

A SEARCHER FINDS ONLY A FINITE GOD!

GEORGE C. RING, S.J.

St. Mary's College

EDGAR SHEFFIELD BRIGHTMAN. *A Philosophy of Religion*. X + 540 pages. Prentice-Hall, Inc. New York, 1940.

Professor Brightman's eminence among American philosophers would win serious consideration for any publication of his. When, as in the present work, he marshals into an orderly synthesis the opinions and arguments which he has developed in his writings of the past two decades, a thorough study and appraisal are in order. The epistemological problem of the validity of knowledge and two cognate problems—the one of psychology, the other of theodicy—have exercised him in previous works. In his latest book he definitely chooses Empiricism as the solution which “best saves the appearances,” (p. 314, n. 21) presented by the first problem. However, this election of Empiricism is not a thesis defended in the book, but belongs rather to what the author calls the “orientation” of his inquiry. In other words, his chosen rule of the game is that “all human knowledge begins, continues, and ends in experience.” (p. 1) What he specifically seeks to determine is, firstly: What certainty does experience justify as to the existence, purpose and immortality of a personal and conscious self? Secondly, from the experiences which we call religious what conclusions may be drawn as to the existence and nature of God?

Religion is described as “concern about experiences which are regarded as of supreme value; devotion towards a power or powers believed to originate, increase, and conserve these values; and some suitable expression of this concern and devotion, whether through symbolic rites or through other individual and social conduct.” (p. 17) This descriptive definition coincides substantially with the familiar one proposed by Morris Jastrow and amplified by P. Pinard de la Boullaye in §307 of his *L'Etude Comparée*, and may stand as acceptable. Since philosophy means for Professor Brightman “an attempt to give a reasoned account of experience as a whole,” (p. 21) he defines philosophy of religion as follows. “Philosophy of religion is an attempt to discover by rational interpretation of religion and its relations to other types of experience, the truth of religious beliefs and the value of religious attitudes and practices.” (p. 22)

That the empirical facts may be duly drafted for interpretation, Chapter II (Religion as a Fact) presents an exposition of the history, the psychology and the sociology of religion. The effort to make this exposition purely objective is evident throughout, and yet the author is not wholly successful in maintaining the attitude of impartiality, which P. Pinard (§327, in the work named above) rightly calls prerequisite to scientific study of religion. Firstly, then, we can accept the book's exposition of the psychological and sociological aspects of religion only after entering demurrers anent the pair-

ing of Thomas à Kempis with Radinranath Tagore in the enumeration of typical mystics; (p. 69) the choice of William James as the best analyst of the characteristics of mystical experience; (p. 69) the assertion that Friedrich Heiler's *Das Gebet* is "the only first-class book on prayer." (p. 70)

Anthropologism is the pattern to which the facts of religious history must conform. Hence, in the four states of religious culture which the Professor envisages (primitive, tribal, national or priestly, universal or prophetic) through overemphasis of the like and muting of the unlike, he makes it appear that in parallel material cultures religious ideas and institutions are closely akin. That the Hebrew "national" religion may be seen to conform to this law, we are informed that: "The early stages of Hebrew religion were certainly polytheistic, as is implied in the allusion to sons of God (or of the gods) who married the daughters of men." (p. 55) Hebrew Prophetism is shown in the table on p. 57 and in the analysis which follows to be but one nation's experience of a world-wide movement which swept through India (Buddha), China (Lao-tse and Confucius), Persia (Zoroaster), Greece (Hesiod, the Orphics and the Philosophers). To the "prophets" religion owes its international outlook, its appreciation of the worth of the individual, its substitution of ethical values for dead forms and ceremonies, its monotheism. Finally, in the delineation of Christianity—to which not more than two pages are devoted—the master key for its appraisal is Harnack's distinction between "the gospel of Jesus" and "the gospel about Jesus." (p. 65)

