory—realities which are profoundly important and affect our whole history and destiny. And the chief of these invisible realities is persons and their personal relations with us. If you think for a moment you will realise that you cannot really see the personality of another man. You can see his body, and he makes his presence known to you through his body, but you cannot see *him*. You cannot see the love or hate he feels towards you. No doubt he expresses his love through a physical gift, or his hate through a physical blow on the jaw. But the love is not the gift, nor the hate the blow on the jaw. The love or hate is invisible. Yet you never have any doubt that the person is really there and that his love or hate is real. We must not, then, let this bias of our minds towards being ready to believe at once in material visible realities, and being a bit doubtful about invisible ones, run away with us; and it is especially important not to let it do so in relation to this matter of the personal God.

which point towards and confirm the reality of the personal God. Some of these considerations have been mentioned in earlier talks, and no sensible person will lightly set them on one side. The rational case for belief in the personal God is undoubtedly weighty. But final, demonstrative, "knock-you-down" proof, which everybody with any brains at all must admit, is not to be had. But this need not surprise us. There are quite a lot of things which we cannot prove in that kind of way, but which we cannot help believing: for example, that the universe is not an insane chaos, but rather a rational order which our minds can always in some measure grasp, or again, that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* really is higher and better art than say a Punch and Judy show. In the same way, I cannot prove by watertight logic that other persons besides myself exist. If anyone cares to maintain that my friend Smith is not really "there" as a person at all, but is merely a highly elaborate mechanical doll, or merely a figure in a private dream of my own from which in due course I shall awake, I cannot prove he is wrong. Theoretically, I suppose, Smith might be just an elaborate machine, or a dream-figure. But I have not the least doubt that he is not a machine or a dream-figure and that anybody who suggests he is, is being merely silly.

This last illustration helps us in relation to this matter of coming to know that God is personal. If I am asked why I am thus unassailably sure that the object which I call my friend Smith really is "there" as a person, the answer is that Smith continuously enters into relations with me of such a kind that his own nature as personal is compellingly disclosed to me. Furthermore, as I respond to him and treat him as a person in this relationship of friendship, so my apprehension of him as a personal being becomes more and more luminously and unassailably self-evident to me. It is

## 9

## PERSONALITY IN GOD AND MAN (2)

By H. H. Farmer

In the previous chapter I wrote about some of the difficulties which some people feel in the Christian teaching that God is personal, and this, I hope, enabled us to see more clearly what exactly that teaching is. The position we took up was, in brief, that the assertion that God is personal is not the absurd and impossible assertion which some seem to take it to be, though it must in the nature of the case be the assertion of something which we cannot fully comprehend. At the end we were left with this question: Granting that the idea that God is personal is not in itself absurd, how is it possible for men to know that He is personal, to know it, too, with such assurance that they are justified in doing what Christianity invites them to do, namely, build their life upon it?

The answer which Christianity gives to this question is not to try to prove the reality of the personal God by some sort of logically compelling, watertight and so to say, "knock-you-down" argument, like that with which we prove in geometry that the three angles of a triangle always equal two right-angles, or in the laboratory that a solid always displaces its own volume of water. There is no final proof of that sort that what Christianity says about the personal God is true. Of course, Christianity does say that when we look out upon the world and our experience of it, a number of quite impressive arguments are to be found

not that I ever argue about the matter with myself, or with anybody else. No, in and through his personal encounter with me I directly discern his personal nature. His being "there" as a person does not need proof and it is not capable of proof. It shines in its own light.

Well now, Christianity holds that men come to know God as personal along similar lines. It teaches that it is only possible to know God as personal because He Himself comes to men in a personal way and so discloses His nature as personal to them. It says also that this apprehension of God as personal can only become an increasingly strong and unassailable conviction if men respond to God's approach in the right way. I will take up the first of these two main points, and then later at the end say a brief word on the second of them.

First, then, God approaches men in a personal way and so discloses His nature as personal to them. How does He do this? In answer to this question Christianity says three main things.

First, according to Christian teaching, God makes Himself known to men by confronting them with a tremendous claim upon their wills. A tremendous claim! Let us look for a little at this notion of a claim upon the will. It lies very near the heart of the world of persons and of their relationships with one another, as distinct from the world of things or animals. Think again of my friendship with Smith, or of your own friendship with somebody. Is it not clear that our relationship would not be one of friendship, in any proper meaning of the word, if we did not both fully recognise, and gladly accept, the fact that each has an independent will of his own, which neither in any way wants to compel, override or subdue? If I suddenly started ordering Smith about, and even more if he started meekly doing everything that I

ordered him to do merely because I ordered it, friendship would cease at that point and some other relationship would take its place. Friendship would disappear because I should no longer be treating him as a person. I should be treating him as a mere thing—something to be "pushed about"—and he would be responding as a mere thing. Do we not say of any man who is completely submissive to another's will that he has no personality? Do we not instinctively compare him to a thing? We say, he is just a rubber-stamp or a door-mat. There must then be independence of will, mutually recognised and accepted. But is it not equally clear that Smith and I could not be friends if our wills were *absolutely* independent of one another? Our friendship is friendship only because, in any situation which concerns us both, we recognise that our wills, though independent of one another, are nevertheless closely bound up with one another. Just because he is my friend, I feel I cannot and must not ignore his will; his friendship binds me, constrains me to be loyal to him. Now, it is this relationship between two persons, where-by they leave one another completely free, and yet bind and constrain one another, which we indicate by the word "claim". A claim is a relationship between two personal wills of such a kind that each is conscious of being constrained by the other and yet at the same time is not compelled by the other. "Claim", then, is at the heart of the relationship of friendship. But my point is that it is at the heart of all our encounter with, and apprehension of, another being as personal. A man only becomes really a person to me at the point where I recognise that he makes a claim upon my will. This is shown by the fact that if I do not recognise that claim, then before long I am not treating him as a person at all, but in the same way as I treat a thing or animal. Hitler recognised no claim in a Jew, and that is exactly how he treated Jews.

