

III

THE INFINITE SPIRIT

GOD IS INFINITE SPIRIT

WE have known all our lives that God is not an old man with a beard (looking rather like Karl Marx, especially when the artist wanted to show God angry, as he often did). We have realized, too, that the more complex picture of an old man with a long beard, a young man with a short beard, and a dove, bears no resemblance to the Blessed Trinity: it is merely the artist doing his best. But getting rid of the pictures is of value only if, in their place, we develop a truer idea of God: otherwise we have merely a blank where the pictures used to hang.

God is a spirit. As a first step towards forming our idea of Him, we imagine our body away and see our soul existing and functioning bodiless: it is partless, spaceless, immortal, it knows, loves, decides, acts. And all these things are true of God. But our soul is not God's equal, it is only His image. For God is infinite: we are not.

We note the meaning of the word *infinite*. It is from the Latin *fnis*, meaning an end or boundary or limit; the prefix *in* is negative; it means that there is no such thing in God as a *fnis*. God is without limit or boundary or end. Whatever perfection there is, God has it totally. Apply this notion of limit to our own soul: it knows certain things but they are a mere drop in the ocean of things it doesn't know: its knowing is limited. So is its loving. So is its power. There are none of

these limits in God—He is all-knowing, all-loving, all-powerful.

We shall return to these, but only after looking at the greatest difference of all—namely that the soul owes its existence to God. He brought it into existence, holds it in existence, could reduce it to nothing again (but He has told us He will not). To have no hold of one's own upon existence is the most limiting limitation of all, and marks the greatest difference between the finite spirit which is our soul and the infinite spirit which is God.

Bernard Shaw tells of asking a priest: "Who made God?" The priest, says Shaw, was thunderstruck, his faith shattered. Whether he committed suicide or merely left the Church Shaw does not tell. But the whole thing is ridiculous. Every student of philosophy has heard the question: and they all know that there *must* be a being which did not need to be made. If nothing existed except receivers of existence, where would the existence come from? In order that anything may exist, there must be a being which does not have to receive existence, a being which simply has it. God can confer existence upon all other beings, precisely because He has it in His own right. It is His nature to exist. God does not have to receive existence, because He *is* existence.

Now we understand the name God gave Himself. The story is in the third chapter of Exodus. God had appeared to Moses in the burning bush. When Moses asked Him His name, God said "I am who am. Thus shalt thou say to the children of Israel: He who is hath sent me to you." This is God's name for Himself, I AM. Our name for Him is HE IS. (The Hebrew word for this is Jahveh. The Jews, out of reverence, avoided writing God's name in full; they wrote the consonants only, JHVH. Somebody in the thirteenth century made a bad guess at the missing vowels and produced the word Jehovah. Actually there is no such word.)

That is the primary truth about God. He is, He exists, with all that existence in its fullness can mean. We shall look deeper into that.

GOD IS OMNIPRESENT AND ETERNAL

“Where was God before the universe was created?” asks the street-corner heckler. His question breaks up nicely into two—Where was God when there wasn’t any where? Where was God when there wasn’t any when? Briefly, the answer is that the words *where* and *when* have no application to God at all. But if we are as brief as that, no one will see the answer.

“Where” means “in what place”, which means “in what location in space”. But God is a spirit, and a spirit does not occupy space; only bodies need space. Yet we do say that God is everywhere. How can He be everywhere if He is not in space at all?

Follow closely. Everywhere means where everything is. The phrase “God is everywhere” means that God is in everything. Clearly a spiritual being is not in a material being as water is in a cup. We must look for a different meaning for the word “in”. A spiritual being is said to be where it operates, in the things that receive the effects of its power. My soul, for instance, is *in* every part of my body, not by being spread out so that every bodily part has a little bit of soul to itself, but because the soul’s life-giving energies pour into every part of the body. Everything whatsoever receives the energy of God, bringing it into existence and keeping it there; that is the sense in which God is omnipresent, is everywhere, in everything. It is no convenience for God of course. He does not need things. But they need Him, desperately.

We can now look at the second part of our heckler’s

question—"before the universe was created". Just as "where" is a word of space—and God is not in space—so "before" is a word of time—and God is not in time either.

What is time? St. Augustine gave the superb answer "I know what time is—provided you don't ask me." But he went on from there, and so must we. Time is the measurement of change. Things go on changing, and time measures the changes. A watch whose hands do not move will not tell the time—because time measures change. Where nothing changes, there is nothing for time to measure, so there is no time. Our material universe is continuously changing, and time belongs to it. God is changeless, so time has no meaning in relation to Him. We are in time, God is in eternity.

If this sort of thing is new to you, it may be difficult at first. Keep thinking it over. God is changeless because He is infinite. He has all perfections. He cannot lose any of them, so there is no past into which they can flow away. Nor is there any future from which new perfections can flow to Him. He has all perfections, in the present, *a present which does not change and does not cease*. That is eternity. The universe He created is not like that. Things come and go. Change is continuous. *Time and the universe started together*.

