

God and Man

By Dr Margaret Lowenfeld



Reading the discussions in this page about God and man, it has come home to me forcibly that there is something new and powerful that the child-psychologist can contribute.

When we have something very penetrating to convey, some profound feeling we wish to evoke; we talk in symbols. The men who have died for the flag of their country and to save it from desecration by their foes have done so not for the integrity of a few yards of coloured bunting, but for the value that that bunting called to life, value that no length of words or legal argument could touch, a value that even speech cannot make entirely clear.

It is mankind's way, when some experience is both powerful and complex, to try and express it not in words, but in pictures, and to choose for those pictures something that is at hand for everyone. In this way we have been accustomed to talk of 'God' and his relation to ourselves in the picture-word of 'Father'. Why? Many reasons have been given; may I give the one I know?

When a delinquent child comes from the slums of our great cities to one of the big children's centres where children who are lost are helped to find their way again, the main difficulty that faces those who would help him is that his ways are set in a pattern which to him seems self-evident. He knows nothing of another way of life and insists determinedly that no other way of life exists. To him life is so; fairness does not exist; every man's hand is against him; the only way of living is to give back the blows you get or think you get, for, more often than not, the injuries suffered are illusory and lie in the child's misunderstanding of the life he sees. Once one can get the child to believe that other ways of behaving are possible, the battle is nearly won; it is at any rate well begun. Before that has happened, both rewards and punishments are useless; he will interpret them in the pattern he knows, and; whichever they are, they will only go to confirm him in it.

Now the essence of the picture 'parent-child' is that the parent is a considerable way further along the road of life than the – let us say – three year old child. If he is a wise parent (and only a wise one comes into question here), there will be a lot about the hanging together of fact and fact, about the inner meaning of things that happen that is known to him and as yet unknown to the child. There is nothing fixed in the relationship. It is one of time alone, for given the passage of years the child will come to stand where the father does, will in time be himself a father. But before that time has come, he is immature, and the meanings of things are blocked from his view.

Mankind is at the beginning of his career. It is only yesterday that he was peeping out from his familial hole in the ground, defending himself with a club against all comers and falling a victim to the simplest of cosmic forces. Now once again he peeps out from holes in the ground and defends himself as best he can against dangers from hostility against him. But this time there is this significant difference that within the group in which he lives, he is aware of his interdependence, is ready to sacrifice, if need be, his dearest possessions and even life itself for the defence of that of which he is a part and which expresses to him, not personal egotism and direct indulgence, but something intangible and powerful, those spiritual experiences which in fellowship with his group he has won.

The difference is real and it is a beginning. In the few thousand years that mankind has been at work, we have learned to conquer all our external difficulties; we can live in the air and under the sea; make buttons out of milk and grow strawberries in winter; were there goodwill among mankind, there is nothing that we need that could not be ours, no human difficulty that could not be overcome. A new danger faces us, a danger that we had not known existed: the danger of man himself, of his distorted ideas and his extraordinary lusts. About man in these thousand years or so, we have learnt nothing: it is all yet to do. But there are beacons to show us the distance: individual human beings who can do what none of the rest of us can do – yet; groups of human societies where lust of conquest and greed of possession have never lifted their heads, new kinds of human societies showing new kinds of human groupings, new forms of consciousness that have never been there before. We are at the beginning of our human possibilities. Only yesterday the dominant classes (about 1/50th of the humans alive) had the power to produce beauty. Had Michael Angelo or Shakespeare, Leonardo da Vinci or Beethoven been born in a modern slum or as the child of an Armenian peasant, their genius would have remained as sterile as the desert before the irrigation of the Nile. What lies ahead we do not know, but that it holds glories for the human race unimaginable today, seems to me as certain as that mankind will eventually find an answer to all the scientific puzzles that plague it now.

What then of God? Mankind lives in a universe whose laws we are only now slowly and painfully coming to recognise, and by whose perfection and detail we are ever freshly amazed. Man is part of this, but not identical with it; his future is unknown to him, as unknown as that of a three year old in today's human family; but in the infinite mind of God it is there, as the wireless radiations were there when Pharaoh built the Pyramids.

Is He then personal or impersonal? Is Alice in Wonderland true? To a small child it is a fascinating phantasy, so real that one day if she looks hard enough, she may actually see the white rabbit hurrying along to have tea with the Duchess. To the mature philosopher the Red Queen crying out for what is going to happen next week, is a parable more vivid than facts, of some of the unvarying factors that appear in life. To the child-nature who has not yet grown out of life conceived of as personal in essence, God (that is the ultimate reality which we someday shall know when we have grown to the place where such a knowledge is possible) can be experienced only in personal terms. For them He is personal, truly personal, felt in the terms that are real to them. To others who have already had some of the experience that makes them understand that it is the personal that limits and the impersonal, the shared, that liberates, that same force, that force we call 'God' is experienced as impersonal, as indeed at one level it truly is. A god who was the same for all people, for the undifferentiated, simple peasant-mind, unconscious of itself or of any factors but its immediate surroundings, as well as for the mystic and for the poet; the man of deep human experience and the little girl in the cash desk of a big multiple store; would be no reality at all, but an idol or a mechanical ritual; something out of touch with life and unable to be the vehicle either of joy or experience.

God is very really there, and is always larger than our experience, richer than we have dared to hope. And the pains that come upon us are pains of the consequence of our lack of development, our greed, our blindness, our maliciousness and snobbery, and God suffers with us in our experience of them.