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## How the Gods Were Made



JOHN H. DIETRICH

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# How the Gods Were Made

How strange that I should speak this morning on how the gods were made, when we have all been definitely taught that the gods were never made. Everything else indeed has been made, but not the gods; they are the creators, not the created; they are the beings that made all things else. But I can assure you that the gods, like everything else, were made, if not by the process of manufacture, at least by the process of growth. We have long been taught that man was made by God in his own image; but now we know that the reversal of this thought is the truth; namely, that God was made by man in his image. The origin of God lies far back in the dim past, but it does not antedate the advent of man. So far as we can know, God is merely a mental concept, and apart from human beings, there appears to be no such concept.

Of course, when I speak of the making of the gods, I do not mean that they were consciously manufactured by man. No man and no group of men ever purposely and deliberately manufactured a God. I speak of how the gods were made just as I would speak of how the world was made. It was not created as a house is built by a carpenter; it grew into its present form more like a tree grows or like a man grows, and so the idea of God has grown into its present form in a purely natural way from the conditions which were present. The process might be compared to the growth of a man's consciousness, for the experiences of the race have been merely the experiences of the individual from child to man writ large. Embryologists tell us that the foetus in its development passes through all the stages of animal existence, thus reproducing in miniature the evolutionary history of the species; and I believe it is just as true that the mental life of a growing individual after birth also reflects the growing mental life of the race from its primitive conditions to the present stage of civilization.

For instance, there was a time in the infant life of every individual man before a conscious thought had passed

through his brain. There was also a time when he waked up to this wonderful thing we call consciousness, though as yet he was a child and thought as a child. His ideals were crude and illogical, and to a grown-up man foundationless and foolish; his utterance was stammering or meaningless prattle. But there came a time when this same individual's brain blossomed out into the development of rational processes, and he cast aside many of the childish imaginative thoughts which filled his early life. And what is true of the individual is true also of the race. There was a time when the human race was entirely unconscious of that which absorbs the profound attention of men today. There was a time also when this human race began to account for things in a childish and imaginative way. But there also came a time when the human race began to use rational processes and gradually sloughed off many of the superstitions and ignorant guesses which made up its childhood. And what we want to do this morning is to get back to the birth time, or as near to it as possible, of this first human thought of God; and then trace it, if we can, to its present position, and if possible forecast its future.

It is only within the last fifty years that modern knowledge has kindled the light, with which in our hand like a torch, we may trace back the path of human progress to the primaeval twilight which preceded the dawn. With this torch, we can go back and down into the crypts and caverns whence sprung the fountains of the great river of human life, whose waves have been the rise and fall of empires, and whose frothy foaming crests have been the various civilizations; between and beneath which has flowed in dark and sullen strength all the common life of the race. And so with this torch in hand, let us go back and catch a glimpse, if we can, of the earliest form of human worship, of the fears and the hopes of these early men, which developed into thoughts of God.

Before we do this, it might be well for me to say that I am tremendously circumscribed in trying to treat this subject within the limits of an hour, and so it will be necessary for me to confine myself to the main current of the stream. There are all kinds of tributaries flowing into this main stream at almost every point, dozens of subsidiary elements

which were constantly modifying and changing the development of this idea of God; but these I have not time to treat. I must stick merely to those forces that were predominant and give you a very sketchy outline of this stream of thought. Also I have no desire to labor over the differences of opinion which are to be found among the scientists in regard to the origin of the idea. I might mention here that three chief theories have occupied the attention of men—one by Max Muller, who held that the idea of God arose from the deification of the powers of nature; another by Herbert Spencer that the belief in God began with the deification of the spirits of ancestors; and a third by Mr. Tylor who finds its origin in the belief that the elements of nature are animated, and its earliest form in what is known as Animism. Personally I think that all three of these things entered into the origin of the belief, and simply represent some of those different streams that I have just referred to. None of them should be accepted to the exclusion of the others.

