

ETHICS AND THE BELIEF IN A GOD

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W. L. SHELDON

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BELIEF IN A GOD**

"Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies;
Hold you here root and all, in my hand,
Little flower—but if I could understand
What you are root and all,
should know what God and man is."

—*Tennyson.*

"In Being's floods, in Action's storm,
I walk and work, above, beneath,
Work and weave in endless motion!
 Birth and Death
 An infinite ocean;
 A seizing and giving
 The fire of living:
'Tis thus at the roaring loom of Time I ply,
And weave for God the Garment thou seest Him by."

—*Goethe.*

Phes615.17



The Author

Ethics and the Belief in a God.

We cannot all have the same God. I do not mean to say that there is more than one power at the heart of the Universe. The Deity which is, is one and the same. But the Deity we *believe in*, will depend on the stage of our culture. It is through the natural world that we have revealed to us the Supreme Being; but it is with our own minds that we interpret the natural world. We form our beliefs by what we think and feel. The developed or undeveloped condition of the mind and the heart in each one of us, will therefore determine for us our idea of God.

What we think of that Being, the conception we have of It, or of Him, the vision in our souls of the Ultimate Power, will depend for us on what we think of the stars and the planets; on the manner we picture in our fancy the life of the blade of grass, the muscular energy of the squirrel, or the laws of Human History. According as we understand Nature, just to that degree do we under-

stand and appreciate the Ultimate Source of Nature. We cannot have one idea of the Universe and its laws; it would not be possible for us to have one particular view as to the natures of earth, air, water and fire; we should not be authorized to have one special notion as to the meaning of force or energy; and at the same time have quite another and different idea of the power whence all this proceeds.

We cannot help having more or less vaguely or definitely, some picture or conception of the ultimate source of all reality. Our notions may be very confused; the outline may be so dim as to lead us to suppose that it does not exist in our minds at all. Possibly we assume that we are no longer thinking on the subject and are in a condition of what is called suspended judgment. But in spite of ourselves we do continue to shape the picture. Instinctively men say to themselves: *After all, there must be some kind of a Power.* At the same time it is quite true that the word "power" will have the most varied meaning. It may suggest to some of us the motion of the wind or the sound of a peal of thunder. Others will think of it as the Voice of Conscience. We shall be more likely to associate it, how-

ever, with the ordinary sense of muscular effort. That is our one personal experience of energy; and so it is natural to conceive of that peculiar sensation as being a picture of the Universal Energy.

But whatever goes on in our minds, it is from what we are conscious of, either in ourselves or in the natural world, that we must form our impressions or ideas of the Infinite Power. If there is a Center of Force, all that we look upon must proceed from it and constitute the basis of our knowledge of it. We are reminded of the assertion of St. Paul, made eighteen centuries ago: "The invisible things of God since the creation of the World, are clearly seen, being understood through the things that are made." Emerson expressed the truth concisely when he said:

"Not unrelated, unaffied,
But to each thought and thing allied,
Is perfect Nature's every part
Rooted in the Mighty Heart."

There must be some kind of a correspondence between what is within and what is without. It all forms part of one totality. We cannot separate Nature from its Central Energy, which we call God.

I venture to present this aspect once more, because it is clear to me that the new thought

of our day is tending to be one-sided in its utterances on theism. It is plain enough that some men have very crude, imperfect, if not debasing notions about the Deity. Nevertheless it would be simply impossible to develop the idea of the Universe and of the Supreme Being, in exactly the same shape for every mind. Each person will grasp it according to the delicacy of his feeling or his intellectual capacity. Law, order and morality, as ideas, will convey different notions to different men.

It would be useless for us to attempt to carry the sublime standpoint of Monotheism to the minds of the races living in the heart of Africa. That class of individuals must either have many Gods or else no God. They will need to pass to a higher stage of culture; that is to say, both the brain and the mind, as well as the emotions, must grow in breadth and capacity, before it would be possible for them to think or conceive by means of so sublime a Unity. I do not believe in seeking directly to change any man's special view of the Deity, although it may be perfectly clear that he is in the wrong. It strikes me that it would be far better to develop his mind and feelings to such a degree, that he would himself, of his own accord, outgrow his crude and mistaken concep-

tions. We can only elevate a man's views about God by enlarging his knowledge of Human History and his understanding of the Universe.

For the same reason it does seem to be a misfortune that so many persons have been disposed persistently to attack the belief in a Deity. Why not rather let it alone? Give the truths of nature; the true way of thinking about God will then come of itself. We cannot impart a plain idea to a confused thinker. If we wish to improve and develop a man's religious conceptions, would it not be better to begin lower down in the scale, and encourage him to use his mind more accurately in every kind of work? It would be inconceivable that men should be careless or slovenly in the manner of using their minds about the affairs of every-day life, and, on the other hand, be true and accurate in their religious opinions or their views of God.

It is a profound question just to what extent it is worth the while to endeavor to develop in all men the same idea as to the Supreme Power in the Universe. There is a class of minds at the present day who would like to draw the whole human race to one particular opinion or conception of that Being. But their efforts would be unavailing, even if we