God

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'God,' '*Theos*,' '*Deus*' is of course a name borrowed from paganism; we take it out of its proper context, where it is used for talking about the gods, and use it for our own purposes. This is quite a legitimate piece of borrowing and quite safe so long as it does not mislead us into thinking that the God we worship (or don't) is a god. We always do have to speak of our God with borrowed words; it is one of the special things about our God that there are no peculiar appropriate words that belong to him, as with the language of carpentry or computer-speak. He is always dressed verbally in second-hand clothes that don't fit him very well. We always have to be on our guard against taking these clothes as revealing who and what he is.

For this reason it is sometimes safer to use clothes that are quite obviously second-hand, words that have been quite scandalously ripped from their proper context and stretched and bent and distorted to suit our purposes. That is one reason for preferring 'The Father' to 'God' as a name for our God. 'The Father' is manifestly being used in a metaphorical or extended sense and so is unlikely to mislead us. It is also the word that Jesus prefers to use.

For Christians any talk about God has to take account of and perhaps start from the radical change that Jesus made in our understanding of the divine. It has to start, in fact, from what we have come to call the Trinity. Jesus did two things — well, he did a whole lot of things, but two that interest me at the moment — first, he introduced us to a new and shocking concept of love. I don't mean he simply gave us a new idea, he actually gave us the love which is the foundation of the Christian movement, an understanding of love developed from the Jewish Old Testament prophets that we have gradually become familiar with over the centuries, the love we have called *agape* or *charity* and which we at least profess to value above all other things. Putting such a high value on this kind of love is a characteristic of Christians — I mean, Jews of Old Testament times did, of course, discover this, but it was Jews of New Testament times who made it central to their lives. I don't think Buddhists or Muslims are quite so obsessed with love — so that John could say, 'He who does not love does not know God; for God is love.' So first of all Jesus is the source of this love, he gave a new and specially deep sense to the

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word; and secondly he said unequivocally that the Father loved *him*, and this was the most remarkable claim he made.

This is because Christian love implies equality; it is distinct from philanthropy, it is different from being kindly, affectionate, caring. There can be a perfectly good and honourable and life-enhancing relationship between unequals, between, even let us say, master and slave. A master sometimes can be kindly and considerate to his slave, the slave can be loyal and affectionate towards his master; all this within the terms of his slavery. The master's kindness does not make him any less a master, the slave's affection does not make him any less a slave. There are all sorts of humane and good human relationships that can grow up within and be sustained by hierarchical structures. Within the relationship of superior and inferior there can be communications which are in no way dehumanising — or at least which do not *have* to be dehumanising. Consider the relationship of parents and children, of schoolteachers and pupils, consider — by association of ideas — the relationship between owners and pet animals. These relations need not be harsh, they need not involve bullying. There can be authority and obedience which is not domination and subservience. All these can be very good relationships but they are not in themselves love.

They are not love because love begins and ends in equality. In a sense to love just is to see the equality of another. Love can coexist for a while within structures of hierarchy, of superiors and inferiors, but in the end it corrodes and subverts them precisely because its drive is always towards equality. Now obviously I am using 'equality' here in a very special sense: people who love each other do not have to be exactly equal in height, or in I.Q., but they have discovered an equality which makes all such differences irrelevant. And because the differences are irrelevant, they will, if they are man-made, finally disappear. That is why love is slowly corrosive of hierarchy, and vice versa.

Hierarchy is something very ancient and deep among human beings. It belonged to millions upon millions of years of our *pre*linguistic ancestors. It is to be found pretty well everywhere amongst the developed mammals and other animals. It is ingrained in our bones. But with us it is slowly subverted by love. Christianity, amongst other things, is the movement of humankind away from hierarchy and in the direction of love. Let me say it again; hierarchical structures are not evil or even necessarily unloving, and they are much better than individualist anarchy, but they are not love. We will shed them as we have already shed our tails.

