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MY IDEA OF GOD

A SYMPOSIUM OF FAITH

EDITED BY

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BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY

1926

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Published October, 1926

THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY PRESS PUBLICATIONS
ARE PUBLISHED BY
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
IN ASSOCIATION WITH
THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY COMPANY

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

University of Southern California Library

HOW I THINK OF GOD

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SCHOLAR, teacher, preacher, executive, Henry Sloane Coffin is a many-sided man and holds a commanding position in the religious life of America, having recently been chosen president of the Union Theological Seminary, New York. The Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church of New York, of which he has long been pastor, is one of the finest examples of "organized preaching" in the country, uniting the ends of society as few churches have been able to do.

Dr. Coffin is a New Yorker, born in 1877, a son of two of the old and great families of the city. After graduating from Yale University, he studied in New College, Edinburgh, at Marburg in Germany, and at the Union Theological Seminary, where he has been professor of practical theology for many years. He is a member of the Corporation of Yale University, and of the National Board of Missions of the Presbyterian Church. He was lecturer on the Beecher Foundation at Yale in 1918.

Among the books by Dr. Coffin are: *The Ten Commandments*, sermons on *The Creed of Jesus*, studies in *Christian Convictions*, and *What Is There in Religion?* — one of the most helpful and suggestive books of recent years, especially to those who are perplexed in matters of faith. In the essay following he speaks frankly of his deepest confidences in a manner to captivate and convince, showing how the Christian faith may be united with the new knowledge.

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God is to me that creative Force, behind and in the universe, who manifests Himself as energy, as life, as order, as beauty, as thought, as conscience, as love, and who is self-revealed supremely in the creative Person of Jesus of Nazareth, and operative in all Jesus-like movements in the world to-day.

In the physical universe I see Him as energy — the energy of whirling electrons which compose light, and which build up the planets, of which our earth is one. I see Him in upsurging life, which assumes innumerable forms in plants and creatures, forms that change in adaptation to changing conditions. And in this vast and unceasing outflow of energy and life I see Him in universally present order and beauty. Electrons disclose a law of their being, and science makes the assumption of faith that everywhere everything is intelligible and methodical. Were the universe capricious, it could neither be known nor depended on. But it is inherently systematic, and belief in this regularity is the faith which underlies all our scientific investigation. The "laws of nature"

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which we discover and formulate are our descriptions of the ways in which we find that God consistently works. Further, energy and life assume lovely forms — witness the crystals in a snowflake and the shapes and colors of plants. This beauty may be due to our perceptive senses, but it also seems to inhere in the objective world, where nature eliminates the ugly as monstrosities and establishes the fair. Poets, artists, and musicians, who are “priests of the wonder and bloom of the world,” are to me interpreters of God, who is Beauty, as well as Energy, Life, and Order.

In plants and animals there is a rudimentary intellectual and moral life — the life of instinct. In that upreaching mind I see God, but God imprisoned and craving more complete self-expression. In man, so closely linked with the subhuman creation and the heir of the long history and development of life through myriads of forms during millions of years, I see God in thought and conscience and affection, God revealing Himself as Truth to be known, as Right to be obeyed, as Love to be trusted. Wherever a man's intelligence is persuaded, there I think of God as touching him and claiming his allegiance. Wherever a man's conscience is laid hold on, there I think of God as in contact with him and demanding his loyalty. Wherever a man's heart is appealed to, there I think of God as present and asking his

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service. So I think of God as indwelling in men, and able to reveal more of Himself through them by so much as humanity exceeds the infra-human creation.

Looking back across the ages, one sees man, from his most primitive days until now, aware of a Presence in the world, whom he has variously conceived: now as a host of spirits inhabiting trees and stones and clouds, now as gods presiding over tribes or ruling some region of the universe or sphere of human life (the sea or the thunder, childbirth or war or death), and again as the one Lord of earth and heaven, or the one all-pervasive Spirit of life. Amid these kaleidoscopically changing conceptions of Deity, there abides the sense of the Unseen as akin to man, and so to be wooed by him as an ally. And to man's various approaches to the Invisible there has always been a response sufficient not only to afford present satisfaction but also to whet his desire for more. Out of every generation men witness that in fellowship with One beyond their sight or touch or hearing they find something of supremest worth. The spiritual results which they itemize in various epochs differ; but there is a body of concordant testimony to the refreshment and power and cleansing and illumination and serenity which are gained in communion with the Divine.

Of all these seekers after God, He who seems to have found most and best in Him is Jesus of

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Nazareth. What He Himself was and said and did He attributed to this unseen Presence whom He called Father and Lord, and of whom He thought as controlling the universe and inspiring His own soul. To thousands in the Christian centuries Jesus has communicated His faith. God is to them the response from the unseen which answers the trust of Jesus, or the self-revealing Father who imaged Himself fully in this dutiful and companionable Son. As one who was brought up in Christian surroundings, who from infancy learned prayers and hymns and the Bible, I caught the faith of the Church. God is for me the Father who unveils Himself in Jesus. It is of God so conceived that I think in all my intercourse with the Unseen. It is this Christ-like Father to whom I pray, on whom I depend for reinforcement and guidance, of whom I think as forgiving my sins and prompting every generous and useful impulse and resolve within me. He is the Spirit manifest in the energy and life and order and beauty of the universe, and in the thought and conscience and love of men, who comes to full self-expression in the Man Christ Jesus.