#### I.

But let us return to conditions upon this planet at the dawn of human existence. It is very essential if we would understand this subject, though very difficult, to visualize the world as it appeared to primitive man. Surrounded as we are on every hand with our modern mechanisms, with our civilized standards, with our advanced culture, with our well recognized mental processes, it is practically impossible to look at nature with the low intelligence of the man just emerging from the brute state; and yet this I must ask you to try to do.

We must remember first that there was a time when man was practically undifferentiated from the animal; when in a sense he and the animal met on common ground. It is possible that then the ordinary movements of nature would make no more impression upon him than on animals. In common, theirs was a world of sights and sounds, a world of woods and streams, of moving things, of growing things, of things to be eaten, and things to be avoided. But as his mind became a little more sensitive, he would probably note the extraordinary movements and hostile influences of

nature. The eclipse would make him notice the sun as he had not noticed it before. The river at flood and in a mood of devastation, the harsh crack of the thunder, the threatening power of the storm, would make him feel or sense certain important influences in his environment. And one chief result of these impressions must have been that of fear, and the effect of fear upon children and ignorant people is to give them a sense of some unknown and unseen power which permeates the universe and for which they are unprepared. Studies of primitive people today in the India jungle show that this indistinct fear of some mysterious nature power is their only idea of natural things. They have not yet reached an explanation of nature which suggests anything personal in the way of spirits that deliberately hurt or help them. This primitive condition is called Naturism—or as it comes before the idea of spirits—it is sometimes called Pre-animism. Its root idea is one of vague, but threatening power everywhere, and a consciousness of their own helplessness, in the presence of this power which gave rise to fear.

But as man's mind developed, these things made a deeper impression and he began to wonder concerning things which he noticed. This marked the beginning of curiosity, and the birth of knowledge, as well as the origin of the idea of God. He had all the varied voices of nature to speculate upon. There was the sigh of the wind in the trees, the murmur of the brook, the roar of the sea. The volcano belched its flames and overflowed its torrents of fiery lava, the lightning split trees and cleaved rocks, and the thunder boomed and crashed, shaking the earth with its reverberations. What was the meaning of it all? There were hundreds of things going on around this latest achievement of evolution, some hideous and terrifying and some beautiful and pleasant; he wanted an explanation of it all. And the conclusions these early men came to, judging from their modern representatives, was that all the objects they saw about them—beasts, birds, trees, stones—were like themselves. Everything was as much alive as they. There is nothing strange in this. Very small children think that anything that moves is alive, and they will talk to it as to a living thing. When it is realized that these early men were

in the childhood of existence, it is equally reasonable that they should feel that the things which we know to be inanimate were really living.

In the case of trees, the wind moves their boughs and rustles their leaves, and they appear to be making creaking and sighing noises. Then there are the echoes among the mountains, while stones and large rocks come rushing down the hillsides. Rivers and streams make sounds and their waters flow, volcanoes rumble and roar, the rain hisses down, thunder crashes, the wind makes a variety of noises. It is no wonder, therefore, that all things seemed alive to primitive man; they are thought to be animate by many savages that live today. Therefore, man explained these things by the thought that every natural object had a spirit, just as he came to believe that he himself, by a process I have previously explained, had a spirit\*. The wind was a great spirit talking; the spirit of the river murmured when it was pleased and roared and dashed its waves against the banks when it was angry. The spirits of the trees talked among themselves when their leaves rustled; the echoes were the voices of the hill spirits calling to one another. Such belief in nature spirits is very widespread among savages and was probably the earliest explanation of nature that man invented. It forms one of our many savage survivals, making children beat the thing which annoys or hurts them, and grown men kick viciously at the stool over which they stumble. This stage of thought is known among religious scholars as Animism.

## II.

Now in time as man discovered how his efforts were thwarted and his life hindered, he began to attribute these things to these spirits, and believed that they deliberately interfered with him to his injury, or perhaps contributed to his well-being; and so he devised methods of influencing them by means of force as in magic, or by bribery as in offerings and sacrifices, or by entreaties as in prayers, or by flattery as in praise; and so we get the beginnings of worship and religious services of every kind. And out of this thought originated the multitude of gods that have been

\*See printed address, entitled "Has Man a Soul"—Series IX, No. 6.

and are worshipped in various parts of the world. The process of development was something like this—of the multitude of spirits in which man believed during the period of Animism, those which appeared to him most powerful, most difficult to persuade, or most useful, gradually came to be considered as more important than the others. The spirit of the storm or the volcano, for example, would be to primitive man much more powerful and difficult of persuasion; while the spirits of vegetation upon which he depended to a large extent for his food, were clearly most useful.

