



# Do We Need a NEW GOD?—A debate

## *I—The Passing of Supernaturalism*

by **HARRY ELMER BARNES**

**T**HE QUESTION of a new and more adequate conception of God involves so many potentially relevant issues that any discussion of the subject within the limitations of space imposed renders it necessary to select with care the essential elements in the case. Our Fundamentalist friends have furnished us with a concise epitome of what they regard as the essence of contemporary orthodoxy. The writer will attempt to formulate in

equally brief and specific form what appear to him to be the vital arguments of modern scholarship against orthodox supernatural religion. These arguments — and it seems that the Modernists will have to concede them if they expect Modernism to receive the benediction of informed and educated persons in the second quarter of the twentieth century — are the following:

1. That the question of a new conception of God is of vital social significance, because upon

**D**R. HARRY ELMER BARNES, who is a Professor of Sociology at Smith College, here enlarges upon the arguments he presented before the last meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. At that time his opinions aroused a storm of comment all over the country, but no opportunity was given him to debate the question with those who so violently disagreed with him. That opportunity is now provided, and **CANON WILLIAM SHEAFE CHASE**, an Episcopal minister, meets Dr. Barnes on his own ground and defends the Christian religion and its God from his spirited attack.

it hinges our whole philosophy of the good life and our attitude toward a multitude of social and cultural issues.

2. That the Biblical God, Yahweh of the Hebrews, has been thoroughly undermined and discredited by the progress of natural science, Biblical scholarship, and cultural history.

3. That the conventional orthodox view of Jesus Christ as the literal “only begotten son of God” and a peerless and unique religious

teacher is undermined as certainly and completely by the state of contemporary knowledge as is the Hebrew God, Yahweh.

4. That the task of constructing, in the disciplined human imagination, a conception of God compatible with the framework and perspective of modern knowledge is so difficult and baffling as to be, for all practical purposes, futile.

5. That any conception of God compatible with modern knowledge would be so vague and

indefinite as to be of no direct utility with reference to a personal religion for man here on earth.

6. That we must surrender any belief in literal immortality, whether physical or spiritual.

7. That the basic categories of the old theology relative to spiritual entities — the soul, sin, and the like — must be surrendered and replaced by determinate secular concepts.

8. That the cause of Modernism will be unnecessarily damaged, if not, indeed, fatally discredited, by clinging to vulnerable and untenable vestiges of the old theology.

9. That religion is probably essential in any complete scheme of social idealism and social control; but in order to possess any validity and permanence in the present order, it must rest upon a thoroughly secular basis and found its attitudes and policies upon the discoveries of the natural and social sciences and æsthetics.

**T**HE QUESTION of a new conception of God is important, in the first place, because it has a direct relationship to our philosophy of life and our resulting social practices. In the orthodox scheme of things man is looked upon as essentially a theological or spiritual entity, who should be concerned primarily with saving his immortal soul and securing an eternal life in the world to come. Society is viewed as the earthly equipment essential for testing out the fitness of man for this future salvation. Social codes and institutions are believed to be divinely revealed, and hence, above legitimate criticism by man. Human deeds are judged primarily in relation to the supposed will of God, rather than with reference to their effect upon man's condition here on earth. The good life is not regarded as that which will make man more happy here and now, but that form of conduct which will make future salvation more certain.

Modern science and secularism repudiate all this. From now on we must realize that human problems are the only valid concern of man, and that the increase of his earthly happiness is the only important issue which confronts him. We may survey the heavens and thereby cultivate terrestrial humility and cosmic reverence, but in our life aspirations and achievements we are thrown back exclusively upon our earthly

habitat. Society cannot continue to be regarded as the testing ground for the scheme of salvation; it must be viewed as the means whereby man may, through coöperative endeavor, work out institutions and cultural traits designed to make his mundane existence ever more efficient, decent, happy, and beautiful. The criteria of the good life must be sought in the relative contribution of every human act and policy toward the realization of this mundane and human ideal. In the new outlook there can be no good but human desires and their satisfaction, though we must recognize that the satisfaction of desires may well express itself in ever higher forms of manifestation and may be guided ever more perfectly by science and æsthetics.

Once this secular and humanistic approach is adopted, the trained observer in modern society cannot fail to discern a multitude of ways in which orthodox religion obstructs the free play of human intelligence and decreases human happiness. Indeed, it may be held, in agreement with Lucretius, that no other single factor is so comprehensive in its disastrous influence upon mankind.