From the survey of religious history, psychology and sociology a synthesis of the chief religious beliefs is formed (pp. 81-84). From the synthesis in turn emerge three beliefs as cardinal—namely, God, human personality, actual experiential relation of man with God. (p. 131) These three, to reduce the religious problem to its simplest statement, are the value-claims which religion presents at the bar of philosophy. Are the claims to be allowed? In the book's remaining chapters the evidence is examined and judgment is passed. However, before proceeding to the examination, the author admonishes the reader against expecting too much, for: "Our highest religious affirmations are, from the logical standpoint, at most only probable." (p. 129) Nor does a qualification of this statement on the following page offer much cheer. "While theoretically all proof is relative, practically it is rational to believe that some propositions are really true. For instance, who can doubt that there are other minds than his own; but who can prove it with absolute certainty? Thus theoretical relativism is united with practical absolutism." Would it not be simpler to confess with the poet:

"All my mind is clouded with a doubt?"

The common denominator of diverse concepts of God (in polytheism, henotheism, pantheism, monotheism) is rightly said (p. 137) to be an

attribution to "the divine" of being the highest value known to man, of transcending all human levels, of being objective as opposed to merely subjective fancy. Professor Brightman in a chapter (Ch. V) in which he is at his dialectic best studies these diverse concepts. He cleverly insinuates that Humanism, Impersonal Idealism and Agnostic Realism are not religious systems, hence have no God to offer for study. He is not without sympathy for the Religious Naturalism of Alexander and of Wieman, but he coolly analyzes the deficiencies of the *ersatz* concept of God with which they try to satisfy religious desire. He is less happy in his remarks (p. 140) on the "usual development of the idea of God in most civilizations from henotheism to monotheism." What happened historically was that thorough-going polytheism reasserted itself after the henotheistic interval or that the henotheistic emphasis shifted to some other god. Facts do not support the statement that: "Spiritual, personalistic monotheism expresses the faith of most actual religions at what they regard as their highest point." (p. 140) In the last place is treated modern Theism, championed by "most of the Gifford lecturers and a large number of the best-known philosophers and theologians." (p. 159) "Theists define God as a conscious mind (spirit or person), immanent both in physical nature and in value experiences. This evolutionary group starts its reflections from an interpretation of the facts of history, psychology, and sociology of religion, and from the monotheism which most of the higher religions have developed as their central faith. Evolutionary thinkers are mostly theists. Theism is a special form of monotheism, as distinguished from other forms, such as pantheism and deism." (p. 157) The author's very sympathetic explanation of this group of thinkers serves as a weather-vane to indicate which way the wind of his Empiricism will blow him in his final judgment. As will appear, he at last casts his lot with the theists.

Among the various "ways of knowing God," he rejects all a priori methods, (e.g. Kantian postulates: the Anselmic argument is not mentioned); he criticizes sharply Pragmatism's hurly-burly of action as a medium in which ideas of the divine may germinate; he then turns his attention to mysticism and revelation. In the "epistemological immediacy" of the mystic's experiences he exhibits an Empiricist's interest, admitting that "mystic intuition furnishes data which no philosophy can ignore." (p. 171) Important omissions in the exposition of revelation are its rational credentials which are household words among apologetes under the titles of preambles of faith and motives of credibility. Their omission leaves the reader with the impression that an untrustworthy *sensus religiosus* chiefly operates in the acceptance of revelation—an impression heightened by a statement on p. 174. "It would be fatal to rational integrity to grant that the mind should trust the Divine Spirit to guide it to accept the right revelation in the absence of reasons or evidence; for then there would be no way whatever of telling the voice of God from

the voice of the devil." Further false impressions are encouraged by an inadequate statement on the following page. "These truths (accepted on revelation) are usually thought of as propositions which the natural reason could never arrive at by reflection on ordinary experience, but which in no way contradict natural reason or experience." It is incorrect to say that all the truths of revelation (e.g. the creation of the soul and its immortality) are inaccessible to human reason. To state, too, that mysteries like the Holy Trinity "in no way contradict natural reason or experience" is to omit crucial distinctions familiar to every theologian. The author, however, expresses a preference for a faith which does not commit one to "the sacrificium intellectus." He would rather have "trust or obedience" (p. 180), which, "religiously, means confident loyalty to what is believed to be of true value." (p. 181) "The advantage of this third, and most truly religious, conception of faith is that it directs purpose toward religious values without committing itself to any one intellectual definition of religion or of God as only valid. In short, it dispenses with the sacrificium intellectus." (p. 181)

