

THE CONCEPT OF GOD

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Among the many questions I put myself none exercises me more than the riddle of why so many educated persons, proud and puffed-up over progress, turn away from God.

It is alarming that, in our times of such great progress in every domain, we find ourselves confronted by a growing trend, rampant as a contagious disease, to deny due honor and recognition to God.

Why is the image of God so obscured that many are no longer impressed by it? Is the fault all on their side, or is something required of us to make it again shine forth more brightly over the world? May we hope that a study of the concept of God will at least alleviate this greatest of all needs?

I do not propose in the course of an hour to solve this world problem, greater than that of material need. I merely wish to share a few thoughts which this question evokes in me, in the modest hope that proposing this question in this place will benefit Catholic learning; not for the answer I give, but in order that this partial and imperfect answer may lead others to a better and completer one, so that one of the most vital questions, too little reflected upon, may find a treatment proportionate to its importance, for the alleviation of the need and the promotion of true progress.

We live in a time of great confusion in the realm of thought. The most contradictory systems are paid homage as truth and defended with passion by recognized scholars. But the most appalling contrast, I find, occurs in thought about God. Besides the great – happily still the overwhelmingly great – majority which has conceived a very definite idea of God and worships him with reverence, there exist – the press and statistics have established the unvarnished truth – hundreds of thousands, nay, millions (I shudder to name such large figures, but there are millions) who find no justification for their concept of God and, not satisfied with denying his existence, wage a battle full of passion and hatred to banish every thought of God from society.

It is not my intention to defend the concept of God; we already have too much polemics. Too much we follow the negative way of defence and confutation, while it is nobler and more useful in a positive way to make the truth shine forth with its inner light that ever attracts the human spirit. I believe it is our task, our duty in point of honour, to look about us for this phenomenon of the denial of God, not in the first place to oppose ourselves to it, but taking it into account, to make known the concept of God under new forms, to adapt it to present-day culture in a way that will set forth from the riches of this concept that aspect of its beauty that has the most appeal for our times.

In spite of great progress in many areas, the human spirit must be terribly blinded if it can no longer see God. This blindness, however, is not a total blindness. Without palliating the fact that it is to a large extent caused by an ailment of the mind that has darkened the eye, I ask myself whether the object to be seen has been placed in the proper light, and whether we should not try to place it in such a light as to be seen again, even by those suffering defective vision.

Such are the riches of the image of God, and so many are the vantage points from which it can be viewed, that we must be careful not to depend too much on the old, to consider traditional representations sufficient. New times require new forms.

It is absolutely not my intention to unfold here the whole wealth of the image of God. We are well aware that this has been attempted in comprehensive treatises, on a purely philosophical level as well, so that it would be presumptuous and an injustice to that wonderfully rich content if I were to attempt in the short span of an hour to show you all the facets of this heavenly diamond. Moreover, I do not think this is necessary for the purpose I have set myself. For this it is enough to point out in brief outline some examples of the changes which in the course of the centuries the concept of God has undergone in our country.

This will show with a few strokes that in this matter great change is possible and is an historic fact. It will show too that our time, also, should have its own concept of God.

Now, one might say that, as in the past under the influence of various factors, without it being reflected upon, the image of God was unconsciously assimilated and developed, so now the pressure of the times will produce the image of God best adapted to our day, to be regarded as a reflection of it. But against this stands the fact that we are already inclined to leave too much to the unconscious and that we should be very much on our guard not to allot to intuition and nature, if not to common sense, too ample a place in the process of knowing. It is precisely for man a challenge and a token of appreciation of what he is and of what he is capable that what is unconsciously carried out in him and, without his knowing how or why, lays itself open to representation he causes to penetrate to consciousness and through reflection and reasoning makes a truly human possession, not materially but formally, in so far as he possesses it through the noblest and loftiest faculties of which he can make it an object.

I

In looking for the dominant concept of God in the history of our national culture, we do well to distinguish a few main periods.

In the first period of emerging culture, of disassociation from paganism, we see an image – it can hardly be otherwise – at first somewhat related to that of the pagan inhabitants of our country. Saint Isidore of Seville's advice for preaching the faith in general and Bishop Daniel of Winchester's recommendation to Saint Boniface for preaching the faith in this land was that the heathen gods should be represented as human persons to whom excessive honour was paid, but neither here nor in many mission fields cultivated today did this representation find easy entry. More successful was the idea that the gods were spirits, devils, who had indeed to be feared, but whose great power one could elude by placing oneself under the supreme power of God. Thus, God was concretized in the image of the powerful warrior, the Mighty One, against whom the local gods in particular were powerless. It was as though God had conquered a new country, had annexed a new people to his kingdom. The war between nations was a war between national gods. With mistaken confidence King Radboud granted St. Boniface permission to preach, because he was certain – and also told Boniface – that his Frisian would acknowledge no god they had just defeated in their battle with the Franks.

God is seen as the Leader of those for whom he is the mighty warrior, their own emperor or king. The king is the one chosen to lead the people in God's place, he holds his place by God's grace, and by virtue of the

conferral of his high dignity great graces of State are bestowed on him. Belief in the miraculous power of the English and French kings survived for centuries as a residue from earliest times. This image of God equally reveals itself in the trials by ordeal, in the use of torture, though with a slight difference, in that God is seen as the Supreme Judge, who, more openly in the ordeal, more secretly on the rack by conferring strength on the innocent, preserves his chosen ones by his power and protects them in greatest danger. The preaching of the faith, particularly among the Franks, pictured God as irresistible, helping and protecting his servants. Miracle upon miracle reveals God's power and cooperation. Holiness calls for miracles. The life of a saint must needs be an account of miracles. God's work must be revealed, and attention is concentrated on facts that show the powerful protection of God in a particularly eloquent fashion. In the old biographies which make a point of enlarging on such matters, Saint Willibrord defies the death that seems to await him in Helgoland and Walcheren, Wulfram rescues a human victim destined to be sacrificed to the gods, Boniface fells the thunder-oak in Hessen, Saint Lebuinus goes forth to meet death at the gathering of the Saxons in Markelo, Saint Willehad places what seems a temerarious trust in God's help in his preaching at Oldehove in Groningen; contrary to all expectations they remain unharmed, because God is with them. The controversy over predestination which rose around the figure of the monk Godschalk fits into the same context. Men could with difficulty rid themselves of the limited idea of God as great, good, and mighty on behalf of his chosen ones, the God of his own people, king and warrior in might and majesty, who also revealed that might in those who served him. This representation of God was further supported by the influence exerted on the emerging culture by Byzantium. It is well known that Charlemagne held in highest reverence all that came from Byzantium and that he introduced Greeks into his court, so that their culture might also find entrance there. His hostile, almost iconoclastic attitude to the veneration of saints also shows on how high and entirely unique a plane God was placed, and how little sympathy was accorded any humanizing of God's image. That awe and great reverence for God are also revealed in the development of the Benedictine liturgy. Saint Boniface required the most solemn celebration of the sacred mysteries and wanted the scriptures written in gold, so that the pagans could see how exalted God is, and how the noblest and richest materials were used to serve him. That lustre and awe, that reverence and royal homage were calculated to inspire in the pagans a lofty concept of God. Christ on the cross is *Christus triumphator*, clothed in the mantle of a king and crowned with the imperial crown. *In a word, God is might and majesty, enthroned in high heaven, but his kingdom is also in this world, where he has his chosen ones whom he leads and protects.*