The secular scientist looks upon the great volume of religious fears and superstitions and sees that they have not the slightest scientific validity; nevertheless, they continue to terrorize millions. He notes the great wealth accumulated by those ecclesiastical organizations devoted to exploiting superstitions and imaginary fears, and must reflect upon what might be done with such resources of money and potential intelligence in advancing the secular welfare of mankind — indeed, in promoting a sane, secular religion. He considers the unhealthy and unhappy mental states which afflict millions in America to-day, because of false theories of life and conduct which were inculcated in earlier ages when man was concerned solely with salvation, and when he had no scientific means of understanding what constitutes a healthy and happy life here on earth.

The secular commentator discovers families in dire poverty and the world approaching the saturation point in population growth, which, by accentuating the bare struggle for brute existence, may well turn humanity back into barbarism — all because of an archaic religious prejudice against birth control. He observes

unscrupulous employers exploiting supernatural religion as a socio-economic anæsthetic, thus enabling them to escape their decent and just obligation to pay fair wages and grant a humane working day. By aiding the priesthood in their effort to perpetuate belief in supernaturalism and other-worldliness, these employers are reasonably successful in inducing laborers to accept their harsh and miserable life here on earth in the hope of better things in heaven.

The candid observer of present conditions must further note our barbarous divorce laws, which degrade the institution of marriage and rob hundreds of thousands of families of freedom, sentiment, and independence. They make it necessary to deal with the family as a theological entity rather than a social institution. Likewise, he cannot ignore a fanatical Prohibition scheme, parading under the guise of "a noble experiment," but actually debauching American morals and political loyalty, stimulating crime, and paralyzing our system of criminal justice — with results as fatal to real temperance as to civilized modes of utilizing alcohol in promoting human happiness. If, in addition to scientific knowledge and acumen, the scientist possesses some degree of æsthetic appreciation, he must also deplore the ugliness, brutality, and wastes which are the inevitable and inseparable accompaniment and by-product of the superstitions, prejudices, and solemnity of orthodox, supernatural religion and its Puritanical proclivities.

For these reasons it is apparent that the orthodox conception of God and its associated attitudes and practices is not a mere metaphysical and academic question; it raises the most fundamental issue which has ever faced man from the pre-Lucretian days to the post-Ingersoll epoch.

**M**ODERN astronomy and astrophysical concepts have completely and finally undermined the pretensions of Yahweh, the Biblical God, who was conceived and elaborated by primitive-minded peoples in an age devoid of scientific knowledge, and at a time when geocentric views everywhere prevailed. In our age, in which the cosmos is conceived by scientists in terms of billions of light years, there is no place, other than historical, for a deity who was in-

vented at a time when this earth was looked upon as a small bit of flat turf around the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, and the heavens were regarded as an inverted blue bowl, studded with luminaries, a few miles from the earth.

Even more disconcerting have been the results of Biblical criticism and cultural history. These have shown that there is nothing basically unique in the Jewish religion, which was a branch of the Semitic cults; and that Yahweh was taken by Moses from the Kenites along with his wife, the daughter of Jethro the Kenite. Crude pastoral deities like the Old Testament Yahweh have existed by the score, and Yahweh owed his remarkable reputation to the dramatic history of the Jewish people who had adopted him.

Biblical criticism has thoroughly discredited the orthodox view of the Bible as a unique religious book, directly and literally dictated by Yahweh to Moses and other faithful scribes. We now know that it was written by scores of human authors at different times and for different purposes, and that it cannot be regarded as divinely inspired to any greater degree than any other literary product of the ages which produced it. Therefore, the history of religions and textual scholarship sweep away the pretensions of Yahweh to being the "Lord of Hosts" as effectively as astrophysics dismantles his claim to being the creative and directive principle of the cosmos.

