

I

GOD

He raised his grey old head. "It is written in the Fourth Surah, 'Men's souls are naturally inclined to covetousness, but if ye be kind towards women and fear to wrong them, God is well acquainted with what ye do.'"

. . . The other women looked at her curiously. "I saw you sitting with the headman, chatting away," said one . . .

" . . . What did he talk about?"

Jean thought for a minute. "This and that . . . He talked about God a little."

The women started at her, "You mean, his own God? Not the real God?"

"He didn't differentiate," Jean said. "Just God."¹

"He didn't differentiate," Jean said. "Just God." Jean's statement is balancing on a razor's edge. What exactly is in her mind? The position of "the women" is clear. "The real God" is their own God; the headman's God is not the real God!

And precisely this is where we come in at this moment: to decide first of all whether any people—of whatever creed or colour or race—have any right to claim God as *their own* in such a possessive way like "the women"; whether any people have a right to speak of "our God" and "their God"; whether a God who could be fitted into the category of the sole possession of any people or race could in any way be the same God whom Jesus Christ came to reveal and whom essential Christian faith holds as "The Lord . . . the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth."

This is a vital point, and we cannot really proceed to discuss God or anything relating to our faith until we have

¹ Nevil Shute, *A Town Like Alice* (London, Pan Books edn., 1961), p. 60.

settled it. For here we strike the question of the knowledge of God, whether every race has something of this knowledge, however primary, or whether any peoples could be said to have been completely excluded from it.

Andrew Lang in *The Making of Religion* has claimed that "many savage tribes are as monotheistic as many Christians".² Father Schmidt of Vienna, who actually researched into the beliefs of the "pigmy" of the Congo, claims in *The Origin and Growth of Religion* that the belief in, and worship of, one Supreme Deity is universal among all really primitive peoples; that the "High God" is found everywhere among them sufficiently prominently to make his position indubitable; that he is not a late development or traceable to missionary influences. He holds that the belief encircles the whole earth like a girdle and that it "is an essential property of whatever ancient human culture existed in the very earliest time . . . before the individual groups had separated from one another". The Supreme Being of the primitive culture is a genuinely monotheistic Deity, described as Father, Creator, eternal, completely beneficent, ethically holy, and creatively omnipotent.

The reaction of European scholars to the conclusions of Father Schmidt is typical. A. C. Bouquet, the Cambridge specialist in Comparative Religion, has his doubts and would rather think that primitive peoples could never develop such ideas apart from "contact with some group of monotheists". In any case, he concluded, Father Schmidt's evidence was not proved!³

Despite the accumulation of evidence from the work of Andrew Lang, Söderblom, and Father Schmidt and others, emotional resentment and deliberate refusal to accept facts on the part of some European scholars have resulted in the erroneous theory of "the high gods of primitive peoples". As I have maintained in *God in Nigerian Belief*,⁴ if ever there is a god who is a figment of man's imagination, it is this "high god"; for he is only "an academic invention, an intellectual marionette whose behaviour depends upon the mental partiality of its

² Quoted by John Oman in *The Natural and The Supernatural* (Cambridge, 1931), p. 385.

³ See A. C. Bouquet, *Man and Deity* (Heffer, Cambridge, 1933), p. 101 f.

⁴ (Lagos, Federal Ministry of Information, 1963), p. 9.

creators. Therefore, he could be made to withdraw from the life and thought of the people, could be lent features and a face, could be made to be just everything that would preclude the slightest suspicion of a revelation from the Living God.” These scholars have furnished us with an unnecessary, artificial pluralism. For they do not hesitate to concede to each nation, people, or “tribe,” its own “high god”, with the result that the whole place is overrun with “high gods” of various brands. P. A. Talbot, in his book *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, writes, “In practically every tribe, there is a Supreme God. . . .”⁵ This “primitive high god” is a product of ignorance and prejudice. There are too many stay-at-home investigators on the job, while those who go out into the field often find it difficult to leave behind at home their own preconceived notions.

For the Christian theologian who is committed to the facts of “In the beginning God . . .”, and “The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein”, Father Schmidt’s assertion that the belief in God “encircles the whole earth like a girdle”, and “is an essential property of whatever ancient human culture existed in the very earliest times” should not appear strange. For the Creator Spirit who like a mother-bird sat upon the primordial chaos and out of that chaos of non-existence brought forth order, cohesion, meaning and life has certainly left the mark of His creative activity upon the created order. This is the primary stage of revelation—something through which the Creator is revealed. Then He created man in His own image—a rational being, intelligent will, someone address-able and therefore responsible (= response-able): someone to whom God could communicate His revelation through his appreciation of the created order and with whose spirit the Divine Spirit could have immediate communication. We can deny this primary revelation only when we rob the created order of its revelatory quality and relieve man of his inherent capability to receive divine communication. In the words of Eliade, “For religious man, the world always presents a supernatural valence, that is, it reveals a modality of the sacred. Every cosmic fragment is transparent; its own mode of existence *shows* a particular struc-

