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Alec De Candole

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CHAPTER I

GOD

IF we examine the Apostles' Creed, which may be called the authoritative statement of what were in the early centuries of Christianity regarded as its fundamentals, we shall notice that it contains three great postulates, typified by the Three Persons of the Trinity: "I believe in GOD," "in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord," "in the Holy Catholic Church"—the Christian sphere of the operation of the Spirit of GOD. In other words: (1) GOD exists, (2) His supreme revelation was in Jesus Christ, (3) He is still alive, and working: par excellence, in the society which Jesus founded—the Church, Holy because of her origin, and Catholic because of her ideal inclusiveness.

With regard to the first of these postulates, it may be said outright that the existence of GOD is not a point which can be proved to the hilt by pure reason. It is always possible, it seems to me, to believe that the world was made by chance, and acts by chance and more or less unfathomable laws. This explains a great deal; indeed, it could theoretically explain anything: for where everything happens by chance, anything at all may happen. At the same time, there is much which it does not explain satisfactorily. You may say that

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the sun and the stars are glowing gases: that the moon is a dead rock, shining by the sun's reflected light: that the earth and the planets revolve round the sun owing to attraction and a balance of centripetal and centrifugal forces. You may trace back the earth to a nebula and, if you like, that nebula to a part of a larger nebula, now developed and organised into the Solar System; but you have not discovered the origin of those gases, or the reason for their movement, or of their heat and their tendency to cool, contract, and harden. You may talk of attraction and gravitation, of the origin of life in a protoplasm. It may be you will yet learn to produce life from lifelessness: but what is attraction and why? Above all, what is life? What is this great principle that differentiates a protoplasm from a rock, and has developed eventually a Plato, a Caesar, a Francis? Fatalism must remain agnostic on these points. Theism has an answer, a personal Creator. Thus, at the lowest, the existence of GOD—of a personal Supreme Being—is a very sound and reasonable scientific hypothesis. And when we consider man, we are again brought up short in our Fatalism. Man is a fact, and his emotions and aspirations,—yes, his very superstitions,—are facts, whatever you think of them; and you have got to deal with them. It is no good talking about the “false fear of the gods,” and saying that man's primitive belief in the supernatural is the result of his observation of phenomena—such as lightning and thunder—which he

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could not explain, but which are now known to have a “perfectly natural” explanation. It does not seem quite convincing to assert that men invented what they had no pattern or precedent for believing in. And apart from this, it is not only savages who have had a sincere and working belief in what they could not see around them.

Almost all the greatest men of the world have believed in some kind of GOD. Socrates and Plato were not easily hoodwinked, nor men afraid of “following whithersoever their reason might lead,” yet they believed in a GOD as fervently as their fellow-countrymen, and more ideally and more rationally. Cromwell was a hard-headed and eminently “practical” man; one of our greatest generals and administrators; who started life humbly, and lived to create the Ironsides, to revolutionise cavalry warfare, to refuse a crown but rule nevertheless as an autocrat, or perhaps theocrat or conscious Vicegerent of GOD; to make England’s name respected and feared wherever a hand was raised against the followers of the Reformers. Yet, though his GOD was not quite ours, we must recognise that few men have ever lived so much “as ever in his great taskmaster’s eye.” His sentries would notice him awake in his tent all night, studying his Bible: then in the morning he would lead his men to victory, a Psalm as a battle-cry on his lips. Belief in GOD is not the prerogative only of feeble intellects.

There is much else of what we may call cir-

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cumstantial evidence that points towards theism; but there is only room for one more argument,—which may be stated shortly thus: Man is not only material, he has feelings and will. These non-material elements may even influence the physical body as when a man blanches for fear, or his heart beats wildly with excitement. Most important of all is his character and personality—quite undeniably an existent thing, which must be taken account of. Now whence is this? Can what is impersonal produce what is personal? “I worst e’en the Giver in one gift,” if I wake in the Universe endowed with will and personality to find that this Universe that has made me is impersonal and unknowing. Thus it is no great assumption to say that GOD exists, and if He exists, obviously our first duty and our interest is to know what we can of Him—what His character is, and what His laws are. Then we shall know how we stand with the Universe in which we have found ourselves; and hence it is that man has for ever searched for GOD.