II

From this first dominant concept of God another develops, which deepens and ennoble the first, bestows more attention on a few aspects which find less expression there, with the consequence that a few beautiful and sublime aspects in the first end up in the background, or at least are not given such complete attention. We soon find that the concept of God, at first still markedly exterior, with many fine elements, has become interiorized, due to the fact that new elements have come forward. With the progress of culture it could hardly be otherwise. A more profound study of philosophy arose. God was now also regarded as the leader and warrior in the realm of thought. He is the enlightener of the human spirit. He infuses his light in us, and in that light we are in a condition to know his truths and develop them further. Revelation itself is regarded as an enlightenment of the spirit, whose destiny is to understand that revelation. Man must occupy himself with the divine, God presents it to him, he must ascend to God. Scotus Erigena may be considered the forerunner and first manifestation of this trend. The epistemology of Plato and Saint Augustine more and more brings leading thinkers to the conviction that man must liberate himself and rise to God, must die to the world in order to cling to God. God is man's deepest ground of being, into which he must again be immersed by dying to self. There is still a great dichotomy between the image of God and that of man, to a large extent re-enforced by the Platonic dichotomy between body and spirit.

God is the object of our spiritual faculties. In the image of God the senses and all that influences the imagination are repressed – not entirely, for that would make the image inaccessible – but the element of the imagination is felt to be something imperfect, which requires spiritualization. We are in a time when negative theology is triumphant. When God is said to be good, one hastens to add that he is not good in the sense in which we conceive good. God's goodness supersedes all understanding and conception, and our idea of God is only then worthy of him when we succeed in repressing every element of definition, to us synonymous with limitation. It is a time of ideals. In literature the sagas of the knights of the Grail originate. It is a time when, inspired by this idea of God the first and second crusades become possible, and a Peter of Amiens and a Saint Augustine make resound their "God wills it," to inspire thousands to abandon all. This is not a struggle like that of the Franks for spreading the kingdom of God; it is a search for the Holy Land, the liberation of the holy places, responding to the voice of God beckoning from afar to come to him. In mysticism it is the ascent of the bride to the Bridegroom who calls and infuses love into the heart, strong enough to overcome all resistance. *In a word, God is enlightenment and inspiration, God is the light of the world, the light of our understanding, the noblest object of love, exalted above all that is good and worthy of love; to be allowed to rise to him is the most wonderful privilege and the finest expression of God's love. High and exalted above all things, he nevertheless wants us to rise out of ourselves and lift ourselves up to where he is enthroned in glory on a throne of unfathomable light.*

III

This representation of God, no matter what beauty it contained, also did not long endure as a dominant concept. There were lacking in the otherwise beautiful image elements which in a later period brought out new beauty in the image of God. We are aware how in the twelfth and even more so in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Plato's point of view was abandoned in favour of Aristotle's, how the idea of the enlightenment of the spirit by God and of innate ideas made way for a greater emphasis on nature, to which God gave the faculty of penetrating from the sensorial to the intellectual. The imagination was no longer seen to be opposed to the understanding, and God began to be seen in the work of his hands, his union with creation, his union with man, and not only with the soul but the whole human being. Special devotion grew up for the mystery of the incarnation of God. God was by preference represented as Christ, a man like ourselves, naked in the manger, naked on the cross. Even the private parts were not covered, and the Child Jesus was preferably pictured at the breast of Mary. All kinds of legends about the childhood and humanity of Jesus found acceptance. It is no longer the representation of the ascent of man to God, but rather the descent of God to man, the revelation of God's love and communality, the coming of God to us, so that we might unite ourselves to him and become constantly more aware of our oneness with him. Saint Francis spreads devotion to the Child in the manger and is the heroic follower of Christ in his poverty and humiliation. We should admit Christ into ourselves rather than rise on high to God. Not only in epistemology but also in the spiritual and devotional life emphasis is laid on the potentiality and receptivity of nature. It is perhaps a more prosaic period than the preceding one, more practical, more matter-of-fact, more suited to reality. In place of the proofs for the existence of God of Saint Anselm one follows the five ways of Saint Thomas, which lead from the contemplation of nature to the discovery of its divine origin. One no longer seeks and regards the divine being in the abstract; the faculty of abstraction places man in a condition to see God under forms that speak to the senses and imagination. It is the time of the beautiful, deeply devotional, yet so naively human medieval art of the Low Countries. *To sum up, God is the God-with-us who came down to us in unutterable love, was born and died for us; in whose incarnation we have the image according to which we should pattern ourselves in order to receive God into ourselves according to our receptivity to the divine descent and indwelling.*

IV

However good and intrinsically sound was the union of the senses with the intellect, this Aristotelian viewpoint involved a danger which, especially in the fifteenth century, reached the point that it led to an excessively external representation of God. The image replaced the reality and ended by suppressing the more intellectual view of God's being. This image of God also has beautiful elements, but it was too one-sided and limited to satisfy man for long. Development continued on. The idea of God's descent to man, of his life among us, led to the beautiful and splendid representation of God in all the phases of his human and divine existence. To these images a place of honour was given in order that man might always hold these scenes before his mind. God was allotted an important role in social life. His likeness was everywhere enthroned, society made a point of showing a Christian character, the Church was identified with society, and much that was external was at the same time intended as religion.