⁵ Vol. II (London, O.U.P., 1926), p. 15.

ture of being, and hence of the sacred.”⁶ “God’s essence”, says Kegley in interpreting Brunner, “is the will to self-communication.”⁷ And DeWolf says, “A revelation must be made to a rational being”, “. . . it is God Who is directly made known rather than ideas about Him.”⁸ All this is summed up in St. Paul’s words in Romans 1: 20—“Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.” The same fact is emphasized by John Baillie in his book *Our Knowledge of God*: he quotes Canon Lilley as saying, “God may create a universe *ex nihilo*, but He cannot reveal Himself *ad nihilum*. . . . We may say that apart from actual communion with God there is no worthy and complete human personality. But we may also say that apart from some incipient degree of personality there would be nothing for God to communicate with.”⁹ Further, Baillie observes that not one of us has been left quite alone by God, that we have been brought out from the beginning, that from the beginning we have possessed more light than we have used. “Man has spirit”, writes Brunner, “only in that he is addressed by God. . . . Therefore the human self is nothing which exists in its own right, no property of man, but a relation to a divine Thou.”¹⁰

We maintain, therefore, that God cannot be confined in any way. His realm is the whole universe. All peoples are His concern. And He has revealed Himself primarily to them all, each race apprehending the revelation according to its native capability. “. . . the growth of religion would have been impossible if there had not been at least one fact—the personality of God—which it not merely started from, but to which it constantly returns, and in which, properly understood, it finds its constant touchstone of truth”.¹¹

The next point for us to examine is whether any people or

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 138.

⁷ Charles W. Kegley, *The Theology of Emil Brunner* (New York, Macmillan, 1962), p. 183.

⁸ L. Harold DeWolf, *A Theology of the Living Church* (New York, Harper, 1960), pp. 32 and 36.

⁹ *Our Knowledge of God* (London, O.U.P., 1941), p. 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 3 ff., 42.

¹¹ F. B. Jevon, “Anthropomorphism”, in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 1. (Edinburgh, Clark, 1908), p. 576.

creed can claim to possess a *clear* knowledge of God in an absolute sense. This point is very important for us; it is not infrequently that we hear it glibly stated that Africans have no clear concept of God. This arises largely from the unexamined premise that because Europeans have written systematic statements about God, therefore they have a clear concept of God. Is there not a world of difference between an actual, saving knowledge of God and an academic "knowledge" of Him—a thing reached and written down through a process of ratiocination, which might make little or no difference to the life either of the writer or the reader? We tend to forget also that the prophetic insight with regard to the nature of God is always far in advance of the general concept of Him held by the generality of the people. Moreover, the emphasis of the Bible is that God reveals Himself . . . God cannot be fully known. "Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour" (Isaiah 45: 15); "Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?" (Job 11:7). These are statements which are expressive of man's baffling plight in his spiritual attempt to solve the riddle with which he is confronted by God's being and nature.

When Western philosophy and theology apply the word "Person" to God, they are only using a descriptive, figurative term. We shall find that much as we may try to avoid it, the word will have no meaning for us unless God is in a way anthropomorphically conceived. And when we intelligently set the teaching that God is Person side by side with the concept that "God is Spirit", we see immediately how much of a riddle we have on our hands.

Recent publications in Europe and America have come to indicate how much confusion there is in the minds even of the enlightened Westerners about God. If we take for example some of the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the writings of Paul Tillich, and *Honest To God* of Dr. J. A. T. Robinson, we shall see at least two facts clearly emerging: the fact that the masses of Westerners appear to be losing their sense of God, and Western theology is in conflict because it has become too theoretical: God according to it has become largely an intellectual concept.

According to H. Wheeler Robinson in *The Christian Experience*

of the Holy Spirit, Sadhu Sundar Singh had a vision, and in relating this vision he said, "When I entered heaven for the first time I looked all round me and then I asked: 'Where is God?' and they answered and said to me: 'God is seen here as little as on earth, for God is infinite. But Christ is here, He is the image of the Invisible God, and only in Him can anyone see God, either here or upon earth.'" ¹²

It is because of the very weakness of our perception that God in His infinite love and mercy caused the Word to become flesh and pitch His tent among us. Even then, God in Jesus is known only to as many as will receive Him—those who spiritually discern and accept that in Him is God (John 1: 14, 9-13).