The turning point of human history, the moment when we realised what we were about, the moment when we saw that the

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meaning of being human was love, was the crucifixion of Jesus. This marks a break comparable with, but even more radical than, the breakthrough to language, the emergence of the linguistic animal. With the gospel it becomes definitive that what we are about is loving, not kindliness and caring (not *just* kindliness and caring) but the special relationship of equality, of recognising the otherness and independence of others. And so all structures of hierarchy, whether overtly benign or exploitative and unjust, become relativised and temporary and irrelevant.

Let me put it this way: we *grow up* into loving. It is not something we begin with, it is something that, if we are lucky, we learn. To be able to love, to recognise the equality of another, to recognise another person for who she or he is in herself or himself and not just as object to me, as recipient of my favour or subservient to my command, all this is something that comes with maturity — indeed it *is* maturity. The infantile world is an hierarchical one and we stay in it for most of our lives.

I am inclined to think that the discovery of adult love between equals is rather a chancy thing, and most of the time we settle for something less than love. If I may say so in passing, it seems to me that the structures of the church are for the most part hierarchical structures of authority and obedience rather than of love. I don't mean by this that they are necessarily loveless, still less that they are consciously opposed to or inhibiting of love, but they function at a different level, they evade the adventure of love, the risk of love, they can very easily remain fixated at an immature, even infantile, level.

We learn to love when we grow up and discover an equal. Now the problem is that it seems God the creator of heaven and earth simply cannot discover an equal; he can it seems never therefore discover what it is to love creatures. Of course he can be kind and forbearing and take care of his creatures, he can be in this sense loving — as indeed he is said to love Israel in *Hosea* and *Deuteronomy* and elsewhere. But this does not have to be love in the sense that since Jesus we have come to understand it. Can this be the real abandonment to an equal that adult love implies? It is plainly impossible for God to have this kind of love for creatures precisely because they are creatures and totally dependent on him for everything they are and everything they have, including their human freedom. He may be immensely kindly and good to them but he cannot be in love with them, any more than you can literally be in love with a pet dog. A prisoner in solitary confinement can develop a perfectly genuine relationship with a pet spider, which keeps him sane. The prisoner can have real affection and concern for the spider. But if he thinks he is in love with the spider then pathology has taken over.

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Now it is even more absurd for God to be in love with a creature than it is for the prisoner to be in love with the spider. The gulf is absolute; there is, it seems, no way in which a creature can be equal to God, no way therefore in which a creature can be loved by God in the full sense, in the adult sense in which we fleetingly achieve love, a love between equals. God therefore seems confined to an infantile relationship of authority to his creatures, he is not capable of the self-abandonment that love involves, there is no one to whom he could abandon himself. In this sense surely we are more adult, more mature than God. And this is what Nietzsche saw and that is why, since Nietzsche, bourgeois Europe has been atheist; its religion, it seems, has lingered on only as a form of infantilism. Religion, like childhood, is charming, perhaps more suitable for women, anyway for unliberated women, but has to be regretfully put aside when we enter the adult world — or thankfully put aside, depending on the kind of childhood we envisage.

For God, the creator and manipulator of the world, cannot himself, it seems, be other than a vast omnipotent baby, unable to grow up, unable to abandon himself in love. Nietzsche, and, from a different starting point, Karl Marx, saw that to accept this God was to accept a kind of slavery. However kind and good God might be, we were ultimately his servants; perhaps well-treated servants or slaves, perhaps slaves compassionately forgiven and rewarded with the life of heaven, but still fundamentally slaves. If you believe that the essence of the human is freedom then you cannot accept this benign slave-master of a God. The heart of modern atheism, certainly the heart of Marxist atheism, lies in the rejection of this master-slave relationship. God is not rejected because he is evil or cruel but because he is alienating and paternalist; he is rejected not in the name of human happiness but in the name of human freedom.