It is difficult to see how any informed, logical, and courageous person can doubt that astrophysics, history, and Biblical criticism wreak equal havoc with the orthodox view of Jesus as the "only begotten son of God" and a religious teacher of unique authority and relevance for all subsequent ages of man. The writer advances this assertion for the following reasons:

(1) The whole notion of Jesus as the "only begotten son of God" is completely foreign to, and incompatible with, the perspective of the cosmos now well established by modern astronomy, and the thesis of the Virgin birth is contradicted by every tenet of modern genetics. (2) The historical background of Jesus' mission — the Messianic hope of the Jews — was directly linked up with Yahweh and Biblical lore. (3) Jesus owed his original reputation and status very literally to the fact that he was regarded by his believers as the son of

Yahweh, his followers having no comprehension whatever of a cosmic deity. (4) When viewed in a secular sense, there is nothing unique in the teachings assigned to Jesus, while the cosmology of Lucretius, the moral conceptions of Plato, and the ethics of Aristotle far transcend the doctrines of Jesus in precision of statement, in grandeur of design, and in solidity of substance. (5) We have but the most fragmentary knowledge of the teachings of Jesus, even if we accept as authentic every word attributed to him in the synoptic Gospels. (6) The opinions and doctrines attributed to Jesus by the orthodox are often indeterminate and contradictory on the most vital issues, such as whether he had in mind the establishment of a secular utopia here on earth or a spiritual assemblage of saints in the world to come. (7) He was an uneducated man who lived a very simple and restricted life in a backward and provincial economy two thousand years ago; hence he was totally unfamiliar with modern social and economic conditions, and with the natural and social science of today. (8) Therefore, he was in no sense prepared to give out competent opinions to guide mankind in the twentieth century.

Still further, even if we were to accept the orthodox view of the status and virtues of Jesus, this would in no sense constitute any justification and vindication of orthodox Christianity, whether Catholic or Protestant. By the time of St. Augustine what passed for Christianity would have been as novel and perplexing to Jesus as it would have been to Zoroaster, Confucius, or Buddha. Christianity was not a faith "once for all delivered to the saints" by Jesus, but one of the most syncretistic or composite of religions. It derived its basic practices, including many of the sacraments, from the religious beliefs and rites of primitive man; its cosmogony and historical philosophy from the Jews; its Messianic background from the Egyptians and Jews; its theology from the Greeks; its cosmic philosophy, eschatology, and other-worldliness from the Persians; its impurity complex from the ascetic strains in Judaism, the oriental mystery cults, and Neoplatonism; its reliance upon faith and credulity from Neoplatonism; its ritual and liturgy — even the sacrament of the mass — from the pagan mystery cults; its methods of preaching from the pagan rhetoricians; and its

organization, law, and financial system from the Roman Empire. Protestants cannot escape from the deadly logic of these historical facts by contending that Luther, Calvin, Knox, Zwingli, and Wesley were more Christlike in their intellectual perspective and moral ideals than Jerome, Augustine, or Aquinas.

It would appear, therefore, that any well-informed Modernist can speak upon any relevant contemporary subject with far more authority than Jesus. For a Modernist to invoke Yahweh in his sermons and to base his preaching upon the synoptic Gospels is as absurd as it would be if a physician in the year 1929 prescribed insulin for diabetes only after offering an earnest incantation to Æsculapius and then reading at length from Hippocrates or Galen. The Modernist cannot logically taunt Mr. Bryan or Dr. Straton for their views on Yahweh and then himself cling to the conventional view that Jesus was unique as a religious and moral teacher. Yahweh and Jesus are a theological couplet and a cultural complex that stand or fall together.

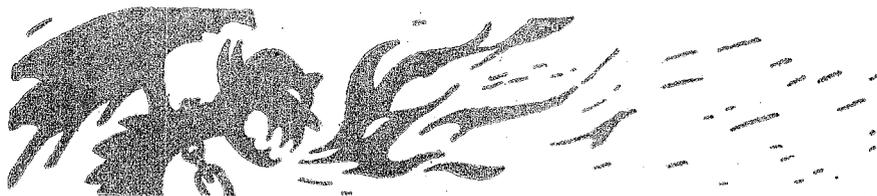
**T**HE PROSPECT of man's being able to reconstruct God in the light of modern science is slight indeed. The whole enterprise is fundamentally nothing but a rationalized vestige of the Yahweh complex. It rests upon the wholly mundane and anthropomorphic conception that all things in the cosmos must have a maker and a directive principle — an assumption the truth of which we have no means of demonstrating. The categories and methods with which we approach the problem are only human improvisations — limited instruments with which we hope to fathom issues and problems of an altogether different order and nature. We assume that the cerebral power in the human cortex is equal to isolating, observing, and estimating the infinite. The very facts of the extent and complexity of the cosmos, in the light of which the new conception of God must be established, are ever becoming more and more baffling to the human mind, if, indeed, they have not already passed the point where they can be intelligently assimilated and interpreted by man.