All this helps us to understand the Christian teaching that God makes Himself known to men as personal by entering into personal relations with them. He does so by confronting them in a tremendous claim upon them. What then is this claim of God? It is the claim that they should freely give their whole being to the service of His will; to the seeking of that to which His will is undeviatingly directed, namely, that which is good. Because it is claim and not compulsion, they are at liberty to disregard it (the disregarding of it Christianity calls sin); but they cannot ever really escape it or slip out from under it. For the claim of God meets them and challenges them all the time, and in and through it, I repeat, God makes known His nature as personal will. If it is asked how God thus contrives to put this pressure upon the wills of men so that they sense that through it a higher personal will is encountering them, the answer is that this is a mystery which we cannot get behind.

But, second, Christianity teaches that God does not reveal Himself as personal to men *merely* by making a great claim upon them. He also discloses to men that in claiming them thus for the service of His will, He is in fact inviting them to follow that way of life which alone will lead to their own highest and most satisfying life as persons. The claim is not merely demand: there is contained in it the offer of a great gift. To put it another way: what God asks from men is never merely obedience; He also asks for trust or faith, faith that man's highest good is what God is seeking all the time to bestow. This is illustrated in the gospels by the story of the man who asked: What shall I do to inherit eternal life? or, in other words, what shall I do to achieve the highest good to which human persons can attain? The answer was: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, strength and mind. And note, too, how in thus calling to men to

trust Him for their highest good in and through their obedience to Him, God again discloses His nature as personal. For complete trust of that kind is only possible towards a personal being. We do indeed sometimes speak of trusting ourselves to a thing—to a chair, for example—but all we mean by that is that we believe it will not let our bodies down. We can only really wholeheartedly trust *ourselves*, our whole being and destiny as persons, to a personal power.

The third thing is this: Christianity does not merely assert in vague, general terms that God encounters men in a personal way by making them aware of His claim upon them for obedience and faith. It says also that because God has always been thus personally active and self-revealing in the history and lives of men He has already made known a good deal concerning His nature and purpose, and in particular it says He has made Himself known in a uniquely full and unclouded way in the person of Jesus Christ. But you see what that means. It means that, according to Christianity, no man is so to speak "on his own", or need start from scratch in this matter of entering into personal relations with God. As in other spheres, there is here also a great heritage of tested experience and knowledge. A good deal of this tested knowledge and experience is to be found in the pages of the Old Testament, but what is given in the Old Testament is fulfilled and completed in God's perfect revelation of His personal nature in the person of Jesus Christ. As the Gospel of St. John puts it: "The Word [that is to say, God's personal approach to men] was made flesh and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth." According to Christian teaching, therefore, the only sure way to get to know the personal God is to live in the light of the revelation given in Christ, as this is set forth in the New Testament.

Perhaps it will be worth while to pause here for a moment



to give one example of the way in which men's thought about the nature and purpose of the personal God does need to be controlled all the time by the revelation in Christ. Christianity teaches that God's purpose is a purpose of fatherly love. But "love" is a very fluffy and ambiguous word. It can mean any number of different things. In many people's minds it means something disgustingly soft and sentimental—the sort of thing that crooners croon about, or foolish mothers spoil their children with. Christian teaching is very firm that that sort of sentimental thinking about the love of the personal God is utterly false and will get a man nowhere. The true meaning of the love of God, it says, is to be found only in the life and teaching and death of Jesus Christ, and there it is revealed to be a love which, while it can be utterly trusted, is very far from being directed towards merely saving men from trouble or merely giving them a good time. Some of the teachings of Jesus are very austere indeed (for example, "if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out") and His own unique life of complete obedience to, and faith in, God was no easy one—the crucifixion shows that. Neither in the gospel picture of Christ, nor elsewhere in the New Testament, is there to be found the least suggestion of a milk-and-water view of the relation of the personal God to human persons.

Let me now in conclusion say a word about the other main thing which Christianity teaches about getting to know God as personal. It is that the knowledge of God as personal can only be built up into strong and unassailable conviction by rightly responding to God's claim for obedience and faith, and so experimentally testing the whole matter. Here, as in other departments of life, verification can only be through experiment. If a man wants to know what the world of light and colour is really like, to get a strong

sense of its vivid actuality, it is no use his sitting in the dark and listening to a Third Programme talk on optics. The only thing to do is to go out into the sunshine.

So it is with the "divine-human" world of persons of which Christianity speaks. Theoretical argument will not make it real to a man, for it has to do with the meeting of personal wills, and that is not a matter of theory, but of living encounter and decision. At the same time, of course, a man would be foolish to ignore the witness and guidance of others who have explored this world of personal relations with God. These people have tested and verified it in the only laboratory where it can be tested, namely the laboratory of life itself, the laboratory of personal relationships.