.. This it is that links together as one
 The sad continual companies of men; . . .
 . . . That souls weary and hearts afire
 Have everywhere besought him, everywhere
 Have found and found him not; and age to age,
 Though all else pass and fail, delivereth
 At least the great tradition of their God¹.

If, then, theism is established against atheism, what next? Polytheism as a recognised belief is

¹ F. W. H. Myers, *St John the Baptist (Poems)*, p. 61.

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dead in Western Europe at least: if we are theists, we are almost certainly monotheists. But there is a curious form of theism which has revived a little lately—the belief in a GOD Who is not omnipotent, and hence not only uses, but actually must depend on, human help. Monotheism includes dualism, if one of the two powers is definitely the stronger; but a dualism or any philosophy that leaves the Supreme Power not yet omnipotent, is a strange thing. If one GOD made the Universe, one GOD must be omnipotent in it. Or else the world must be a compromise between two or more powers agreed that a Universe must be made, but differing with regard to its nature! Whatever more GOD may be He must be at least the Sum of all human activities, ideals, and aspirations. Thus, He is supremely good. Do you demand that a man be just, pure, consistent? Then GOD must be the same, only far more truly so. Is the perfect man wise and strong and patient? So must He be to whom man looks and tends. Do men seek truth? Then GOD must be the truth—the final satisfaction of the Intellect. Are there men who seek GOD in beauty? Then GOD is there, and “thine eyes shall see the King in His beauty.” He is the Righteous, the True, the Fair. Whatever is perfect is in Him; whatever seeks perfection, is from Him; whatever climbs towards perfection, is through Him. This must be so, if there is a GOD at all. This, then, is the first great postulate of the Apostles’ Creed; that GOD is One, Perfect, Eternal

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—the ALL. He is revealed in nature, in the faint colours of dawn, the glory of noon, the myriad hues of sunset, the terrible silence of the eternal stars. He is in the freshness of spring and the richness of autumn, in the trees and forests, rivers and peaceful valleys, barren downs and rugged mountains, in the stern cliffs and the tossing sea;

Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man¹.

He is revealed, too, in the beauty of art, in all the pictures that were ever well painted, in all great architecture and sculpture, in all music and poetry that have in any degree attained power or loveliness; no one who has ever truly known any art has not said in some sort, “GOD is here.” Nor is He less revealed in all the great men who have trod this earth, in Moses and Isaiah, Plato and Aurelius, Buddha and Confucius and Mohammed, Pericles and Caesar,—yes, and Napoleon. This is not poetic fancy; no theism can say less.

But the greatest revelation of GOD that has been shown to us is not His power, or beauty, or truth, or even His goodness; but His love. We know Him now as Father, if we accept this revelation, and this was given us by Jesus of Nazareth. This, then, is our second great postulate—“I believe in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord.” We must next consider this revelation and the Person who made it.

¹ Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*.

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CHAPTER II

JESUS OF NAZARETH

CHARLES LAMB is said once to have remarked: "If Shakespeare came into the room, we should all rise and offer him a seat; but if Jesus Christ came in, we should kneel down and try to touch the hem of His garment." This truly illustrates the difference between the feelings with which the majority of us regard Jesus and those with which we regard even the greatest of other men. Even so wonderful and mystical a figure as St Francis of Assisi does not affect us in quite the same way as does the figure of Jesus. Yet it is worth while to examine this feeling and to try and see how far it is genuine, and how far merely the result of twenty centuries of the worship of Jesus. For this is not irreverent, but rather the truest reverence, to look back as closely as possible on the real figure of the Founder of Christianity. And one fundamental and obvious fact often becomes clouded—that primarily, to human knowledge, Jesus was not the Christ, but the Nazarene—not a Divine revelation, but a man; a man who lived in a certain country at a certain period under certain rulers. During the reign of Augustus, Emperor of Rome, Jesus was born in

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Judaea, a country at that time¹ ruled by Herod the Great, a monarch who had obtained his kingdom by acute diplomacy during the wars that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar. Jesus lived for a little over thirty years only, and was eventually put to death by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, during the reign of Tiberius. He was thus living a few years after the death of Horace and Maecenas, and was more or less a contemporary of Sejanus. This is important as we are bound in the first place to examine His life as we would the life of any other historical character in whom we are interested. It is necessary, then, to find out what first-hand evidence we have, and how far it is reliable.