Images were to be found not only in church but everywhere in the houses and streets of the city. Men became attached to all sorts of externals which took the place of interior adoration of God. Indulgences and pilgrimages, however good in themselves, contributed to the externalization of religious life. Humanism and the Renaissance, which replaced the naive, primitive, and tangible image of God with a humanly perfect, lustrously shining classic image and caused God to be honoured in even the highest ecclesiastical circles with excessive pomp, competed, as it were, in externals, in order to bring God the honour and praise due him in Christian society and all its parts; eventually they troubled this in itself beautiful image of God and caused him to avert his eyes. Hence that image could no longer attract men. The efforts of Gerson at interiorisation, the attempts at reform in the various orders around the middle and end of the fifteenth century, had only a temporary effect. Father Brugman among the Franciscans, Bl. John Soreth among the Carmelites, John Busch among the Canons of Saint Augustine, Nicholas of Cusa, and Dionysius the Carthusian did a great deal to stem the tide of externalization, but they were unable to stop the pronouncedly one-sidedness of this image of God, particularly its markedly external character, from leading to a reaction in which an interior image of God again appeared.

In summary, we would like to call this a social image of God, an image of God served and paid homage by outward society. It was certainly a further development of the concept of God, but one which led to the point where God was seen only as the object of homage and honour by external show.

No matter how necessary for religion externals are, man needs interior motivation as well. Only too seldom did one find in Church and society that religious display emanated from faith and devotion. So God was again represented as spirit and truth who wishes to be confessed and served in spirit and truth. In this process of development the mystical life was in danger of suffering an eclipse. The Modern Devotion had laid too much emphasis on man's receptivity and the need to practise virtue in preparation for the coming of the Bridegroom who alone decides on whom he will descend, without our having anything to say about it or being able to contribute anything to it. More value was placed on social works in the following of Christ than on mystical gifts; on the exterior of the spiritual life than on its inner reality. Thus the spiritual life also lost its inmost inspiration and strength and was no longer in condition to hold the proper middle course in the trend towards externals.

V

So we come to a new era, which may be said to be again characterized by a more interior and spiritual concept of God. God was once more seen as the object of the intellect, as enlightener and teacher of truth.

First place was given, not to the service of God, but to faith in him. The divine was seen less as familiar, more as sublime. In comparison with the divine the human gives way. Only through divine election and grace can man act; thus the important thing was to become the object of this divine election. Predestination again occupied minds. Man was able to perform good actions through the grace of God. Divine election manifested itself in the good deed. Besides the representation of God as Teacher of Truth, this new concept brought into sharp relief the severe and exalted Judge. Loving familiarity gave way to holy awe; anxious, careful service replaced a perhaps too comfortable and familiar intercourse. The strict idea of God in Calvinism was made even stricter by Jansenism. The Occasionalism of Geulinx, the pantheistic notions of Spinoza, reinforced the representation of God's omnipotence over against man's impotence, exalted the divine Being above human nothingness which was capable of achievement only through divine action. Descartes' epistemology that accords value to our ideas because of the divine origin of our nature moved in the same direction, and the great vogue of his teaching among the Calvinists of The Netherlands and the Jansenists of France shows how his concept of God agreed with theirs, or at least was closely akin to it.

Besides this interior and stern concept of God among the Protestants and Jansenists there also occurred an interiorisation of the concept among Catholics. The Modern Devotion's following of Christ became – in the school of Nicholas van Esch and Maria van Oisterwijk, teachers also of Canisius – an experience of Christ, which – on the one hand the divine indwelling and guidance, on the other the revelation of that indwelling in a virtuous life – showed a kindred modification in the concept of God and the dominant representation of him. To the *Theologia Deutsch*, published by Luther as a summary of Tauler to bring man to complete abandonment to God, Saint Peter Canisius opposes a German translation of Tauler, of which the Carthusians make a Latin translation and call for a new Dutch one, so that by this transmission of the text a proper balance might be obtained. But the trend continues in the direction of the complete dependence of man on God and of God's action in his chosen ones, with the result that in the end Tauler himself is misunderstood and pawned off as a protagonist of the doctrine of the total inadequacy of human nature and the efficacy of faith alone in the divine election.

To sum up this concept in a few words, we would say that it is characterized by an exaltation of God above man, who can do nothing except through God, the only source of truth and goodness, to whom he must abandon himself completely in believing trust. This is going too far in depreciating man's autonomy and ability to act. It was a return from the intimate image of God to the exalted, awe-inspiring one, from God our brother to the image of the Judge who pardons the elect and manifests this preference in the good works he inspires in man, who is otherwise powerless. This tendency to severity and the exaltation of God above man also finds expression in the way the Oisterwijk School conceives the experience of Christ.

VI

This beautiful but on the other hand too severe and exalted a concept of the divine nature and operation, inspired by or at least based on and strengthened by Cartesian philosophy, the beginning of a revival of Platonic subjectivism in epistemology, was inevitably replaced by a concept which contrasted sharply with it but nonetheless emanated from the same Cartesianism. God was conceived to be exalted so high above the world that communication was hardly to be thought of, while on the other hand nature was represented as so gifted and endowed by God that its divine origin and issue were placed in the limelight. God spoke to the individual as well as to society in and through Nature; in the voice of Nature man heard the voice of God. In a word, Nature is the remote revelation of god; in that revelation man must see God, he must not fancy a closer union with God. It would be presumptuous to want to enter into a more intimate intercourse with exalted divinity, or to represent that intercourse as consonant with divine being. Nature replaced God, the supernatural must be explained by the natural, God exists for man only in and through Nature; in his

essence he is exalted above all things, inaccessible, unknowable. It is the Deistic idea, the image of God of the Enlightenment, the *Aufklärung*, which carries God so far away and lifts him so high that he passes out of man's sight and ceases to be the direct object of human knowledge and love. *It is the standpoint of the abstract idea of God without man's denial of him, the reverence of silence about him, the banishment of God from the realm of ideas because he is above it, the worship and glorification of God in the work of his hands, in the Nature created by him, a worship which, in fine, comes down to a worship, not of God, but of Nature which is put in God's place.* The break with all traditional ideas of God was complete. The Christian religion was to be transformed into a religion led by the voice and revelation of Nature. Religion is more the ennoblement of man than the service of God. The idea of God is the highest idea to which the human spirit can ascend; it is the perfection of the spirit, the satisfaction of a need of human nature which generates the image of God in the development of self as the highest crown. The idea of God, finally, has only a subjective value, it is something personal, individual, something that would be profaned by being revealed and wrangled about. It is the concept of God of the Encyclopedists Renan and Voltaire, spread in our country by Pierre Bayle, later by Hemsterhuys, and taken over by the liberal latitudinarian school.

