

Personal and Impersonal God

*Self-Realization Fellowship International Headquarters,
Los Angeles, California, December 21, 1939*

Tonight's talk will bring home to your consciousness the significance of the coming of Jesus Christ on earth. Though a few doubt what happened twenty centuries ago, his presence in this world was real—many came in contact with him personally. Some understood his greatness; others ignorantly helped to crucify him. In the drama of his life, Jesus showed us what God Himself would be like, and how He would behave, if He came on earth in flesh and form. In Jesus, as in other divine incarnations, we have been able to behold and know the visible God.

The God of some scriptures is a revengeful deity, always ready to punish us. But Jesus showed us the real nature of God. He could truthfully proclaim: "I and my Father are one."* The Spirit within him was one with the Infinite Spirit. He who is one with God is God Himself. Jesus proved this in his life. And yet, though one with all-powerful God, he humbly let himself be crucified through the ignorance of certain men, rather than retaliate against them. As a son of God, a reflection of Cosmic Consciousness, he had dominion over all forces in creation, but he never used his power against anyone. He who could raise the dead, who realized that his body was not physical but ethereal, could certainly have saved himself from the cross. He said, "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?"† But instead, he hid his omnipotence and allowed his body to be crucified. He did not destroy his enemies with "twelve legions of angels," but rather overcame evil with the power of divine love. His actions demonstrated the supreme love of God, and the behavior of those who are one with Him.

Don't you prefer a God who with infinite love is ready to

* John 10:30.

† Matthew 26:53.

say: "I forgive you, for you know not what you do"? You may be worried about the wrong you have committed, but God is not. What is past is past. You are His child, and whatever wrong you have done came about because you didn't know Him. He doesn't hold against you the evil done under the influence of ignorance. All He asks is that you not repeat your wrong actions. He wants only to find out whether or not you are sincere in your intention to be good.

God shows His loving forgiveness to us every day. He could punish us by hellfire for our errors, but He doesn't. Hellfire is an imaginary creation of man's vengefulness, which he ascribes to God as well. But revenge is not God's way. In His greatness He is ever loving toward His children. We never have to fear Him. We should fear only ourselves, our own wrongdoings: those actions performed against the dictates of conscience. Before the tribunal of the conscience the evil man convicts himself. Jesus said: "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* That is, repent of the mischief you have done, and you will attain the kingdom of God. So remember that God does not condemn you; you pass sentence on yourself by your own actions. You punish or reward yourself through the karmic results of those deeds.

The great problem is that God knows too much about us! I often say to Him: "Lord, it is not fair that You know everything about us, and we don't know anything about You." If you knew that God is with you all the time, you wouldn't do many of the things you do. But He doesn't want to interfere with the free will He has given to you. He wants your spontaneous love. He has given you freedom to do good or evil, to cast Him away or receive Him on the altar of your heart. You may do whatever you choose; He doesn't intervene. But those who willingly choose good actions are on their way to becoming manifest representatives of God, just as Jesus was a perfect representative of God.

Jesus said: "Many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them."† It is only from time to time, in different ages, that great souls are sent by God with a special mission to declare His glory. Their

* Matthew 4:17.

† Matthew 13:17.

lives reflect the various attributes of God: Krishna manifested the love aspect of God; Jesus' life represented the devotional and active, or serviceful, aspects of God; Swami Shankara reflected the wisdom of God; Chaitanya,* the love; Buddha showed us God's benign intelligence, working through *dharma* or cosmic law. Hence, though God Himself is invisible, He can become manifest in the bodies of such great masters.

It is significant that when we think of God in human form, we visualize Him according to our own familiar concepts. For instance, the Chinese make the image of Buddha with a flat nose and almond-shaped eyes; the Hindus represent him with an aquiline nose. Such is man's need for a personal God in a form to which he can easily respond.

God Is Both Personal and Impersonal

Many devotees who worship a personal aspect of God shun the concept of an impersonal God; and devotees of the Unmanifest sometimes reject the idea of a personal God. But I say that God is both personal and impersonal. He is the Absolute, beyond form, but He also makes Himself manifest in many ways. If there were no blue sky, no vast space, no beautiful scenery, no moon or twinkling stars in the heavens, we would never have suspected the existence of God at all. The wonders we behold in this universe suggest to us the immanence of God. He is visible everywhere, in everything He has created, and in the workings of His intelligence governing all creation.

When we see pictures of tragedy and drama and comedy on a movie screen, we forget that all the characters and their characteristics are nothing more than electricity, vibratory forms of light. So it is when we see all the different things about us—the earth, the sky, the trees, other human beings, and myriad creatures—we forget that they are nothing but God, the Cosmic Electricity. We must realize that all of us are playing a drama of good and evil in this world, and that our flesh, the bulb and the electricity that illumines it, the vast ocean, the wood, the iron—

* A brilliant scholar in India, Sri Chaitanya in 1508 had a spiritual awakening and became inflamed with love for God, whom he worshiped as the *avatar* Lord Krishna. His fame as a *bhakta* (devotee of God) spread throughout India in the 16th century.

all are made of God. Do not forget this. Everything is composed of the subtly vibrating cosmic energy of God.