Yet, recent discoveries indicate that we are only in the infancy of our potential discoveries as to the scope and content of the cosmos. The

intricacy of physical matter and modern theories of the atom and electron are as impressive as the cosmos; but, as Professor Eddington has well reminded us, they throw no direct light upon the question of God. Einstein has shown that energy is the physical ultimate of science and has suggested that time and space are only manifestations of energy; but this is no aid to precise theism.

Whether or not man will ever be able intelligently to conceive of God in terms of the new cosmology and physical chemistry, it is certain that any conception which could emerge from such postulates and such a quest

of dependence upon God is a conditioned-response, produced by our past tendency to project into our interpretation of God the subjective attitudes which are associated in earthly life with parents and the domestic complex. No child brought up independent of the God-complex would have any sense of dependence upon God, and an ever increasing number of people are coming to be able to live happily and adequately without any sense of cosmic support from God. Even more, people are becoming capable of supporting vital religious movements entirely divorced from any belief in God.



would be far too remote, indefinite, and impersonal to serve as the basis for any practical, personal, and social religion. It would, at best, be nothing more than the basis for generalized cosmic reverence — which may be secured and conceded without any specific conception of God.

In short, the conception of God savors so much of the older anthropomorphic theism, carries with it so many archaic and unpleasant associations, and is so incapable of definite formulation in the light of contemporary knowledge, that we may probably agree with Dr. Dietrich — the leader of Unitarian Humanism — that it is best for a modernized religion to drop the God-conception altogether. Yet the quest for God is a noble venture, certainly far more lofty than the search for an additional million dollars or a high political office, and we can cast no aspersions upon those who desire to carry on this type of exploration. It will doubtless captivate many superior intellects as long as man exists on the earth. Manifestly, in so far as the quest for the new cosmic God helps on the abandonment of Yahweh, it will be a great gain for civilization and humanity.

Not only is God apparently indeterminate and irrelevant to religion in the new perspective, but it is also evident that a sense of the reality of God and a conviction of our ability to lean upon Him for cosmic support is not an inherent necessity of human nature. The sense

Many contend that the God question is practically subordinate to the problem of acquiring a new and adequate religion. The writer heartily concedes this contention, but he maintains that no adequate secular religion can be secured until we have disposed once and for all of the Biblical God and the supernatural orientation associated with Yahweh and all his works.

**T**HE BELIEF in immortality cannot be squared with modern scientific facts. The conception arose in the undisciplined imagination of primitives. The Christian view of heaven and hell was derived from the Persians and has no more standing than any other aspect of the folklore and superstitions of ancient Persian culture. Modern physiological chemistry and physiological psychology have shown the sheer impossibility of perpetuating psychic life after the intervention of the chemical change known as death. If we have any immortality, it can be only the immortality of the germ-plasm and the immortality of our earthly achievements. If this is true, then it is worse than futile to govern our conduct by considerations designed to help us escape hell and attain heaven.

The natural and social scientist would also insist upon relinquishing still another ancient animistic conception — namely, the category of "sin." Sin connotes a supernatural situation

— a violation of the specifically revealed will of God. To-day, when there is no means of proving the very existence of God, to say nothing of His nature and express will, it is obvious that we do not possess the prerequisites of sinning. This outworn term should be abolished and all forms of anti-social action should be determined and classified according to their mundane nature and consequences. No act can be regarded as bad or harmful, no matter how ancient or deep-seated the religious taboo against it, which does not diminish human happiness and the beauty of life. Socially harmful acts should be rechristened with wholly

Moreover, and this is fundamental, theological Modernism is of no value unless it carries with it sociological Modernism. It avails a Modernist clergyman nothing to reject Yahweh and yet cling desperately to the moral code which owes its validity and sanctity to the fact that it was supposed to have been revealed and dictated by Yahweh. There are to-day three major socio-religious groups in America: (1) Fundamentalists, who accept the Yahweh-complex and logically control their conduct with reference to the hope of attaining heaven and avoiding hell; (2) the great majority of Modernists, who reject Yahweh and



secular terms such as *crime* and *immorality*.

The notion of sin and the supernatural origin of morality only confuses, complicates, and obstructs clear and honest thinking in the premises. Psychiatrists have long since shown that the sense of sin is but a commonplace conditioned-response — the product of post-adolescent emotional development. It is even less necessary to comment upon the legend that man is a base, vile, and sinful being because of the “fall of man” in Paradise. This is one of the most primitive strains in Bible lore, with less scientific and historical standing than the Yahweh myth. Man may not rank high compared with some hypothetical inhabitants of other celestial bodies, but he is the best exhibit that has thus far appeared on our planet, and it behooves us to make the most of our heritage instead of vilifying our traits.