VII

It can hardly surprise us that all this led – especially under the influence of Kantian philosophy – to a new image of God of an ever more monistic nature. The line of thought which had led Deism to lose the image of God in positive infinity again educed the image of God from negative infinity. From the vague All-Being, which the subject established in itself and which came more and more to have a cosmic character, rose the image of God eternally actualizing himself. *Subjectivism nourished by evolutionism applied the concept of emanation to the image of God and ended by deriving the whole world of subject and object, idealistic and voluntaristic, from the Single Absolute, the divine. The personal character in this image of God ended in the background, the contrast between finite and infinite was no longer noticed, or at any rate was solved by a synthesis of both. The infinite reveals itself in the changing forms of the finite, without one of these forms being able to express it in a lasting manner, and without new forms being able to find expression in this monistic image of God.* Thus the life of God is conceived as being in continual flux, and with him truth and religion change as time goes on. Although the concept of God in this later form can no longer be called Kant's, one thing is certain: his postulate smoothed the way and predisposed to it. Made their own by Hemert and Kinker, it quickly found acceptance in philosophical circles which reproduced it in literature and social life. The concept of God was more and more regarded as a product of the human spirit, which comparative religion made an object of research and reflection, in order to establish ever more firmly its changing character and to see it as the product of a development of the human race, which itself is more and more regarded as developing from primal matter. Evolutionism, like empiricism, gradually took on a more psychic character. Psychic monism became the system of the day, and in this system the concept of God became no less hazy and vague than it was hazy and vague in Deism.

VIII

These last two phases in the development of the concept of God may truly be called a serious crisis, in which from the beginning, as a healthy reaction, the idea of a personal God struggled against the tendency to render that concept vague. This period is strongly characterized by the defence of the ancient, traditional concept of God against its degeneracy and deterioration. There was more defence and resistance than development in the image of a personal God. In fact, it cannot be denied that especially the liberal, but also the evolutionistic-emanistic school had a crippling effect on the harmonious development of the positive image of God and greatly diminished its vitality. Still, it lived on and continued to live on, and by resisting became stronger and adapted itself to changing times. We may say that the time of simple self-defence is

now past, and a more positive way has been entered upon. Apologetics are appreciated but are not considered an end as such. Those who confess faith in God and love him are once more confidently coming forward and giving expression to their faith and reverence. More poetry – certainly in our country – has entered into the concept of God. It has again begun to live and inspire. Gezelle especially has set his soul to listening and in all that encompasses him has heard, not Monism's or Deism's vague image of God, but a personal God speak to him of love and the return of love. That new life may even have expressed itself in an exaggerated lyricism about God, but the lyric element has gradually retreated, and intellectual reflection, the prelude to spontaneous expression of love and service, has prevailed.

IX

Oh, I know that my picture of the image of God through the ages, with special reference to our country, is far from complete and does not render all the colours and tints of this rich image. It is like a black on white reproduction of a masterpiece of colouring. But what can I do in an hour? I have to restrict myself to a few broad strokes, in order to provide at least some insight, to construct an outline under which numberless variations can be resumed. I am convinced that from my very first words, at each picture that I painted with rough strokes, your memories called up a wealth of nuances. That I have been able again to conjure up these images in you is for me a reason to be pleased, and was the purpose of my exposition. My sole purpose in presenting this short historical sketch by way of an example was to bring before your minds again the many-sidedness of the concept of God and to show you how it can adapt itself to changing times.

One lesson thereby imposes itself on us.

We have seen one image follow upon the other. While one exercised its dominant influence, another image, partly a reaction, partly a further development, was already coming forward to supplant the other. There is talk of consecutive generations of ideas, of shorter or longer duration. One image is born of the other, and while the old generation still survives, the new one arrives to overpower it. Sometimes the new one is weaker than the old and hardly manages to suppress it; sometimes the new has an overwhelming power and takes all hearts by storm. The deistic and monistic concepts of God, with their negative tendency, were sickly offspring, in no condition to doom the old forms to death. The representation of God's descent to man and the harmonious union of spirit and senses in the contemplation of God was too overpowering.

What is the nature of our image of God? Will it be strong and in a condition to overcome the world for him? It doesn't look that way, but there are aspects that fill us with hope and trust. We learn from history. Philosophical reflection on history teaches us that our era also has its image of God, and that it will be able to exercise greater influence according as it is more adapted to the needs of the moment, feeds and fosters the current reaction but also uses it; in a word, brings out in the representation of God that which this era seeks and desires in the image of God. The philosophy of history also teaches us to avoid one-sidedness in that adaptation, because otherwise we immediately arouse a reaction that affects and weakens our work.

X

A second question that we consequently have to answer is: What concept of God is especially evolved and needed in our age? It is remarkable how human nature knows how to find that which it most needs. Here also history is particularly instructive. The phenomenon of reaction in history shows that what unconsciously comes into evidence in the following times is what has been neglected in the previous years, and is what a person could not lack in order to arrive at the complete development of his powers. Every

one-sided attitude avenges itself and causes a need to arise for what has been neglected. And this not only occurs in a negative way, in so far as a one-sided attitude has detrimental results and causes people to resort to another orientation in order to avoid and exorcise those results, but also in a positive way, because the one-sided representation no longer satisfies, and a new orientation takes on the character of a surprise, a discovery, a revelation, which as such arouses great interest and satisfaction.