The visible universe is thus a vast personal representation of the invisible Spirit. Everything is a part of Him, even the smallest speck of dust. The wood that appears to be inert matter is the living light of God. In seemingly empty space there is one Link, one Life eternal, which unites everything in the universe — animate and inanimate — one wave of Life flowing through everything.

The wave is the same as the ocean, though it is not the whole ocean. So each wave of creation is a part of the eternal Ocean of Spirit. The Ocean can exist without the waves, but the waves cannot exist without the Ocean.

Therefore, you see, God is both personal and impersonal. He is the Uncreated Absolute, and He is manifest in creation, peering at us through the twinkling stars, breathing on us His sweet fragrance through the flowers, and talking to us through his saints.

Even the Finite Is Infinite

Now, just behind the universe is the infinite presence of God. And because God cannot be bound by any form, even His personal aspect in the universe is also infinite. So what we call finite and infinite are both right before our eyes. But our eyes deceive us, because they cannot see all there is. What we call finite is infinite in essence. Therefore, we cannot conceive the depth of the heavens, of space. The space in this room is about eighteen feet, measured by what confines it; but space itself cannot be seen or measured. When you stand on a mountaintop and look up at a clear night sky, you see only a few thousand stars. But uncounted trillions more lie beyond your vision. If you look through a telescope you can see a few of them; you can see the moons of such planets as Saturn and Jupiter. The light of the distant stars takes aeons to reach the earth. And what is beyond the farthest star? Man does not know. Space is infinite. The ordinary human mind cannot comprehend this truth.

If you trace the origin and end of matter, you find it is infinite. Trace the origin and end of human beings, and again, you find they are infinite. You may say, "My name is John. I am finite." But who were your parents? And who were their parents?

Ask this of each preceding generation, and eventually you come to Adam and Eve. And whence did they come? From God, who is infinite. Creation was infinite in the beginning, and is infinite in the end. At the moment you are in the middle, or manifested state, of that infinite change. Therefore you are infinite too; there is no beginning or end to you.

In this sense, nothing is finite; nothing is personal. Everything in essence is the ever-living Absolute who has become personal and visible to us for a time through this cosmos. It is His life permeating the universe, rotating the suns and moons and stars in mathematical order. God is visible as these created forms, yet that very visibility makes Him invisible: Gross vibrations hide His infinite nature, His omnipresent invisibility in which everything has its beginning and end. To illustrate, steam is invisible, but when condensed it becomes visible as water; condensed further by freezing, it becomes ice. Steam is a gas; ice is a solid; how different, and yet the same. Similarly, the impersonal God is personal, and the personal God is impersonal. All matter is Spirit, and Spirit has become matter. There is no essential difference. Reasoning thus, it is easier for us to conceive that invisible God can have a visible aspect.

The Absolute Cannot Be Described

The impersonal God cannot be described, or even understood with the intellect. The only way you can know the Absolute is to be one with Spirit. It is only the personal God that you can think of or worship. I would ask any human being if he can convey what God is like without employing any personal concept; he can't. When you think of God's love, you think of the human love you have felt in your heart, and you picture God's love as greater than that. Because goodness, love, wisdom, have been embodied in persons you know, or more perfectly so in the lives of the saints, you are able to conceive these as qualities of God; and to say that He is kind and good and beautiful, that He is wise and loving. Do you see how tangible He is? But without a personal example of God's divine qualities, we could not conceive of Him at all. So long as we are identified with our own body-consciousness, God will be more real to us in the personal aspect than in the impersonal. So it is easier to strive first to

realize Him as the personal God.* In fact, we *should* approach Him through the visible, because that is more tangible to us. For this reason are great ones such as Jesus sent on earth. Though one with God, they have a body of bones and flesh. In this way, God takes a body at will to guide and inspire His children. But He cannot be confined to any one body because that would mean He is born and He dies; He would be limited, not limitless. He would not be God.

God Manifests in Human Incarnations

In the beginning, before creation, God was invisible; but He wanted to become visible, and to enjoy His infinite nature through many forms. Electricity is in the air around us, but you don't see it. Unmanifest, it is impersonal. But when it is brought into a bulb, it becomes visible, even though it is the same electricity. So it is with God. You are all gods†—the Divine Electricity made visible in body-bulbs—though you don't know it. Thus my God not only remains unseen behind the stars, hidden in the sky, but He is visible right before me—a God who has taken the forms of more than a billion beings on earth. "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?"‡ But though He has made a personal representation of Himself in each human being, some reflect His light more than others. These are His great saints and avatars.

To cite again the example of Jesus, his body that was crucified and that he recreated, or resurrected, was manifested from the invisible God. And that resurrected form didn't die a second death, but was dissolved in Spirit after Jesus had appeared to his disciples. This demonstration proves that God can make Himself visible and appear in any form at any time. Since God is not limited to any one manifestation, it is all right to visualize Him in whatever form is dearest to your heart. He will appear to you in a form representative of one of His divine attributes, such as those personified in the deities of the Hindu scriptures, or as any avatar, saint, or great soul that you love. The first step in drawing

* "Those whose goal is the Unmanifested increase the difficulties; arduous is the path to the Absolute for embodied beings" (Bhagavad Gita XII:5).