Four chief works have come down to us dealing with the life of Jesus—what we call the Four Gospels. The Fourth of these is later than the rest; its date and authorship are very uncertain, and its historicity more uncertain still. We are left with the three “Synoptists.” These three writers are not altogether independent, but two chief sources have been traced; one lost, named by scholars “Q,” and the other probably our present “Gospel according to St Mark.” This was almost certainly written by St Mark, the friend of St Peter, the first leader of the Church after the death of Jesus, either at St Peter’s dictation, or else from immediate recollection of his reminis-

¹ Or shortly before; the exact date of the birth of Jesus being uncertain.

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cences. Moreover, as St Mark is mentioned¹ as one of the earliest Christians, it is quite likely that he himself had seen Jesus. His book is therefore our best guide. The first thing to notice in it is that Jesus is very human. He could be angry and sorry², disappointed³, affectionate⁴, tired⁵. But at the same time He stands head and shoulders above His surroundings. He feels Himself inspired by GOD⁶ to preach and teach. He was at first popular⁷, or at any rate well-known and sought after. But He came into conflict with the Pharisees, the professed religionists of Judaea⁸, and at last, going to Jerusalem, He was arrested at their instigation, and the Roman governor, a weak man, was persuaded by them to crucify Him. St Mark does not spend much time on His teaching; he is more interested in the actions of Jesus; but he indicates the three main lines of His doctrine:

(1) That mutual love and forbearance are necessary between man and man⁹;

(2) That religion is not formalism, or tradition, or the heritage of one nation only¹⁰;

(3) That He was Himself "the Messiah,—the Son of the Blessed¹¹": that is to say, the fulfilment of all the aspirations of Judaism, the promised Champion and Deliverer. This claim is very

¹ Acts xii. 12, 25 et al.² Mark iii. 5.³ Mark viii. 21, ix. 19.⁴ Mark x. 21.⁵ Mark iv. 38.⁶ Mark i. 15.⁷ Mark i. 28, v. 24, xii. 37.⁸ Mark vii. 1-23.⁹ Mark x. 42, 45, xi. 25, 26.¹⁰ Mark vii. 1-23, 24-30.¹¹ Mark viii. 27-30, ix. 41, xiv. 61, 62.

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important, for it is the final basis of the doctrine of the Divinity of Jesus. At present it is enough to say that even in St Mark's Gospel this claim is definitely and unmistakeably made. Moreover, it is plain, both from St Mark and from the other two Synoptists, that the disciples did not understand what this claim meant to Jesus. They thought He meant that He was to free Israel and rule the world¹; they were anticipating a kingdom on earth, in which they themselves should be great². This was not the ambition of Jesus as He showed in His replies to their questionings and their quarrels "who should be greatest." What the claim actually did mean to Jesus we must try to consider later.

With regard to certain other qualities, the character of Jesus has in some ways been very negligently treated. Certain marvellous and interesting points have been too much overlooked. "The meekness and gentleness of Christ" have too often overshadowed, not so much His sternness as His manliness: just as the "non-resistance" teaching of St Matthew v. has often obscured the combative qualities of Christianity, which are just as fundamental and essential, though less original. I would insist very specially on the courage of Jesus, both physical and moral. Jesus, simply as a man, is worthy of a man's admiration, worthy to be taken as a man's hero. Not only do we get such

¹ Daniel vii. 13, 14.

² Mark x. 35-37; Luke ix. 46; Acts i. 6.