I take it for granted and state that all of us gathered here enjoy the privilege of acknowledging God, have the will to serve him, to bear him love, to praise and extol him for many things. God is the object not only of our intellect but also of our will and imagination, and it is not easy to enumerate all the functions of those faculties of which God is, through some sort of relation, the object of their activity. Our imagination plays a richly varied game with the representation of God. He is our emperor and king, he is the good shepherd, the trusted leader; he is our father, our protector; he breathed life into us, he preserves us; he leads the stars and planets on their way, gives life to plants and animals; he carries the world in his hand and guarantees its peaceful subsistence; he dwells in us and opens the eye of our understanding on the first truths, he whispers his first commandments to us and urges us to observe them; he stands before us as the judge of our whole life who will show us to the right or left hand according as we have done good or evil in his sight; his eye follows us in all our actions and omissions and he looks on us with pleasure when our life corresponds to the ideal he cherished of us from eternity. I could continue in this manner with image upon image that express our representation of God in one form or another. One image is more beautiful than the other, but if we put them all together, our image of God is still only imperfectly expressed, and we feel the need of constantly new images to give expression to it. This need becomes greater if through various circumstances we do not succeed in making the rich image of God shine before our eyes in its richness, and the one-sided representation eventually does not satisfy us. Still, this has been almost always the case. We have almost always taken a too one-sided image of God as the guideline in the labyrinth of life, so that reaction has followed on reaction, in order to help overcome the dissatisfaction aroused by that one-sided idea. This does not alter the fact that every age has its own image, is even characterized by that image. That is not what is wrong. The mistake has been that people have clung too passionately to their own image and, living at an unconscious level, have neglected to reflect on that unconscious image and through reasoning to avoid one-sidedness.

It is therefore not enough to determine the image of God which rules our thought, and not only ours but also of the world around us, of the great currents which at the moment lead the life of thought; we must ask ourselves, besides, how far that image corresponds to the needs of the times and is adapted to the mentality of today, as most fitting for this time, the most appealing to the multitude.

This need not correspond completely with the image which has unconsciously won a place for itself in the minds of the people. I am by no means of the opinion that nature is always right. Although it may not be denied a healing action, and in sickness of mind is also the indicated doctor, first of all, for bringing into play the curative power which it possesses – although, as in the case of the sickness of the human body, the organism as such contributes a great deal that opposes and fights the disease. Everyone praises and extols the work of the physician who understands the secret action of nature's curative power and leads and helps, strengthens and safeguards nature against noxious influences. The same is true of disease of the mind. There, too, the action of nature is not to be considered unconditionally effective, and reflection and reasoning are necessary for purposes of control and help.

XI

When we ask ourselves what representation of God leads and rules minds in today's society, it almost

looks as though the question cannot be answered. There is so little unity in the realm of ideas that at first sight we might have the impression that we will have to let pass in review an endless series of representations. If we wanted to descend to details, we would have to do so, but such is not the case here. However great the confusion and contrast, there are yet tendencies, there are yet trends in the development of thought that, in broad outline, have determined the course of the image of God throughout history and also in our times reflect the salient features of the current image of God, especially those which are overlooked in it.

When the philosophy of history convincingly proves to us that even the strongest man, who apparently dominates an era and stamps it with his seal, is entirely dependent on the time in which he lives, is the child of his time, and is almost more led than he himself leads, then also they who are deeply imbued with a certain representation of God and feel themselves called to come forward as apostles of their notion of God, who also, strong in that strength, exercise great influence, are nevertheless subject to the currents, especially philosophical, of the times, thus revealing what is also characteristic of their thought. Do not we Catholics say that we stand fast in the maelstrom of life, in the whirling streams of thought, in the evolution of philosophical thinking, as an immovable rock which knows no change? Let us rather choose the image of a rock which lies in the middle of the sea and according to the changing seasons and ocean tides now is adorned with fresh young green things and flowers which ravish and give enjoyment to the eye, then again in summer's fertility promises hope of a plentiful harvest and after a time joy in the possession of fruit, enjoyed in the sight of new colours, spread over the land now, not by spring but by autumn.

We value our representation of God as a rock upon which the waves break, but not as nakedness without beauty or charm, or as an image of strength and resistance alone; the image is much richer and more beautiful in the changing forms which may not affect its essence yet modify its aspect in no small way and in constantly varying light manage to bestow ever new enchantment.

XII

It occurs to me that in ascertaining what is brought into particular evidence in the image of God in these times we must take into consideration three tendencies in the development of the idea.

In the first place, there is a movement toward more metaphysical insight. We see how from materialistic currents, especially under the influence of the idea of evolution, an insight was gradually born whereby behind visible perceptible reality the invisible is traced and discovered, how behind appearances an idea is sought of the being which, evading actual perception is recognized as the object of a faculty rising above the senses. In Husserl's *Wesensschau* it finds expression and a description. If this view of being is more in semblance than in truth metaphysics as Aristotle knew and introduced it, if it still bears a strong subjective character, stronger than some time ago, in the object of our knowledge the separation appears between the sensorially perceptible and the abstracting element of suprasensory knowableness. An intellectual character may not be denied this point of view; yet it is an intellectuality of a certain kind, in so far as there is question here of intellect in the sense of an intuitive faculty of human nature which is said to know in an illogical and irrational manner a suprasensory object actually above its apprehension or reasoning, or in any case not accessible to it.

This brings us to a second distinctive feature of modern thought, the intuitive character which is credited to human knowledge. From Max Scheier to Bergson there is a richly varied conception of this intuitive character. I won't go into details here, but I think I should call attention to the value which is hereby again credited to human nature, in so far as the latter by its nature and being is brought with a certain spontaneity

to the acceptance of truths which reason does not prove, of which the grounds are only vaguely seen, but which a person is conscious of possessing and knowing as something real, as a truth conferred in and by nature itself and revealed in the fact of being known.

Very closely related to this is a third noteworthy character of modern thought which I will call pragmatic. Here man is in possession of the truth and reveals it in his actions. Truth is the object of his understanding and reason but appears there only vaguely and partially. Man is more than a mere faculty of knowing; he is led to truth by his whole nature, is kept united to it and in part consciously but for the most part unconsciously is led by his actions to the revelation and making known of truth. Truth is not immediately knowable to the intellect, yet it is not an unattainable possession for man, because his nature, attuned to truth, causes him to experience and live out the truth, and the latter by its ennobling action reveals itself ever more strongly in advancing culture. Here also there are marked nuances. From James to Schiller a great difference still manifests itself, and in the disciples of both an even richer difference in this point of view appears, but especially noteworthy here is the high appreciation, on the one hand, of human nature as entirely above limitation to intellect and understanding; on the other hand, of truth which with irresistible force makes itself known in human nature.