† "Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods?"—(John 10:34).

‡ I Corinthians 3:16.

that divine response is to visualize, with eyes closed in meditation, the image of the deity or saint. If your meditation is deep and your effort is persistent, you will draw God to you.

Throughout twenty centuries, God incarnate in Jesus has appeared to many devotees, including St. Francis of Assisi. And because St. Francis so completely identified himself with Jesus, he lived the crucifixion of Jesus in his own consciousness, and the stigmata appeared on his body. I saw the same miracle in Therese Neumann;* her hands and feet showed clearly the wounds of the nails. Such are the testimonials of God.

The Guru Is a Model of God

In India we emphasize very strongly that God can be received only through the proper spiritual representative. In the West the emphasis is on filling the church, without much concern as to the inner spiritual qualifications of the preacher. In India we search everywhere for one who is a visible representative of God: one who knows God and communes with Him. When we find such a model, when in such a one we see God in action, we call him "guru," and follow him faithfully. Guru is he whom God appoints to lead you out of the darkness of ignorance into the land of His eternal light. A seeker may have had many spiritual teachers, but he can have only one guru. When he finds his guru, he follows him solely and steadfastly. God is visible in the lives of those who love Him and are in tune with Him. Thus whoever attunes himself with his guru finds God. Do you see how important it is to follow one who can show you the way to God through his example? When you are in tune with your guru, the visible representative of God, He will come to you in that form while you are meditating. Then you will know that God is real and that He works through the guru.

Before his passing, my great guru, Swami Sri Yukteswar, told me to wear a certain kind of bangle as a special protection. With faith in his blessing in the bangle, I put it on. When I was in Bombay just before returning to America, I realized that the satanic power was trying to destroy my life, to prevent me from

* The Catholic stigmatist of Bavaria (1898-1962). See *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Chapter 39.

fulfilling the mission given to me by God and my guru. I wasn't afraid; I knew God was with me and I remembered Master's promise of protection. I put a little light on in my room, because the evil forces do not like light. For a little while I sat meditating, watchful of my spirit. And then I felt sleepy. As I opened my eyes and looked toward the right wall of the room, I saw the black form of Satan, horrible, with a catlike face and tail. It leaped on my chest, and my heart stopped beating. Mentally I said: "I am not afraid of you. I am Spirit." But still my heart wouldn't work. Suddenly I glimpsed an ochre robe, and there stood Master. He commanded Satan to leave; and as soon as he spoke, the evil figure vanished and my breath started to flow again. I cried out: "My Master!" He said: "Satan was trying to destroy you. But fear not. I am with you evermore." I could even smell the familiar, gentle fragrance that emanated from Master's form, just as when he was incarnate on earth.

Such experiences convince you that the forces of good and evil do exist, just as radio vibrations are present in space. If you dig into the ether with a radio receiver, immediately you can hear songs that have been broadcast from another point in space. Likewise the saints, by tuning in their minds to God, have drawn Him from the silence of space. He and His saints are right here, hidden behind the ether. Tuning in with Them is not simple, but unless you learn to do this, how are you going to convince yourself that God *is*?

There are sixteen qualities of God that are manifest in great incarnations. Krishna and Christ, and also Babaji, Lahiri Mahasaya, and Sri Yukteswar, had all sixteen qualities: the power of omnipresence, power of projection, power of omnipotence, joy, and so on. In lesser prophets there are lesser manifestations. When God's sixteen qualities are fully manifest in a human being, he is one with God Himself.

Those Who Are One With God Can Appear in Form Any Time

A master who is one with God can appear in form any time he wishes, just as my guru appeared to me and as Jesus used to visit his beloved disciple St. Francis every night. Just think what your life would become if you had even one experience like that! You would see this whole world as it really is. But you are not willing to make the effort to explore the depths of meditation.

God's presence is there in abundance, but you don't work for it; you don't use your intelligence and God-given freedom to find Him. When I started my search for God in this life, I found that what the great teachers say is true, and I went after God in earnest.

One night, another student and I decided to meditate on Krishna; we wanted to behold him. After several hours my companion said, "Come on, let us go to bed now." His whole thought was of sleep, because he didn't really believe Krishna would come to us. But I said: "You go to bed if you like, but I haven't given up hope. I shall go on meditating." As I said that, there was a sudden blinding flash of light, and in that light I saw the divine face of Lord Krishna. I cried out: "Krishna is here!" I touched my friend, and he beheld him too.

So you see, on the one hand, it is the hardest thing to find God, and yet it is also the easiest if you are sincere and determined. God is not impressed by great temples or well-planned sermons; He doesn't enter the gates of pride and material pomp; He cannot be known through a mechanical relationship. God responds to a sincere call from the heart. "A humble magnet call, a whisper by the brook, on grassy altar small—there I have My nook."* Such was my temple even in childhood. I used to seek a quiet outdoor nook, and there I would pray until I saw that the blades of grass were the sinews of God, the water was the light of God, and in the laughter of the brook I heard His voice.