Recalling that "theoretically all proof is relative," so that philosophy at its apogee attains only an explanation which "best saves the appearances," we are not surprised at being told that even the assent of faith should be merely heuristic. A high degree of mutual coherence between the articles of your *Credo* may indeed hearten you to hope that the philosophy of Empiricism will not dismiss them all as old wives' tales. Insofar as your God can further be shown to fit into a universe contacted by multiple experience—through ordinary sense experience, through credible historical data, through scientific experiments—will He be conceded to be plausible. But unless you would be as reactionary as "the Schoolmen of the Middle Ages, who were on the whole satisfied with consistency," (p. 190) you must let your religious beliefs run the gauntlet formed "when modern science arose and created a problem for traditional belief in God partly because it used methods and arrived at results inconsistent with the faith. But it constituted an even greater challenge to theism because its results appeared to be quite irrelevant to the sacred doctrines." (p. 190)

The problem thus may be restated: Is God postulated by the total testimony of human experience? Perhaps, firstly, Solipsism is the be all and the end all, so that there is no Being answering to the mystic's apprehension, no Designer corresponding to the scientist's discovery of intricate order in what we call physical nature. Professor Brightman, while professing that his Empiricism cannot disprove such a supposition, yet holds that "practically it is rational to believe that some propositions are really true." (p. 130) Supposing, then, that there is an Object of experience, he confronts Atheism with the patent testimony of experience to manifold values in life. "For the atheist there are no value distinctions at all; in the eyes of such a person, Mr. Guest is as great

a poet as Shakespeare, Mr. Berlin as talented a composer as Wagner, Mr. Hitler as just as Aristides, St. Bartholomew's Eve as benevolent as the Sermon on the Mount, ignorance as good as science, sorrow as good as joy—nothing either better or worse than anything else." (p. 203) But normal persons hold to values, and for these there must be a "Source and Continuer of Values" (p. 203), which is the minimum definition of God.

What, then, is this God? That the Object to which experience points is a Unity "seems probable" because of the postulate of science that throughout the universe natural laws constitute a consistent system. Furthermore, though the history of religions catalogues "gods many and lords many," still in evaluating them one must "choose between a pluralism which points toward scepticism and a monism of ideals which welds value experience into an ideal unity." (p. 206) Theoretically, however, "the divine Unity" might be variously explained. Is God the same as the whole of nature in the sense of Spinoza's "deus sive natura?" Is nature just one department of "the divine?" Is God all in all in the pantheistic sense? A negative answer is given to all these questions, chiefly on the grounds of the ineluctable fact of human consciousness and of experience's persistent assertion of values which transcend nature.

The plausibility of a "God wholly superhuman and supernatural" is next investigated. (pp. 220-222) This means, as Professor Brightman indicates by referring us back to Ch. V, "The God of Christian Philosophy." Most unhappily he chooses Calvin's God as the example and details only the arguments advanced for Him by the depressing sage of Geneva. St. Thomas Aquinas rates a three-line foot-note which merely states that his method is more empirical than Calvin's. Criticizing Calvin's position as supported wholly by wishful thinking and assumed revelation, as placing a well-nigh impassable gulf between Creator and creature, the author concludes that: "Therefore, the notion of deistic supernaturalism must be set aside as highly improbable." (p. 222)

To sum up, the book has reached a point where Personal Theism is the only explanation left, if explanation there is to be. The Personal Theism of Christian philosophy's God proving unsatisfactory to the author, he proceeds to outline what he conceives a Personal God to be and to offer arguments for the acceptability of this concept. "To believe in a personal God is to believe that the unbegun and unending energy of the universe is conscious rational will, a conscious purpose that is coherent, selective and creative. * * * The one essential factor in personal theism is that the ultimate creative energy of the cosmos is personal will. Prior to the appearance of self-conscious beings on this earth, prior to all organic life, prior to the solar system itself and all astronomical phenomena, the eternal energy has always been and will always be personal consciousness." (p. 227)