We add here, not as a fourth characteristic besides the three already mentioned, but as a modified orientation comprising all three together: namely, that thought is no longer so exclusively subjective; that a more objective trend is standing out more sharply than ever; that a more relative as against such a formerly absolute vision, a more divergent against the formerly strongly convergent view is appearing. This means that man is shutting himself up less closely in himself but is reaching out to the universe with which he feels himself one. The social, community factor is being made one's own, and even if this social feeling, this sense of community sometimes degenerates into collective egoism, this egoism has in any case a social slant, causes the subject to go outside itself, and strongly emphasizes its relative character over against the former idolizing and worship of the absolute "I". We have the strongest expression of this in Communism, which considers itself called to create a new kind of person, a collective person, and a culture which causes the impersonal collective person (*al-mensch*) to triumph over the individual. But where this is not so strongly expressed one can nevertheless perceive the above described greater objectivity and stronger tendency toward the object rather than the subject of knowledge. There is a greater sense of reality, a more sympathetic eye for relationships and implications, more insight into mutual dependence.

If the latter has found only very weak expression in economics and politics – rather the opposite is to be observed – this is more a regrettable phenomenon one would like to see removed, but to contend against which the proper measures have not been found, than that nations are not seeking rapprochement, do not recognize any mutual dependence. Everyone knows that that is the way to go and wants to follow it, but the most able economists, the most skilful politicians cannot find their way out of the labyrinth in which we find ourselves astray.

There is certainly a very wide-spread feeling of despair over this chaos. But those who look at history from a point of view of philosophy do not despair, and the calmly reasoning person also lives in the expectation that the crisis will be surmounted. On what foundation is that hope, that expectation, built? In the first instance, on the nature of man, which throughout the ages has found a way out of difficulties, even without knowing that such an escape existed; which unwittingly often applied the remedies that brought relief, sometimes in a surprising manner. Nature summons up the salutary reaction apt for curing the evil; nature walks unknown paths that lead to recovery. Man does not relinquish hope, because throughout history there is human nature taking its stand with the secret and unknown powers and faculties embodied in it. The individual person cannot bring redemption here, cannot speak the proper word; all minds fall short, all

wisdom is inadequate; but nature will again assert itself now, as it has in the past. Nature transcends history.

And behind nature there is God, not the God of the Deists, but God who created nature and sustains it; who works in, through, and with it; whose work and being can be distinguished in nature by the abstractive intellect. If in present need we dare to trust in deliverance because, taught by history, we trust in human nature, then we trust in God, and his image in this need appears in a new light and charms us with a new beauty scarcely ever discovered before.

XIII

From all this we are already led in some degree to perceive, on the one hand, which image of God will be born from that constellation of thought; on the other hand, which concept of God leads human nature in the right direction and in view of the trends of the times should count with us as the most apt to attract and inspire mankind. Then it occurs to me that we who love God and like to see him adored and glorified by all must above all emphasize the following elements in our rich image of God, in order to arrive at an image adapted to our times.

We must first of all see God as the deepest ground of our being, hidden in the profoundest depths of our nature, yet able to be seen and contemplated, clearly knowable in the first movement of our reason, by regular familiarity without repeated reasoning and as it were by intuition, so that we find ourselves in continual contemplation of God and adore him not only in our own being but also in everything that exists; first of all in our fellow man, but also in nature, in the universe, present everywhere and penetrating all things with the work of his hands. The divine indwelling and operation must not only be the object of intuition, but must reveal themselves in our lives, must find expression in our words and deeds, must radiate from our whole being and appearance.

This natural image of God, the best adapted to the philosophical currents of these days, is powerfully strengthened if in the supernatural image of God we have come to know through Revelation we emphasize those elements which most accord with those already mentioned and either define them further or explain them more clearly.

Then I think of the description of the work of grace, of the explanation by experienced theologians of what is comprised under grace, and further of the practice of the three theological virtues which, when practiced to a heroic degree, so gloriously and beautifully demonstrate and make distinguishable both the work of grace and the divine element in every being. Where faith, hope, and love are put into practice as virtues in the most heroic degree there we sense the nearness of the divine, there God as it were comes forth to meet us from the one practicing those virtues, and all who witness it fall under the spell of that divine radiation.

A bright spot in these dark times is to be found in the gradual preparation and evolution of this concept of God. Among the many elements that endear the concept of God to us none can be pointed out that bestows such enchantment as the idea that God dwells within us, that we are able to discover him and by abstraction contemplate him in ourselves and with us in everything that surrounds us, while that divine indwelling can become a bright radiance permeating our whole life.

That the development of philosophic thought, which after all is our guide in life, brings out this element in such a special way and, in spite of the will of many persons who have gone astray from God, that the need of the times leads to his contemplation under the most beautiful forms is truly to be considered a ray of

light in the darkness and to be seen as a happy outlook. Religion is undeniably deepened and interiorized through this debate over God. And it is a source of no small joy that out of this conflict of thought this beautiful image of God seems to awaken to new life. I should not say that it was born out of this conflict. It is not new, yet there is new life, and though that new life may be a reflection of the representations of God of earlier ages, in every age such an image prominent in various periods has its own colouring, accidentals for the most part, probably mostly a matter of different combinations, but if according to the French expression the tone sets the music, then we have here a case of a new chord in which a particular tone can be heard, and this particular tone confers a special charm on the chord.

XIV

I should not fail to mention, in view of this happy outlook, that this image of God also demands a special function of our faculty of knowing. To any objective modification of the image of God there corresponds a subjective modification of the functions of our faculty of knowing. Now it is a pleasing circumstance, for that matter not unrelated to the development of thought sketched above in rough outline, that a change has occurred in the appreciation of the faculty of knowing, and that the Aristotelian concept, so harmoniously adopted and developed in Thomistic philosophy, more than for ages is forging ahead and requires to be acknowledged – namely, that our intellect works by abstraction, and that the faculty of abstracting, properly understood, is revealed to be the greatest glory of our intellect.