Now to a Christian the interesting thing is that this God who is rejected by the modern atheist is in fact pre-christian, it is just this God that is abandoned first by the Ten Commandments and then by Jesus. The central thing that Jesus says is something he says about himself; it is that the Father *loves* him. His primary announcement is that the Father *is*, after all, capable of love, that after all God *has* grown up. God is capable of love and he, Jesus, is the object of that love. Of course God cannot love the creature as such, there could be no foundation of equality there. But Jesus announces himself as the beloved of the Father and this reveals a depth in *him* that is beyond creaturehood. *To say that Jesus is divine and to say that God is capable of love is to proclaim one and the same doctrine.* Any unitarian view of God, or Arian view of Christ, immediately destroys the possibility of divine love — I mean divine love in the serious adult

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sense. We are left with a benign dictator, what Bishop John Robinson in *Honest to God* called a 'Top Person.' It is only the doctrine of the divinity of Christ (and thus the doctrine of the Trinity) that makes possible the astounding and daring idea that God can after all genuinely love. He is in love with the Son, and the exchange of divine love between them is the Holy Spirit.

Of course it remains that God cannot love his creatures as such — he can merely be kind to them. The adult love of God belongs within the Trinitarian life of the Godhead, the Father can only love what is divine. But as Jesus announces that God is grown up, that he can love, he does so by announcing that *he* is loved by the Father and simultaneously announces that *we* are taken up into this love. (There is no gap between God in himself and God-for-me.) God cannot, of course, love us as *creatures*, but 'in Christ' we are taken up into the exchange of love between the Father and the incarnate and human Son, we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we become part of the divine life. We call this 'grace.' By grace we ourselves share in the divine and that is how God can love us.

As creatures, as having our human nature, we cannot be loved by God, only kindly treated, but because we are given a share in the life of Christ, because we are filled with the Spirit, because we have grace, we are divine, and, like Christ, we are the beloved of God. Well, not just *like* Christ; the Father loves us in the very love that he has for Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

Notice that, so far, we have not said anything about sin. It is not precisely because we are *sinners* that God cannot love us. It is because we are creatures. We need not only to be forgiven from sin but to be divinised from simple creaturehood. Though of course sin is nothing but our deliberate settling for simple creaturehood, settling for what we are, for what we can achieve, closing ourselves off and rejecting the gift of God's love, the adventure of transcendence, the risks of divinity.

So with Christianity God ceases to be primarily the creator God, Lord of the universe. The gospel is that he is *primarily* the lover of Jesus Christ. With Christianity the ultimate activity is not making or doing, creating, but *love*. The primary reality, the reality that lies at the very depth of humanity, the divine reality is not even creativity, but love.

So the gospel announces that our fundamental relationship to God is not that of creature to creator — a relationship which cannot but be one of servant to master. For the gospel, our fundamental relationship is that of lovers, of lovers in equality. We have this equality to the Father because we are given a share in the life of Christ.

In Jesus we have one who, of course, owes his being to the

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Father, but one who is not created but loved into existence; for, of course, it is not that the Son first exists and then is loved by the Father, his divine existence *is* for him eternally to be loved by the Father. This is what Jesus announces to us: that the very centre and heart of his being is his being loved by the Father, he exists only in this relationship to the Father. When he searches into his own identity, when he asks himself 'Who am I?' he finds that the ultimate thing about him is the Father's love. And by grace, by our receiving the Holy Spirit, by our sharing in the death and life of Christ, this becomes the ultimate thing *about us* too. Not that we are created, but that we are loved. We are not objects of the Godhead, but, by being in Christ, we are *within* the Godhead. The difference between our divinity, our divinisation through grace, and the divinity of Christ himself is *just* that our divinity is a *gift* from the Father through Christ, the gift we call the Holy Spirit. This is the precise meaning of the statement that it is grace that makes us free. This does not mean that without grace we are incapable of free decisions; it means that without grace we are stuck in a servant/master relationship to God (and an unfaithful servant at that) instead of participating in the divine life itself. Our freedom in this sense is precisely the 'glorious freedom of the *children* of God' — where 'children' is contrasted not with adults but with 'servants of the household.' Without this divine life we are, as Paul puts it, '*under* the law' — he means the moral law of God. Without this divine life we would have to live according to *rules* laid down by our master, our creator. Excellent rules, of course; none other than the way of life that would lead to human flourishing and fulfilment and happiness, liberated from idolatry and all the gods, but nonetheless rules laid down by our master and maker. To live ultimately *under* law in this sense, even a good law, is in the end to be a slave. There is of course nothing wrong with laws, they are a necessary part of social life, but to be obedient to a law is not, for the gospel, the essence of man, the deepest thing about him. The essence of man is freedom. It is a mysterious fact about human beings that even to conform to the law of our own being is to be restricted. We naturally tend beyond ourselves.