In seeking evidence that this concept of God is the more acceptable (for we must recall that Professor Brightman thinks absolute proof impossible), he professedly (p. 227) ignores the traditional teleological and cosmological arguments. Nevertheless, it is hard to see how his evidences are other than a restatement of certain points in each of these standard arguments. The empirical character of these points he indeed emphasizes—an empirical character which Scholasticism has always considered sufficiently manifest. For Professor Brightman conscious personal experience is the rock of reality to which philosophy clings, is the one thing of which we are absolutely sure. He argues, therefore, that if there be any reality which originates and sustains the scheme of things, this reality should be a conscious Personality; otherwise, the ultimate Reality is wholly diverse from the one reality which we immediately and inevitably apprehend. Secondly, the data of experience points to (though it does not demonstrate) the hypothesis that there is an ordered universe of intricate design. Now law, order, design are either the irresponsible offspring of chance or magic or else they are the product of conscious personal intelligence. Finally, unless the huge dossier of experience which the history of religions submits be wholly illusory, the Object of these experiences is Personal.

Various "speculative" difficulties against the theory of a Personal God are satisfactorily disposed of on pp. 232-236. The "empirical" difficulty of the fact of evil so preys on the author's mind that he devotes three chapters (VIII-X) to it and allows it to modify profoundly his final definition of God. Were it not that the author's Empiricism has produced a fatal "blind spot" in his philosophic vision, the sympathetic reviewer might recommend that he seek light in the *Summa contra Gentiles* (Lib. I, cc. XXXIX, XLIII, LXXIII, LXXXV; Lib. III, cc. IV, XII) in order to put the problem in its proper perspective and to reduce it to its true proportions. The problem of evil is not quite the Frankenstein monster that Professor Brightman evokes. As he envisages the matter, evil protrudes its ugly head "in the irrationalities of sex, of liquor, of a crazy economic system, and of the implacable cruelty of biological processes." (p. 232) Hence the long agony and struggle experienced by the individual in achieving a bit of good in himself and in others. Must religion and philosophy, then, abandon the vision of a Personal Unity originating and sustaining all, and at least rehabilitate Ahriman?

After an impatient gesture of dismissal for the "maya" of Hinduism and for Mrs. Eddy's "error of mortal mind," an examination is made (Ch. VIII) of evil as an instrument subserving a good end either known or hidden, as a product of human free will, as punishment for sin, as discipline of character. The appraisal of these partial solutions of the problem is unexceptionable, at least if allowance is made for Professor Brightman's allergy to the light of revelation. His conclusion is that we are faced by a trilemma. One

might, taking refuge in some form of Agnostic Humanism, leave the problem of evil alone and emulate "the poor benighted Hindoo" in making the best of a bad business. If one, however, still thinks that God and the fact of evil are susceptible of rational reconciliation, he has a choice between two kinds of God. "It may be called the choice between theistic absolutism and theistic finitism. The former is the Thomistic and Calvinistic and generally accepted view: that there is a personal God who is eternal, and infinite in power and knowledge as well as in goodness. The latter view also defines God as personal and eternal, and infinitely good, but denies the infinity of his power and perhaps of his knowledge." (p. 274)

Interestingly, Theistic Absolutism and Theistic Finitism respectively are fathered on Aristotle and Plato. The former "may be said to have written the history of theistic absolutism" (p. 284) in his sublime definition of God the self-dependent actuality (Book XII of the *Metaphysics*). The concept, according to Professor Brightman, was so climactic as to admit only of reiteration, but not of any further development. Plato (in the *Timaeus* chiefly) depicts a God of infinite good will being "inevitably hampered by the intractable nature of the material on which he has to work." (Adams, *The Religious Teachers of Greece*, p. 361) It is Necessity that hinders, a condition (personified in the *Timaeus*) clearly extrinsic to God. Now, Professor Brightman approves of this "well-reasoned concept of a finite God," (p. 289) but holds Plato's "ultimate metaphysics unsatisfactory and disunified," because Plato puts the principle of limitation out of, not in, God. It is more than likely that Plato would have deemed "unsatisfactory and disunified" the Empiricism which would introduce limitation in the essence or attributes of this Supreme God. Be that as it may, the author goes on to trace "the history of thought about the finite God." (p. 291) For twenty-two hundred years his finds add up to Marcion's clumsy dualism of the Heavenly Father and Hebrew Jahve, Mani's Zoroastrian opposition of the Father God and Ahriman, Peter Bayle playing with Manicheism, Hume in a chance remark on Cleanthes, Kant in a moment of puzzlement. Within the past century "a great light" has dispelled the age-long darkness and shown man that his God is finite. Proposed in posthumous essays on religion by J. S. Mills, the idea was taken up by F. C. S. Schiller and by James; Wells discovered it as a new motif for his romancing; Bergson was converted to it; Bradley, Whitehead and H. B. Alexander seriously defended it. "The present writer (E. S. Brightman) began in *The Problem of God* (1930) the development of the idea of a personal finite God whose finiteness consists in his own internal structure." (p. 300)