There is a particular satisfaction in the renaissance of Aristotelian and consequently Thomistic philosophy in that it so radically and efficiently assists and promotes the further development of the image of God outlined above. The one is connected with the other, and we may speak of interaction.

What is of greater importance in Thomistic epistemology than its high esteem for the faculty of abstraction? The place awarded it seems to me to mark in the history of philosophy, first the preparation for the appearance of Saint Thomas, then the success of his doctrine, at the same time and especially later its disparagement.

We live in an age of the abstract. It manifests itself in literature and perhaps even more strongly in architecture and the plastic arts, ever so clear a reflection of what moves men's spirits.

And it is that faculty of abstraction which must lead us to the *visio Dei* which one day will constitute our eternal happiness, but because of the harmony with our nature which presupposes this happiness in itself, though here imperfectly obtained, is still already a foretaste of it and guarantees high spiritual delight.

Although only a chosen few will arrive at the highest contemplation, we must all bring ourselves to an ever clearer contemplation. The highest contemplation remains the prerogative of a few who, to speak in medieval terms, have practised the purgative and illuminative ways and thereby have acquired the needed receptivity to the contemplative life and, in conformity with that receptivity, are graced with that contemplation. I readily grant that, although there is a tendency toward a more metaphysical view, and the appreciation of our intuitive faculty prompts us to a better development of our faculty of abstraction, not everyone will therefore allow himself to be led by the faculty of abstraction in the most perfect manner, and that the complete development of the image of God in the indicated sense is thereby assured.

Yet the possibility that we may be able to develop ourselves in that direction and thereby cause this concept of God to be more meaningful, not only to ourselves but also to others, places on us the obligation of also doing it. Let us above all follow and strengthen the trend of the times, which draws us to so much

mischievous, where it clearly leads us to something beautiful and good.

Here the Catholic philosopher and the Catholic theologian have a special role to fill. Their Aristotelian-Thomistic schooling endows them with special qualities not only for providing leadership but exercising continual pressure in the direction desired by the philosophy of the day.

The current mystical and mystically-related literature shows that this task is being understood and felt, that this literature springs from the spirit of the age and at the same time satisfies it. But all must be convinced that by this way they can and must unite themselves more intimately with God, and that the thought of God can and must be made to live in society.

If this is to become a reality, the mystic must not be thought of as standing outside of life, but all who possess life and are conscious of that life must see their first and highest calling in the *gnosis seautou* – self-knowledge – the most difficult but most beautiful of all knowledge: to descend by means of one's abstracting intellect to where one meets God in the ground of one's being.

We can see into those depths. The water may provide a difficulty and through the storms of life often become so troubled that only after rest and reflection our glance may be able to penetrate those depths. We possess the faculty for that sight, God can be known in our being, we can see him and live in the contemplation of him. That contemplation will not take place without his influence on our conduct. Hence he will also reveal himself in our actions.

XV

Not the least manifestation of the pragmatic-intuitive character of the image of God is to be found in the great apostasy from God, greater than in any other age. This character at the same time shows how many do not understand under which forms God is now especially sought, and so many fail to find him. The World War contributed its share, and one of its most fatal consequences is precisely this denial of God. The pragmatic spirit of our times seeks the revelation of God, but thinks that God can only be known in the works performed by man – not the individual man but man in society, the revelation of human nature. Here a comparison might be made with what took place at the beginning of the sixteenth century, when millions abandoned the Catholic Church, but besides similarities there are so many and such great differences that it would take us too long to complete the picture. We may say that now that the dissatisfaction has become so great, the reaction is so much the more radical. Previously the mentality was also much less pragmatic. This latter character of truth now stands forth so strongly that many wrongs that occur in the world and are represented as self-evident and conformable to nature hinder thousands from seeing God in nature. The acknowledged intuitive, illogical, and irrational character of human thinking breeds in man an aversion to reasoning about facts, to explaining what occurs. Today a thing is required to be so evident that it irresistibly and overwhelmingly imposes itself on the mind. Under present circumstances it costs an effort and involves the use of reason to see that everything really comes from God, is directed by God.

When human thought takes this course, one is justified in speaking of an ailing condition, but that does not relieve the worshippers and lovers of God of the duty of taking it into account, if they wish to spread the thought of God and have it again receive acceptance. Then we experience what is required of today's image of God and is too little seen in it. Then we see that this age of illogical intuition is not satisfied with an ordinary practice of virtue; for these times we have to ask God to raise up men and women of heroic virtue, who through their deeds compel the cry, "Disbelief cannot accomplish this!" Then the concept of God must perforce have an effect on society, and one need not turn away disappointed from those who

confess God with words but deny him by their actions. Fortunately, this is being more and more understood. Especially among the young a youthful enthusiasm has arisen for confessing God proudly and openly in deed and for making him known in his beauty, in his inspiration of the good deed.

However, it is not enough to insist on the practice of faith in God and to arouse ourselves to it; more is needed. We must understand the times and not place ourselves outside its influence. We too are children of our times. Let us be so with clear consciousness and allow its salutary incentives to have their way with us.

Today's concept of God has an intuitive besides a pragmatic character. We must make use of the favourable circumstances and teach intuitive man to see God where he is not hidden from our eyes but at most veiled, where our intellect can reach him as the object of reflection. Let me be well understood. I am not recommending intuition for the concept of God, I am not trying to bring back the age of ontologism; but usage becomes second nature, and many take for intuition what is the result of unconscious reasoning. Even when we reason, our faculty of abstraction does not remain unemployed, and although we distinguish between reason and understanding, both contribute to comprehension, to the act of seeing, of which we often manage to see the way which has brought us there only with the greatest difficulty and the most profound reflection. We must indeed be careful with the word "intuition", certainly when we are talking about our contemplation of God, but on the other hand we must not be excessively afraid of those who use the term, but due to too little introspection take for intuition what is nothing more than the result of habitual and hence unconscious reasoning, and which consequently is controlled and guided abstraction.