We must concentrate upon the concept of eternity; it brings us deep into the meaning of God. You and I and all men are in time: which means that we are never at any moment the whole of ourselves. What we were last year, what we shall be next year, all belongs to our total being; but last year has gone and next year has not arrived. There never is a moment when we are all there. We possess our being, the philosophers say, successively. Not so God. All that He is, He possesses in one single act of being. Eternity does not mean everlasting time, time open at both ends, so that however far you go back into the past there is no beginning, however far you go forward in the future, there is no end.

Eternity is not time at all. It is God's total possession of Himself.

Infinity, omnipresence, eternity—these are rich and rewarding concepts, but we should not stay with them too long at a time without returning to the Gospels to meet the living God. Christ is there for us, "whom", as St. John says at the opening of his first Epistle, "we have seen with our eyes, whom we have looked upon, whom our hands have handled". The Infinite we are studying is the same Infinite whom we meet in the Gospels, the same Infinite whom we receive in the Blessed Eucharist. It may be well to repeat here what I said earlier. Gospel reading should accompany the reading of this book: without it, the theology we learn may be accurate but will not come properly alive in us. The Acts of the Apostles and some, at least, of St. Paul's Epistles—I Corinthians, for instance, Galatians, Ephesians, Philip-pians, Colossians—should follow the Gospels immediately. Then the rest of the New Testament and the Old in due course.

GOD'S KNOWLEDGE, LOVE, POWER

God, we have seen, is utterly changeless. This might strike us as involving Him in infinite stagnation. For us, with our matter-bound habits, activity seems unthinkable without change; but this, as we see looking closer, is because we are finite.

The first great activity of the infinite Spirit is knowing; with us this activity involves an immensity of change, learning what we had not known, forgetting what we had; in both cases the change comes from our finiteness, in the one case from ignorance, in the other from a defect of memory; but God knows all things, merely by being God, and there is no forgetfulness for Him; so that His activity of knowing is at once limitless and changeless; He is omniscient.

His other great activity is loving; and that again for men involves change, waxing and waning, finding new objects, losing hold upon things already loved; here again the change comes from our limitations; God loves with infinite loving-power: no loss possible, no increase conceivable. He knows and loves with infinite intensity, and this is not stagnation but measureless vitality.

God is all-powerful, too. There are no limits to what He can do, no limits to what he can make. The most powerful man cannot make anything of nothing at all, he needs *some* material to work upon, and in the absence of material his power must lie all locked up within him and unusable. That is a solid limitation and God lacks it. He needs no material: He creates.

“Can God make a weight so heavy that He cannot lift it?” asks the unbeliever. He feels he has us cornered. If we say “yes”, then God cannot lift it; if we say “no”, then God cannot make it. (The reader might do well to pause here and think out how he would answer this.) Our reply is that God can indeed do all things, but a self-contradiction is not a thing. God cannot make a four-sided triangle, because the terms contradict each other and cancel out: a four-sided triangle is meaningless; it is not a thing at all, it is nothing. A weight that an almighty Being cannot lift is as much a contradiction in terms as a four-sided triangle. It too is nothing. And (to give an old text a new emphasis) nothing is impossible to God.

Because God is infinite, there is no distinction between His attributes and Himself. This is difficult to put briefly. We must try. Take knowledge, and begin with our own. My knowing is something that I do, but it is not myself. This may not strike us as a limitation but it is, and a considerable one. If only my knowledge were myself, I should be knowing all the time, simply by being; I should not have to make

a distinct effort to know; I should never forget. But, as it is, my knowledge is less than myself; I am finite enough, heaven knows, but my knowledge is more finite still.

Now God's knowing is not subject to this limitation. It is not distinct from Himself. It is Himself. If it were not, if there were really a distinction between His knowledge and Himself, then He would have something that His knowledge lacked. In that event it would not be infinite, and we should have to face the monstrosity of an infinite God with limited knowledge.

This applies to all His attributes—just as God *is* knowledge, so He is love, He is justice, He is mercy. We have to think of them as distinct, in order to think of them at all; but in Him they are not distinct from His very self, and therefore not from one another. Whatever God has, He is. And these attributes are not less themselves for being infinite. God's love would not be greater by being distinct from His very self—as ours is.

It is a difficult idea for our minds. But then God *must* be mysterious to the beings He made of nothing. Live with it; keep it in the mind; and our feeling that the attributes must be distinct will grow less, we shall begin to "see" their oneness in God.

We are now clearer, I hope, as to what God is. We are ready for the question: what is God's *life*, what does He do with Himself? We are ready, in other words, for the great adventure of the Blessed Trinity.