From Chapter X the arguments for God's finiteness may now be summarized. Prehuman evolution is a panorama of dysteleological waste and frustration, but also of unconquerable progress upwards. Secondly, in the

world as we know it "surd evil" (evil, that is to say, which cannot be explained either as instrumental good or otherwise) constantly obtrudes itself on our experience. Therefore, the world both of old and of today postulates "a Good Spirit in struggle" against forces which it controls only imperfectly; that is to say, a God of limited power. Thirdly, such a God is adequate for religion, since not power, but goodness is the object of worship. Fourthly, Professor Brightman offers (pp. 319-321) an odd argument from an analysis of conscious experience. "Every moment of actual experience, and every concrete real object to which our experience can refer, is a complex which can be analyzed into factors of three kinds—activity, form and content. * * * If this be true, we have important evidence for theistic finitism. Our experience of activity would be evidence for the cosmic will of God; our experience of form would be evidence for his uncreated eternal reason; and our experience of brute facts would be evidence for his uncreated non-rational content." Finally, Theistic Finitism is empirically adequate, because through it are explained all the facts of the good-evil world of which we have experience. It is surely obvious that these five arguments stem from the one root of Professor Brightman's profound conviction that the whole fabric of the world and of human life is deep-dyed in evil. Luther, Pascal and Schopenhauer cherished a like conviction, though their ways of escape differed from the author's. May we submit that such a conviction is an exaggeration. A truly objective judgment is not so pessimistic. To explain the fact of evil is, of course, another question and a knotty one, but the explanation cannot lie in a self-contradictory concept of God. Revelation has shed light on the problem of evil, though the Giver of it did not will to render the solution of the problem crystal clear. However, it may be futile to argue with Professor Brightman in this strain, if we have read aright his mind on faith, revelation and the Scholastic tradition.

The definition of the finite God must be quoted in full. "God is personal consciousness of eternal duration; his consciousness is an eternally active will, which eternally finds and controls The Given within every moment of his eternal experience. The Given consists of the eternal, uncreated laws of reason and also of equally eternal and uncreated processes of non-rational consciousness which exhibit all the ultimate qualities of sense objects (qualia), disorderly impulses and desires, such experiences as pain and suffering, the forms of space and time, and whatever in God is the source of surd evil." (pp. 336-337) This means that there are in God's essence or (to lapse into the terminology of Empiricism), in God's experience of Himself elements of which He disapproves. These elements the author specifies as the roots of disorderly impulses, of pain and suffering, of surd evils. As an after-though he adds (ft. p. 337) that the divine knowledge is probably limited as to the precise details of the future. Place these limitations and you have not God, but monster. It does not help that Professor Brightman

concedes that there are "grounds for the postulate that his will for goodness and love are unlimited; likewise he is infinite in time and space, by his unbegun and unending duration and by his inclusion of all nature within his experience." (p. 337) In a previous passage (pp. 333-334) occurs a rather rhapsodic description of the "wise finite God" forming his conscience before creating men who must inevitably inherit from Him the taint of His own imperfection. He cannot "make man right," but nonetheless decides to create him and so subject him to "unjustifiable and unavoidable evils" that He may exercise "redemptive love," which means that He will struggle along with man to salvage together with him whatever values they can.