I think of God as essentially self-imparting. He puts Himself into His universe at every stage in its evolution. But, like all artists, the medium in which He works limits the amount of His possible self-utterance. He expresses as much of Himself through

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the inanimate creation as it can manifest; but it cannot embody His conscience and heart. He expresses as much of Himself through mankind at every stage in human history as He can succeed in inducing them to receive and incarnate in their personal and social life. But men have never shown themselves fully obedient to the truth which they acknowledged or entirely responsive to the right which they recognized. Only One has seemed completely to understand and accord with His purpose; and in Jesus God has expressed Himself fully. To me Jesus is the adequate picture of God's character.

I try never to think of God as inharmonious with the mind of Jesus. If there be much in the ways of the brute creation which seems unchristian, I interpret it as not yet completed after God's heart and as waiting for Christians to subdue it nearer to their own and their Father's desire. As scientists assume that the world is to be understood and mastered to serve the needs of humanity, so Christians assume that anything in the universe which is hostile or indifferent to the purpose of Jesus is to be conquered and brought under the sway of His Spirit. I do not read God's character in cosmic happenings or charge Him with the results of human greed and folly. I ~~see~~ His character in Jesus, and believe it is His purpose that the forces of nature and the wills of men

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should be made to accord with the aims for which Jesus lived and died and ever liveth.

My thought of God is defined in Jesus, but it is not confined to what I see in Him. I do not think of God as doing aught that is incongruous with Jesus; He deals with men as Jesus dealt with those whom we meet on the pages of the Gospels; He forgives and empowers, redeems and selects as did Jesus. He suffers with and for His children, as Jesus suffered with and for His brethren. But there is more in God than can be incarnated in any human life. The whole universe is pervaded and controlled by Him; the entire race of men is begotten of Him and reflects something of His image. Every religion has its message of God, and can contribute elements to the fellowship of men with Him. Science, art, ethics, philosophy, all bring their discoveries of God as the True, the Beautiful, and the Good. God is to me Christlike and more — the Spirit who rules and fills this and all worlds.

Is God a person? I prefer to put it that He has personal relations with us. Personality is the loftiest product of the world's evolution, and it would be degrading to God to conceive Him in subpersonal terms. We do not wish to lower God to our level or restrict Him within our limitations, and personality as we know it is only embryonic. We men are tadpoles of persons. Further, we cannot

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conceive a Person who is also the immanent Spirit of the universe, and we posit more in God than the phrase "a person" connotes. Christian thinkers in their doctrine of the Trinity often attribute to God social relations within His selfhood. But the finest religious experience of the race, and supremely the faith of Jesus, discloses a God who has intercourse with His children which we can only describe as personal.

I have so stressed the revelation of God in Jesus that one may ask: Do you think of Jesus as Himself God, or as a man to whom God was fully disclosed? I answer that to me He is both. I grant that it is difficult to combine these two aspects of Jesus — that in which we envisage Him as man, made in all points like ourselves, whose faith discovers God, and that in which we picture Him as coming from God and embodying Him. At the moment physicists are facing a similar difficulty in defining light. They have thought of it as waves of energy which move through a hypothetical ether — "the nominative of the verb, to undulate." But recently they have discovered that light exerts a pressure which can be weighed, and they are computing the tons of sunshine per annum which our earth receives. They are working with both the undulatory and the emission theories of light, but without successfully combining them. The theological problem is similar.

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As in the undulatory theory of light, God is that Spirit who responds with inspirations and reënforcements to the faith of Jesus, across the medium which interlies the here and the yonder. As in the emission theory, God is that Spirit who comes in Jesus with the pressure of His love upon our world's woe and sin.

And while I have stressed the full self-disclosure of God in Jesus, I do not think of Him as having nothing more to impart. On the contrary, I think of Him as the indwelling Spirit who has ever been revealing Himself to faithful souls; and that Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. I commenced by saying that God is to me a creative Force. A force can be seen only in action: the Spirit of Christ can be watched in operation — in a Paul, counting all things but loss that he may be found in Christ and present others perfect in Him; in an Augustine, putting off the sensual life and devoting his powers to building up the City of God; in a Francis of Assisi, espousing poverty and claiming glad kinship as a child of God with sun and moon, beasts and birds, and with every man to whom he can minister the happiness of obedience to Jesus; in a Luther, discovering that a Christian is the most free lord of all and subject to none, and the servant of all, bound to be to them what Christ has been to him; in a Lincoln, with malice toward none, with charity for

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all, with firmness in the right as God gave him to see the right, setting free the bondmen and preserving the unity of a nation; in an Edith Cavell, finding that patriotism is not enough, and that she must die without hatred or bitterness for anyone. In all Jesus-like movements in current thought and life, in the trend toward coöperative fellowship in industry, toward a commonwealth of free nations, maintaining peace and promoting human well-being, toward a comradeship of mutual reverence and mutual help of the races — in every advance in science and art and commerce and education I think of God as imparting more of Himself to the sons of men. He is to me the Living God, a Contemporary, unveiling Himself to His children in the life of each generation, and recognizable as the present Spirit of Christ.