If Modernism is to save religion, it must surrender such of its present tenets as do not square with those scientific discoveries and scholarly researches which are not open to challenge. If it compromises and wavers, it is bound to lose its most intelligent and indispensable supporters; for those who might constitute the core of its forces will be driven out of the churches to seek intellectual freedom and consistency elsewhere. It profits Modernism nothing to abandon one sinking craft to take refuge on another that is just as certainly foundering.

eschatology, but support the Fundamentalist code of life and behave *exactly* as though they accepted Fundamentalist theology; (3) the secular Modernists and the non-religious groups, who reject the Yahweh-complex and all its associations and implications, and are attempting to construct a code of conduct on the basis of science and æsthetics which will be wholly devoted to producing a better life for man here on earth.

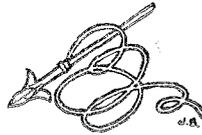
**T**HE WRITER believes that if humanity and civilization are to be preserved, we must have collaboration between science and a dynamic secular religion. He readily concedes that Bertrand Russell, John B. Watson, James Harvey Robinson, Clarence Darrow, and George Dorsey have no need of God or religion in order to behave in a seemly fashion; but with half of the American population falling below the intellectual level of the dull normal type, we shall certainly require some form of social control beyond the appeal to pure intelligence. Further, there are many capable persons more sensitive to æsthetic considerations than to matters of cold intelligence. For these two types, a social institution which could exploit human emotions and enlist them in support of just and decent causes will prove indispensable. Such a secular religion would, of course, obtain its factual guidance from

science — natural and social; but it would aid science in the social application of such facts. In short, the new religion, if sound and practicable, must rest upon a thoroughly secular basis, must secure its facts from science, and must conceive its ideals in terms of sociology and æsthetics. It must join forces with the new queen of the sciences — that is to say, mental hygiene.

Some exponents of religion might hold that this scheme only makes allowance for man as man, and they would contend that religion endeavors to make us something “more than man.” The writer would join issue directly on this point. In the light of the facts about our inherent nature, no rational person can hope to make man more than he is. It is a sufficient challenge and task to be able to bring out the best that is in man. This is an achievement

which has never been attained thus far in human history. Further, if orthodox religion has actually endeavored to “make us something more than ourselves,” it has failed signally, and, in reality, has almost invariably made us far less than ourselves.

Religion must abandon its hopeless effort to adapt ancient categories and concepts to new knowledge of entirely different nature and connotation. Rather, it must base its reconstruction upon the facts of the cosmos, of the world, and of man as we now know them, and then determine what valid religious concepts and practices can be worked out in harmony with the new knowledge and perspective. Never has there been a more pertinent example of the futility of attempting to force new wine into old bottles than we find in conservative Modernist apologetic.



## ***II—The Follies of Pseudo-Science***

**by WILLIAM SHEAFE CHASE, D.D.**

**I**N DEFENDING the orthodox conception of God against the attack of Professor Barnes, I wish to base my argument upon three specific points:

1. That the orthodox conception of God is necessary for the full-orbed development and real happiness of humanity, because it appeals to and develops the highest and best in human beings.

2. That it is necessary for the highest welfare of science and morality, because it incites a self-sacrificing loyalty to truth, righteousness, and love.

3. That it is necessary to promote social progress, because it unites individuals, nations, races, and religions upon the basis of brotherhood, as children of the one Heavenly Father.

Jesus of Nazareth gave the best possible conception of God. He gave it by His teaching, by His life and death, and by spiritually dwelling in the hearts of those who accept

Him. Science has never given us a better definition of God, and never can, than Jesus did when He said: “God is a Spirit, and they who worship Him must worship in Spirit and in Truth.” Jesus did not say that God is spirit (a vague general influence), but *a Spirit* (a personality). Those who worship Him must worship Him as a personality and with their personalities. As Dr. William Adams Brown puts it in his recent book, *Beliefs that Matter*—one of the best statements of the Christian religion written for laymen: “The permanent elements of the Christian conception of God are creative energy, indwelling spirit, ideal personality, each interpreted and illustrated by the life, the teaching, and the character of Jesus Christ.”

But Professor Barnes believes this is inadequate. He says we must have a new conception of God. Why, then, does he evade the issue? Instead of showing *why* we need a new con-