What spirits first played an important part in the life of primitive man depended upon circumstances. A race living inland, for example, would be ignorant of the mighty forces of the seas, while those inhabiting flat countries would have no conception of great mountains whose rugged and desolate fastnesses and mysterious echoes suggested the abode of great and terrible spirits. Another circumstance which influenced the importance of special spirits was the degree of culture which man had reached. He was first a hunter, a nomad wandering in search of game or pasture for his flocks, and having no fixed abode; and he worshipped the gods of the chase. It was not until he reached the stage of agriculture, in which he depended for food upon the crops he raised, that the sun and moon began to influence his actions; and became to him gods. An excellent illustration of this is found in the early history of the Hebrews. For years these people had been a group of nomadic tribes wandering in the desert, and naturally worshipped a desert god—Jehovah, whose voice was the roar of the thunder and whose weapon the lightning bolt, who guided them on their wanderings as a cloud of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night; but after they had settled in Canaan and became an agricultural people they were constantly tempted to worship the Canaanite gods—the Baal, who were gods of sunshine and of rain; and the attempt to hold the people true to their traditional god—Jehovah, instead of wandering after strange gods—the Baal, was one of the real tasks of the Hebrew priests, and at one time became the vital issue of their national life, as portrayed in the story of Elijah and the contest between

these rival gods. And with the worship of the sun and moon among the agricultural peoples there gradually grew up an important belief in spirits of vegetation, worshipped as tree and corn spirits. And thus to the great crowd of malevolent spirits, always on the watch for an opportunity to work evil upon man, were added many good beneficent spirits which helped him and gave him the things necessary to his existence.

Now Professor Leuba points out that one of the most natural propensities of man is to ascribe to unseen beings the ability to supply all the wants of the tribe and the individual. Therefore, the powers with which the gods are invested are as many and as varied as human deeds. The things essential to life and at the same time hardest to secure are those with which the gods will be mainly connected in the mind of man. If a community depends for its subsistence upon the sea, its gods will be endowed with the powers necessary to make fishing safe and productive; if it subsists upon grains and fruit, it will worship chiefly the gods of vegetation. If in dry regions, where happiness and often life depend upon the fall of rain, the whole ritual centers about the production of moisture, and the object of worship is the god of rain. And so, according to man's needs and desires in any particular place, were the powers attributed to his gods. And thus their constant need of certain natural processes and their fear of others, and their desire to obtain the one and prevent the other, led to that belief in the supernatural—the belief that these unseen powers, these gods, had the ability to control arbitrarily the processes of nature, and that they would control them in the interest of or to the hurt of individuals according to their divine pleasure. And for the purpose of influencing them, there arose the whole elaborate system of ritual and worship, including magic and offerings and sacrifices and prayers and praise. These beliefs became more and more elaborated by the thinking members of the race until the spirits were gradually metamorphosed into beings in the likeness of men and women; that is to say, they became anthropomorphic. They were then human beings, physically, mentally, morally, but with supernatural powers.

### III.

And this recognition of the importance of some spirits over others, in connection with the gradual understanding of certain natural processes, led men to departmentalize and organize their deities, instead of ascribing a spirit to each and every object; and this stage of culture is known as Polytheism. Things are grouped together, and one god is thought to preside over a whole group. For example, they no longer think of a spirit in each tree, but of a spirit presiding over all the trees—the god of the forest; there is no longer a spirit in each stream but a god of streams; no longer a god of each sea, but a god of the seas. This stage of thought is best exemplified in the religion of the Greeks and the Romans. By this time, man had developed a highly organized family and social life and this was carried over into the realm of the gods; so that the gods were related, and special functions and responsibilities assigned to each, and the importance of the god or goddess determined by the importance of the function. Man had also by now attained a much higher degree of culture and there came to be gods of the thought and emotional world, such as the goddess of wisdom and the goddess of love. Thus arose the twelve major deities and the countless minor divinities of the pagan world, forming a well-organized pantheon of gods and goddesses. And this stage we call Polytheism, the stage at which man worships many and various gods.