Without grace we are subject to law, slaves to the lawmaker; but more than that: since as a matter of history we cannot be without grace except by rejecting it, since we cannot in fact be without grace except through sin, we are not only slaves but guilty slaves. The illusory God that we envisage when we depart from grace is the God of righteous wrath, the punitive avenging God — the projection of our guilt into the skies. It makes little or no difference whether we think of this God as real or unreal, whether we are in this sense atheists or not (for, as I say, modern atheism is precisely the rejection of this supreme boss). Faith in the Christian sense springs only from our being in *grace*, from our

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own sharing into the divine life. The man who has rejected grace can only envisage God in a distorted punitive form. What we call the forgiveness of sin is nothing other than our being given the gift of shifting from the punitive image of God to a true vision of the God who is totally in love with us, who is absolutely and unconditionally loving, who loves us whether we are sinners or not. But to realise this, to believe this, is to be freed from sin.

So with the gospel we move from seeing God primarily as creator, as author of the world and hence of the natural and moral order of the world, to seeing the Trinitarian life of God which we are called to share. We see God as primarily engaged in loving and only secondarily concerned with creating.

But we must not lose sight of the creative side of God, for on this hangs the autonomy of our own nature. We are not just divine; we are divinised *human beings* and human nature has its own reality and autonomy. We may be saved, in one sense, by faith alone, but we certainly do not live by faith alone; we live also by human communication, human society, by language and intelligence, by human affection, by human contrivance. It is, I suppose, a specially Catholic and, I think, Jewish thing to defend the autonomy and rights of the nature in which we were created, to reject any view that exalts the importance of grace at the expense of seeing nothing in nature, of seeing nature as totally corrupt.

To acknowledge the Trinitarian Godhead then is not to deny God as creator, it is simply to refuse to *settle* for God as creator, it is to refuse to be *content with* a creature/creator, slave/master relationship with God. This sets us the task of accommodating the creator God within the context of the Trinitarian God of love. From the standpoint of our shared divinity we can see the act of creation in the perspective of the redemption, in the perspective of our call to divine life. We can see the act of creation as itself an act of love.

For this purpose it may be more helpful to picture God as space rather than as an object. Think for a moment about space. In the material world space is, of course, a relative concept, relative in fact to the size of our bodies and the range of our senses. We are accustomed, quite rightly, to contrast the solid matter of the earth with the vacant interstellar spaces. But, apart from the fact that, after a few miles down, the earth is mainly liquid anyway, we are all familiar with the idea that, molecularly speaking, solids are mostly empty space and, conversely, there is presumably a macroscopic view from which our galaxies constitute the particles of a solid. Space then is a merely relative concept referring to the obviousness or relative unobviousness of the contact between things. Absolutely speaking *all things are in contact*, over a greater or less distance. I am interested here in a

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metaphor, you will understand. So far as our impersonal context is concerned we are hemmed in by things. What provides us with space, real free space, is other people, the love we receive from others.