Human personality, which in a philosophy of religion is complementary to Divine Personality, is analyzed in Chapter XI. The fact of consciousness is obviously the material which Empiricism will accept for analysis. Yet, though Empiricism must dominate, "experiments are not made in a vacuum." Hence, "presupposed" are the validity of reason, God as ultimate Sustainer, an objective world, brain and nervous system of the experient, the unity of the experient. To identify the experient with the objective world or even with the brain or nervous system is, further, to deny the first fact testified to in conscious experience. "I am not my nervous system, the sun, or God. I am what I experience myself to be—a conscious self." (p. 349) A transcendence of degree, not of kind, is defended (pp. 351-352) for human self-consciousness over the "self-consciousness" of ape and horse. Most important levels of transcendence are noted in "consciousness of imperative norms, freedom and reason." Beyond such sublimated conscious experience of the experient the analysis of human personality really does not progress. The metaphysics of a substantial soul is abhorrent. "To add to consciously experienced unity and identity the further unity of a substance is philosophically to create a needless hypothesis. Religiously, it is only our conscious experience of ourselves as realizers of value that is of any importance; what happens in a supposed soul substance is not of religious moment until conscious experience of God occurs. And if the soul were to be immortal, the only possible value in its immortality would lie in its conscious experiences, not in the persistence of a substance. The traditional theory of substance seems unempirical and otiose." (p. 356) On the contrary, "The whole self, or person, consists of all the conscious experience that is or has been or will be present in all the empirical situations that constitute the history of the person." (p. 358)

W. James' aphorism: "Selves are fighters for ends" furnishes the text for a chapter on purpose. "All personal living is purposing," and equally all evidence for teleology is evidence for personality. While rightly admitting the machine-like working of the cosmos and the coordination of parts in man's complex organism, the chapter (XII) sharply criticizes the extravagant claims of Mechanism. The psychological evidence postulates a human

purposer: the cosmological evidence, a divine Purposer. Furthermore, a purpose implies at least a choice of mechanical means; hence Empiricism believes in this much of freedom. There is noted, however, a studious avoidance of the metaphysics of free will.

"Our life, then, is essentially a life of purpose, but of uncompleted purpose. Our potentialities are to a great extent unrealized when death comes." (p. 389) Have we here the final argument for dysteleology and the triumph of evil at least as far as the human person is concerned? Professor Brightman is inclined to think otherwise. A dead body with the cessation of personal conscious experience which it indicates, he admits (p. 395), looks like the end when viewed through the glass of Empiricism. He struggles with the impasse, rejecting a number of arguments for and against immortality as too weak. He finally reduces the problem to a choice between a materialistic and a theistic interpretation. "If the body is viewed as materialistic postulates require, death is final. But if the body is interpreted on theistic postulates, the destiny of personal consciousness in the world will not be determined by the laws of matter but rather by the purpose and will of the God whose activity is very incompletely revealed in the object we call the human body." (p. 400) Materialism does not cohere with all the data of experience; the hypothesis of a (finite) God does. If now, the finite God makes human persons that they may appreciate and strive after the ideal values which He esteems, and if death is the end of each human person, there is implied too much frustration even for a finite God. "If he continued to create new persons, then he would be conducting a cosmic bonfire, with each new generation warmed by the burning of the previous one; God and man alike could look back on centuries of effort with no permanent results, no persons treated as ends in themselves, no life coming to full development." (p. 401) If we mistake not, this argument (the only one that the author offers to exhibit immortality as a probability) is a veteran of the Scholastic wars dressed up in a new empirical uniform. Immortality, as a curious corollary (p. 408) explains, is conditional, for those only will survive whom God judges capable of developing worthily in the future state. The imbeciles, the no-accounts, the Jeeter Lesters will "more justly be allowed to enjoy what they can while they live" and will not be preserved as "aimless immortals."

The theory of the book is now substantially complete. Concluding chapters deal with the evolution of religious ideas within the great historical religions, and with criticism directed against religion by its foes. Limitations of space prevent appraisal of several brilliant and stimulating discussions (e.g., pp. 443-458), as well as high praise for heroic jousting with religion's foes, (e.g. Marx and Engels, pp. 473-476; Santayana, pp. 477-480).