Now thus far these gods are just like men, subject to all the weaknesses and limitations of human nature; neither good nor bad, but capable of justice and mercy as well as of injustice and cruelty. But as some showed more signs of evil than of good, and vice versa, there went on a very natural process of dividing them into two groups according to character, as good and bad, friendly and hostile; and this later developed into what is known as Dualism—a stage in which the good and bad deities are thought to be in opposition to each other. Its classic example is found in the Persian religion, Zoroastrianism, the two chief deities being Ormuzd, the god of light and good, and Ahriman, the god of darkness and evil. Some of its features such as a belief in God and the devil as presiding over the kingdoms of good

and evil, have come down to us as a part of our religious inheritance. But it should be remembered that these people worshipped the good and bad gods just the same; and this was natural, for you can readily see that if we really believe there is a power outside of us who can harm us, we should try to keep on the right side of him, just as earnestly as we try to please him if he is kind. And this process of thought has not entirely disappeared. Not so long ago I read of a Christian mother who was found teaching her child to bow whenever the devil's name was mentioned, just as when that of Jesus was uttered, and she explained it in a manner to my mind very consistent with Christian theology. She said, "If the devil is all that he is reported to be, I think it safer."

But another process of selection among the gods of Polytheism leads us along the path that we desire to travel this morning, and that is in respect, not to their character but to their ability. Some came to be lifted up into greatness and others were cast down to a lower rank or even into obscurity and in time into oblivion. By this process, Zeus eventually became the chief of all the Olympians, and Jupiter became the king of all the gods of Rome; and so among the Hindoos and among the Chinese—everywhere that Polytheism prevailed—one of the gods came to be first and supreme. And then as the nations were in conflict with one another a process of rivalry between the chief gods of the different nations arose, and this brings us to the next step in this development—known as Henotheism. In this stage all the inferior gods of the different nations passed into forgetfulness, and each people worshipped only one god, but a god which was distinctly its own. Each worshipped only one god, although it did not deny the existence of other gods; but each asserted the superiority of its own god, and the inferiority of other gods. Perhaps the best illustration of this stage is found among the Hebrews at a certain stage of their development. They believed that they ought to worship Jehovah, their god, but they never doubted the existence of Dagon, the god of the Philistines, or the gods of the Egyptians, or the gods of the Moabites, or the Baal of the Canaanites. They believed that these were real gods; only Jehovah was their god, and they must worship him and him alone. This is best illustrated in those phrases

in the bible which speak of Jehovah as "king of kings and lord of lords" and again as a "great king of all the gods."

#### IV.

But the process of simplification continued, and after Henotheism we get Monotheism—the belief not only that men should exclusively worship one god, but that there was no other god to worship. The existence of all gods but one is denied. The multitudinous variety of effects in nature are referred to one cause. Good and evil fortune have the same ultimate source, and it remains for us merely to note the changing character and activity of this one and only God.

In regard to the former, that is the character of God, this one and only God continued to have the form of a man. In the earlier stages of Monotheism, and even among the more ignorant people today, God possesses even the body of a man. He has hands and feet and all the organs of sense. But as people have gained intelligence, they have outgrown the thought of God in physical human form, although they continue to represent him with human properties and passions, with the anger and even the appetites of men. This is true of the Jehovah of the earlier Hebrews and of the God of the medieval Christians as well as of the more orthodox Christians today. God is possessed not only of the weakness, but also of the wickedness of men; so that it has been in accordance with his will that men have practiced every kind of cruelty even to the butchering and burning of heretics here on earth, and have attributed to him the purpose of burning most of his children in hell forever. He is also endowed with the very human trait of desire for flattery, as evidenced in the constant praise and glorification of him in the average religious service. But in the latter days of the Hebrew prophets and again among the more educated Christians, God no longer possesses the undesirable traits of human nature. He is no longer subject to fits of jealousy and cruelty, neither is he susceptible to praise and flattery. He now possesses only the desirable attributes of man. He is visualized as the complete embodiment of the virtues, as the perfect type of justice and kindness and love. He is still believed to be a person, but a magnified and perfected type of individual life. In fact, he is portrayed generally as a

heavenly father, as bearing the same relation to mankind as a father to his children, only in its perfected form. We are constantly under his guidance and care.