To love others is: we can put it two ways: we can say it is to give them themselves or we can say it is to give them nothing — the priceless gift of nothing, which means space in which to move freely, to grow and become themselves. Every gift we give to others (apart from the gift of ourselves) imposes something upon them — they have about them something of ours, if it is only a new tie or a drink. But love, which is the gift of ourselves, does not *add* anything to them from outside, it is the gift of the space in which they can be themselves. You can see this quite clearly in the love of parents for children, especially if we contrast it with counterfeit love and possessiveness. Children with genuinely loving parents are able to be free, they are secure enough to be spontaneous, to be really themselves. Without this love they are left to the impersonal world which hems them in and ties them down. They haven't got room to breathe. Nothing, empty space, is not what we start from, we cannot take it for granted as though it would be there anyway. *Nothing* is very precious and is created by persons for each other, it is the pre-requisite of freedom. God in this sense is the great primordial source of nothing. I should say, I suppose, that we *should* 'take it for granted' because it always has to be *granted*. And only if it is granted can we grow into ourselves. We receive ourselves at each other's hands. Not because we make and mould each other, but because we let each other be. Nature will not let you be. Only persons can let you be.

Love of course is very similar to indifference, even though it is as different as anything could be. Indifference is the caricature of love. Indifference says: 'I don't *care* what he does.' Love says: 'I don't care *what* he does.' The picture I drew earlier of the absolutely unconditionally loving God who loves us whether we are sinners or not, could be caricatured as a God of indifference, for whom sin does not matter. But this God of indifference would in fact be merely the other side of the punitive God, it would not be far from the atheism which rejects the punitive God and yet has never come across the loving Trinitarian Godhead.

How to discern the immense abyss between love and indifference, I won't go into now. It's a gap that is a millimetre wide and a thousand miles deep. It is just that indifference is a way of *protecting* yourself while love is a way of *risking* yourself so that another can *be*.

Once we have seen how the gift of love, the gift of yourself, can, by giving space, by giving nothing, enhance the life and freedom of others, we can see how love is a *source* of life, and we can at least

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pretend to ourselves that we can see what might be meant by 'being loved into being,' the procession of the Son from the Father.

But creation too is an act of love, it is the giving of a world in which things and ourselves can be. Creation too, as we saw, is not an interference with things. Any other kind of making, any making within the world *changes* things, but creation obviously does not change anything, or add anything to things; it makes things to be what they are, it does not make them any different. It should be clear that if we take the notion of creation seriously we cannot think that creation leaves any vestiges in things. Creation unlike other causal actions does not just make things to be like this instead of like that; it makes them to *be* rather than not to be at all.

Creation, then, does not make any difference to things. If you like, it makes *all* the difference, but you cannot expect to find a 'created look' about things. The effect of creation is just that things are there, being themselves, instead of nothing. Creation is, of course, an unintelligible notion. I mean it is unintelligible in the sense that God is unintelligible. It is a mystery. Not that the notion is self-contradictory, but it involves extrapolating from what we *can* understand to what we are only trying to understand. To be created is to exist instead of nothing; but the notion of 'nothing' is itself a mystery unintelligible to us.

Unless we grasp the truth that creation means leaving the world to be itself, to run itself by its own scientific laws so that things behave in accordance with their own natures and not at the arbitrary behest of some god, we shall never begin to understand that the Lord we worship is not a god but the unknown reason why there is anything instead of nothing. We know of God not by understanding him but by recognising that there are questions which impose themselves on us to which we reach out to answer but cannot yet. In this phase of grace, in this life so far, we cannot see an answer to our question — only that it is a genuine question demanding an answer — in this era we can have no concept of God. As Aquinas said, 'We cannot know God in himself, we know him only from his effects.' We live only in faith not in seeing for ourselves. Even the revelation of God's Son as a human being is just the greatest of the effects of God amongst his creatures. Through him we have faith that all these effects are the works of God's love for us. We will see God when we no longer have faith but clear knowledge, when we have died with Christ and so shared in his resurrection, to share in the eternal life of the Trinity of knowledge and love, the life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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