What I defend and consider necessary for these times is to see in all existence its dependence on and origin in God, whose work we must see there, whose being we must distinguish there, whom we must acknowledge and worship, primarily in ourselves. God is there and reveals himself to us there. He wants to be seen and acknowledged there. Lastly, he is nowhere better to be recognized by us than in the ground of our being. If the idea of God's indwelling, of the total dependence of all nature on God, of God's guidance and revelation in all things, were alive in us, how our words and deeds would have to be changed, in order to make them correspond to their character of revelations from God! People must again see God and live in the contemplation of God. This is called mysticism. So be it. I can even applaud the term, if I may see in it the expression of the truth that we must see in mysticism the further and highest development of that which is potentially human nature, even though the activation of that potentiality can take place only through a special gift of God. Mysticism is in no way opposed to nature; on the contrary, nature is called to see God as the noblest object it can know. It is a pity that this is no longer understood. The mystical works of a Ruusbroec in our own national literature would be able to teach us again how we, using the natural gift of our intellect, can arrive at an ever clearer vision of God. At present there is reason for great satisfaction in the fact that mystical writings are again in vogue, that they are again being consulted, in order to learn from them divine contemplation, to derive from them the image of God most needed for these times. From the intuition of God in the depths of all being the transition is easy to the inspiration it should exercise on our actions.

It is a pleasure to note how many persons, especially the young, with holy enthusiasm and led by God, are inspired to service though their union with him, whom they adore in themselves, with whom they feel themselves even more intimately united through grace, which union they confirm and strengthen through the daily reception of Holy Communion. That is the way it should be. Good deeds no longer suffice; they must originate in the consciousness that our union with God obliges us to perform them. That consciousness must become the powerful mainspring of good deeds. On the other hand, neither is faith in God sufficient; it must be seen as living in works and reveal its value in them.

The image of God sketched here is thus a powerful idea which will not only find ready acceptance beside the vague and hazy representations of God which still survive in the minds of so many, but once it has been acquired and assimilated will be proof against much contention and opposition.

XVI

Let me add a word about the great advantage for the renewal of the damaged social order of spreading this concept of God.

Unquestionably it draws people out of their isolation and causes them to see themselves in a relation of dependence. It not only binds them to God, but in and through and with God they see themselves united and in relation to all others. Here is a society founded on the inmost union of God with all that exists. Acknowledgement of mutual dependency must be one of the first conditions for the restoration of the shattered order. What idea will be more fruitful in this context than the concept of God which we have described as most suited to these times? This image of God touches in two different ways the delusion that follows in the wake of Communism. First, it shows that nature, even nature made operative and strong in society, is not independent, but actualizes the directives given by God and by him alone determined in their initiation and execution. Secondly, it creates a new and more fruitful communism, based on deeper and more evident foundation, in that it suggests to us that all are united in and through God and are ordered to each other. This consciousness of mutual dependency and ordering to each other and also of the most intimate communion with each other is certainly the most beautiful idea that can be conceived for delivery from present need.

XVII

However beautiful this image of God is, especially for the present day, yet, taught by history, we must be careful not to preach and present it in too one-sided a manner. Let me briefly point to two dangers.

The intuition, the vision of God must not divert the mind from reasoning of the intellect, which must remain its foundation. Not illogic, but sound reasoning and science must nourish and develop the concept of God. Although we may anticipate the happy result that the contemplation of God which we habitually practise will become second nature and that according to our judgement will equal intuition, still we must never lose sight of the way that leads to that contemplation. If we do not continue to emphasize this and if we do not develop the concept of God in a thoroughly scientific manner, it will not acquire the strength which it can and should have in order to exercise the influence we would like it to have for inspiring to action. For this reason we are pleased that not only the devout have seized on this concept of god in order to cherish and nourish it, but also the philosophical and theological sciences are submitting this concept to further study and reflection, in order to clarify and further develop it in harmony with what we know of the divine Being, either by speculation of the mind or by revelation. When we see how great, nay, vital is the importance for these times of a proper concept of God, then we rejoice in the fact that this University also has a Theological Faculty attached to it, which hopefully will be further expanded, in order completely to fulfil its task. It is of incalculable benefit to Catholic scholarship, which in any case aims to serve true progress, that in these times full attention is being given to the concept of God, and questions of every sort are not considered unrelated to it. This has happened only too frequently and has been the reason why we no longer know how to penetrate any object whatsoever to the point of meeting and adoring God. No science will be hurt by doing this; in fact, it will be penetrated to its most profound depths, made to descend to the lowest foundation, and will reveal the starting-point of the synthesis of all that has been analyzed.

Because of the great importance of the concept of God for all true progress and the need not only to receive it from revelation but also to develop it with our intellect, after it has drawn this concept from the things that surround us, I am pleased that we now have our own University, where I not only am privileged to speak of the beauty and value of the concept of God, but where a staff of professors of philosophy and theology collaborates with the professors of other subjects in making God be seen and recognized in all things and in bringing and holding in harmony all our knowledge of whatever science with the most fundamental and fruitful of all concepts, our concept of God.

A second danger which we must not underrate, although from the interior nature of the concept of God described above it would not seem very threatening, is that the pragmatic interpretation of that concept will lead to an emphasis on the exterior. We have already seen from the history of our spiritual life how an excessively one-sided practice of virtue led to the exteriorization of the spiritual life. We must therefore be on our guard lest the same occur again. Besides the need that our faith be revealed in deeds which it must inspire, we must keep an eye open for the even more pressing need for inspiration from within. The deed is not enough; it must consciously issue from God dwelling within us, as advice or counsel from him from the depths of our being. This will not only make the deed strong and irresistible exteriorly but also interiorly strong, an expression of a more beautiful, nobler life.

XVIII

We like to act and speak in images and similitudes. We like examples and memory helps.

We have an image for developing our representation of God.

Once there was a Virgin who became the Mother of God made man, who gave us God as the Emmanuel. He died on the cross to make us live in union with God and to fill us with his grace. Thus, he was also born in us in the order of grace, to bring into its own the union with God in the order of nature, to make that union even more interior and superabundant. Thus, the Mother of God gave us that interior union with God, while she presented herself as an example of the profoundest communion.

Let us keep that example before our eyes.

It is more than a mere example.

She is called to direct our gaze to God. Just as we, led by revelation, recognize God in the Child in her arms, so may she lead us through our intellects to the contemplation of God in all that he has created, in order that, as he lived in her, he may also live in us, and, through the deed born of us, be revealed in us.