In regard to his ability or powers, this one and only God was thought to be the creator and ruler of the universe. And in this role, he has been almighty. He was thought able to do anything he desired. This was not true at first of course. In the earlier stages of Monotheism, the ability of God was considerably limited, but in its more highly developed forms, God was simply a great personal being, with almighty power, who has existed forever, and who at a definite period in time created this universe out of nothing and runs it according to his own desires. And he is all-powerful in regard to controlling the affairs of our individual lives. He controls them according to his own plans, unless he can be persuaded by entreaty or prayer or worship to change those plans in the interest of our desires. But the thing I want you to understand is that in the highest form of Monotheism, God is the supreme being of the universe, who knows and does everything; not even a hair can fall from our heads without his knowledge and his permission. But now that the conception of a universe governed by physical laws has become established, God has lost his function as a controller of natural events, and is looked upon only as operating in the ethical and emotional realms. He is no longer the dispenser of physical benefits, but only of spiritual benefits. He is no longer a god of fertility and of health, but rather a god of the heart and of the conscience. He no longer gives us rain and food and health when we ask him, but he gives us comfort in times of sorrow, and supports us in the ways of justice and of righteousness. And this seems to be the last stage in that phase of development known as Monotheism.

I say this represents the last phase of Monotheism—belief in one personal supernatural God—because now that men have searched into the dark recesses of the past and have established the universality of natural law, they naturally come to two conclusions about this idea of God, one in regard to his character and the other in regard to his ability. For instance, as we look back over this long procession of gods in which the people have believed from time to time.

we realize that in character they are merely man's magnified projection of himself, and have reflected at each period of the world's history the culture and morality which man had at that time attained. When the predominating characteristics of man were jealousy and cruelty, the gods were jealous and cruel; and only as man sloughed these off and developed within himself a sense of justice and righteousness, did the gods become just and righteous; so that at any period of man's development the gods or God simply represent an idealized and glorified type of man's own character, a projection of his moral ideals, moulded into a definite form as an object of worship; and therefore have only a subjective existence in the mind of man.

And in regard to their ability or power, we realize as we trace their development from Animism, through Polytheism and Henotheism, to Monotheism that the more knowledge men have attained the less gods there have been; and since the belief in one God, the more knowledge men have gained, the less power they ascribe to this one God. In other words, we have ascribed to God those things which we could not explain by natural processes. For instance, back at the beginning when men believed in Animism, they ascribed to every living thing a divine spirit, because they were unable to explain by natural processes the activities of these living objects. But once they came to understand many of their doings, they no longer believed that they were animated, each one, by a living spirit; and from this time on up through Polytheism, there was a gradual shrinking of the number of gods as men were able to explain strange phenomena by natural means, until we get only one God. But the same process continued in respect to this one God. God was once supposed to have control over natural phenomena as well as spiritual, and men prayed for rain and for the cure of disease; but when the universality of natural law was established, intelligent men no longer prayed for these things; but they continued to pray for spiritual blessings, and now those who realize that these things are within our own control and subject to well-defined laws, no longer look to God for spiritual blessings any more than for material blessings. And the conclusion is that God, from the standpoint of ability to do things, is merely a concept which man has formed to fill

the great gap of the unknown, to explain that which he does not otherwise understand.