All this is to warn us that nowhere is the concept of God clear in an absolute sense. In fact, more likely than not, it is clearer to those who grasp the fact of God intuitively and know Him to be the very basis of their existence and the ultimate motive of their lives than it is to those who are able to read about Him in books for pleasure, to satisfy curiosity, or as an intellectual exercise, and no more. We know this in consequence of our bafflement when we are confronted with certain basic questions about the nature of God which we have no spiritual resources to face, or whenever we are faced with acute social or moral problems which by their nature raise questions with regard to the reality of God and the government or the very purpose of the universe. Isaiah's and Job's exclamations as quoted above, and Luther's famous phrase, *Deus absconditus et revelatus*, are not academic; they are expressions by worshipping but baffled human souls. *Deus absconditus et revelatus* is always urging Himself upon us anywhere and everywhere; but quite often we see the *absconditus* rather than, or more than, the *revelatus* aspect, because of our finitude. Therefore, when the theologian takes a look at other people's religion, before he asserts glibly that there is no concept of God, let him look within his own system, or, better still, within himself. If he is honest and he is not just someone setting one religion against another in competition, he will at least concede that here is a mystery with which people are grappling according to their own native capabilities. He will avoid rushing to facile conclusions.

¹² (London, Nisbet, 1944), p. 67.

I have no time and space to quote and criticise more of the things which have been said about belief in God according to African traditional religion. Suffice it here to quote Herskovits: "The assertion of the existence of the belief among West Africans that the Creator, having made the world, left it to its own devices and the pleasure of inferior gods, found so often in literature must be viewed as defining the traditional European approach to African religions."¹³

Now, where do we go from here? Should the theologian, because of the basic difficulty that we have outlined above, pray in the language of Ronald Knox's limerick:

O God, forasmuch as without Thee
 We are not enabled to doubt Thee,
 Help us all by Thy grace
 To convince the whole race
 It knows nothing whatever about Thee.¹⁴

We cannot do this, because the heart of the prayer is false. We only need to achieve a clear perspective: to know that God is God and that we are only creatures. Our major difficulty begins and we are confused in our ideas only when we forget this and seek to prescribe for God the bounds of the operation of His Spirit. Our calling is to accept that which God Himself gives and commissions, and transmit this to the world. That means that a theologian who thinks that he is an intellectualist is only wasting his time. A theologian who is worthy of the name is first and foremost a man of prayer, waiting upon God for a message, God's own message.

With regard to Africa, I have outlined briefly in the "Introduction" those things which constitute our difficulty in the acquisition of first-hand knowledge of Africa and her peoples. I have also indicated what I consider to be a fruitful line of approach. There is no doubt that from the honest research that has been done and that is being done, we have enough material to begin with. And here is a challenge: each of us must get to know his own people thoroughly, and approach

¹³ M. J. Herskovits, *Dahomey* (New York, Augustin, 1938), Vol. I, p. 289.

¹⁴ From *The Complete Limerick Book*, ed. Langford Reed (London, Jarrolds, 1925). Reprinted in R. A. Knox: *In Three Tongues*, ed. L. E. Eyres (London, Chapman & Hall, 1959), p. 123.

their belief reverently and sympathetically, because we possess that which is the key to their soul—the language.

We begin by looking at the African concept of God first because this is the key to all that we seek to achieve at, and as a result of, this Consultation. In the words of Tillich, “a religious statement, where God is not the *prius* of everything, you never can reach Him. . . . If you don’t start with Him, you never can reach Him.”¹⁵

In *Nupe Religion*, S. F. Nadel says, “The most basic concept of Nupe theology, that of the supreme being, is also the widest. In a sense it stands for the whole realm of religion . . .¹⁶ Let us begin here and we shall find the following true with regard to the concept of God in Africa.

(a) *God is real to Africans*

We can speak of a many-sided concept of God in Africa. This is in consequence of linguistic and cultural variations by which it has been affected. It is not infrequently that foreign investigators over-emphasize or exaggerate these elements of variation and therefore fail to see the basic unity, concluding, as they have sometimes done, that it is all amorphous.

God is real to Africans and that is why Africans call Him by names which are descriptive both of His nature and of His attributes. A study of these names will afford us a very deep insight into the African concept of God. Unfortunately, we cannot be quite certain about the derivations or history of several of the principal names in consequence of their age, but especially because we have no written literature about the ancient past of Africa to guide us. *African Ideas of God*, edited by Edwin Smith and recently revised by E. Geoffrey Parrinder, has placed this difficulty before us in clear terms. Edwin Smith warns that “Etymological methods are not invariably helpful and indeed may easily lead astray. It is impossible to recover the primary meanings of some of the old African names for the Supreme Being. . . . This philological region is the happy hunting ground of fantastic etymologists. Certain writers seem to be supremely ambitious to find origins outside Africa

¹⁵ Mimeographed lectures on “A History of Christian Thought” (1953), ed. C. E. Braaten (London, S.C.M. Press, 1968).

¹⁶ *Nupe Religion* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), p. 10.