And so we reach the last phase of the development of the God idea, if it can be described as such at all. It is sometimes called Cosmic Theism, but is better named Monism. The former title is used more by religionists and still carries with it the suggestion of personality, while the latter is used by scientists and suggests a principle rather than personality. This would say that God, if it uses the term at all, is not some individual personal controlling power apart from the universe, but that he is the indefinable indwelling life of the universe. He is not a clearly defined being who controls the universe from without; but the activating principle in the universe and present in every part of it, just as the thing which we call life is the activating principle of the human body and present in every part of it. God, to these people, is the indwelling spirit of the universe, which rolls through all things and impels us all. To them he speaks in the poet's lines:

"I am the blush of the morning, and I am the evening breeze;  
I am the leaf's low murmur, the swell of the terrible seas;  
I am the mote in the sunbeam, and I am the burning sun;  
'Rest here,' I whisper the atom; I call to the orb, 'Roll on'  
I am what was, is, shall be,—creation's ascent and fall;  
The link, the chain of existence—beginning and end of all."

## V.

But some of us feel that even this, especially when thus personalized by the cosmic theist, is an attempt to set up a greatly enlarged image of man himself, an attempt to interpret the life of the universe in terms of the life of man. And what right have we to measure life by our little experience? The earth shows it rising from the amoeba to man, and in man rising from the savage who cannot count six to the sage who calculates the course of comets. The earth too is but an atom in an infinite space filled with larger worlds, as our air is filled with dust. With the rocks under us and the race around us showing such progress, and with the heavens shining above pointing to infinite possibilities, shall we even attempt to define that which embraces the totality

of being in terms of our own experience? For man to suppose, therefore, that deity is like himself,—is personal, is conscious,—is about as wise as if the barnacles on a lone rock in mid-ocean should suppose that they represent the highest possible existence, and that God is "altogether such a one" as themselves.

It were more rational and more reverent to adopt the attitude of the agnostic, and to say with Richard Hooker, "Our soundest knowledge of God is to know that we know him not, neither can know him; and our safest eloquence concerning him is our silence, when we confess without confession that his greatness is above our capacity and reach." Spinoza once said, "To define God is to deny him" and I believe that even to name him—the name circumscribed as it is with our petty conceptions—is suggestive of irreverence. I would heed the voice of deity as heard in a modern drama, "Never more name me! Nameless, I hold men ever, draw them ever on and on; and you are atheizing them with your kind stress about my name. Silence names me better than sound."

Perhaps you call that atheism. Very well, I know not what atheism is; but what is termed atheism is generally the denial of narrow definitions of God in order to assert better—or to reach the best of all by leaving him undefined. And it was with this thought in mind that Thoreau said, "God himself might prefer atheism." One of Renan's philosophical dramas is a dialogue in heaven, wherein Gabriel, speaking of the earth and its skeptics, says to Jehovah, "If I had thine omnipotence, I would quickly reduce these wicked atheists to silence." But Jehovah replies: "Ah, Gabriel, thou art faithful; but that fidelity makes thee narrow. Learn my tenderness for men who doubt or deny. They deny the image, grotesque or abominable, which has been put in my place; but in that world of idolaters and hypocrites, they alone respect me."

The fact is that throughout the centuries definitions of God have been vanishing, idols have been tumbling, symbols have been falling away, personalities have been waning and losing themselves; but the great encompassing All continues to exist. And this great encompassing All carries within itself the qualities for religion to revere and worship. Seeing

how this power pervades an infinite universe, ever working the miracle of new creation and advancing life, yet everywhere working with such constancy that we can formulate its methods into laws, we find far greater reasons for reverence than our fathers ever knew. Seeing how this power manifests itself in conscious, intelligent human life, and how in man it blossoms out in moral heroism, we have better reasons than our fathers to stand in awe and wonder. Heretofore, this has all been enshrouded, and thus hidden, in idolatrous names and definitions; and it is just possible that, as the poet William Watson says:

When whelmed are altar, priest, and creed;  
When all the faiths are passed;  
Perhaps from darkening incense freed,  
God may emerge at last.

But whether he emerge at last, or eventually become entirely submerged, they are wisest who attempt no definition of the undefinable, being of Robert Herrick's opinion that

"God is above the sphere of our esteem,  
And is the best known, not defining him."

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