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HAVE YOU A GOD?
WHAT IS HE LIKE?

MARTIN J.
SCOTT, S.J.

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HAVE YOU A GOD?

What Is He Like?

Martin J. Scott, S.J.

My dear sir, if you don't believe in God, give me your reason for it.

Oh, there are lots of reasons. Don't bother me. If you believe, all right, but let's not argue about it.

All right, if you want it that way. But say, just what do you understand by the word *God*?

The same as everybody else. But let's not go into that.

Very well. Only I've been wondering how a man of your learning and experience can hold the views you do about God.

Is that so? Well, let me tell you that I wonder how a man of your sense in ordinary matters can hold on to the worn-out notions of the past.

That's a crusher, but it does not meet the issue. Now, frankly, will you tell me what you mean by the term *God*?

Well, by the word *God*, as ordinarily used, people understand the power, whatever it is, that is responsible for the existence of the world.

Capital! I knew if we got down to brass tacks we'd get somewhere. The trouble with most discussions is that neither party has a clear notion of what the other party means. That's why a clear definition of terms is the basis of a right understanding.

Well, now that you know what I mean by the term *God*, what's next?

When you say you believe in God as the power responsible for the universe, what is the nature of that power?

That, no one can tell, except that it's not a personal being.

If not personal, what may it be?

It may be some unknowable force, or perhaps chance, or matter of some kind.

Now we're getting somewhere. You say, to begin with, that the *power* is unknowable. Let's see. You understand, of course, that we may know a good deal about a certain thing without knowing all about it. Edison knew a good deal about electricity, for instance, from its effects, even though he did not

know all about it. But he knew enough to enable him to benefit the world by his knowledge of it. In the same way, we may not know all about this *power*, but from its manifestations, we may know a good deal about it.

You mean we may speculate about it, in which case my guess is as good as yours, and my theory is that we can know nothing definite about it.

On the contrary, if you are willing to listen, and are open to conviction, I am certain that I can show you that we may know certain very definite things about the Power which is responsible for this world of ours.

What things, for instance?

Well, to begin with the most important, it can be shown definitely that this Power is a person.

Oh, you may as well stop right there. You don't mean to say that the great scientists who deny that there is a personal God are wrong?

Until Pasteur demonstrated the contrary, great scientists were wrong about spontaneous generation, which was something in their own line. And why shouldn't they be wrong about what is not in their own line? Some of the scientists, who have never given serious thought to the study of religion, make

positive statements about it which would discredit them if they spoke in the same way about other things not in their special sphere. Because a man is a great surgeon, it does not follow that his judgment on art or architecture is to be accepted. So let's look into this matter reasonably, and judge it, not by someone's say-so, but by sound reasoning.

All right, go ahead, let's see what you have up your sleeve.

First, I'm going to show that the Power which is responsible for the existence of the world is a person.

I hope you won't think I'm butting in if I ask you just what you mean by a person?

I'm glad you've asked me that, for it shows that you agree to what I said about defining terms. By the word *person* is meant an intelligent being. For instance, you would not call a very clever dog a person, but you would call a child of six a person.

Do you deny that a dog has intelligence?

I certainly do. A dog has instinct, given by its Maker to direct it unerringly for its own destiny. Along its own line, it may be superior to man, but its line never varies except when man teaches or directs it. No animal has ever naturally varied its procedure. Some other time we'll go into this matter more deeply.

Very well. By a person you mean an intelligent being. Now show me that this Power we're considering is an intelligent being.

There are various ways of knowing what a thing is. Sometimes we know what a thing is by observation, as for instance, a mountain, a river, a house. Other things we know by their effects, as for instance, the power of dynamite or the genius of a composer or artist. To look at Shakespeare, no one could know that he was one of the greatest dramatists of all time, but on reading *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, it would be at once evident that he was one of the greatest geniuses the world has known.

So with regard to Edison. No one merely beholding him would know what an inventive wizard he was. But his works reveal his marvelous mind, which itself is not perceptible by the senses.

In the same way, by the works of the Power which is responsible for the existence of the universe, we may know that it is an intelligent being, that is, a Person.

I'm interested. Would you mind developing this point a little further?

I shall be only too glad to do so. Doubtless you will admit that design requires a designer, and that the universe manifests marvelous design. A designer must be an intelligent being. Hence we conclude that the Power which produced the universe is an intelligent being, that is, a Person.

Couldn't *chance* account for the universe? Very many distinguished thinkers believe that all that we behold could be brought about by *chance*.

That's a fair question, and the answer is that, since *chance* is a blind force, it could not design anything. In order to produce a designed something, it is necessary first of all to have a notion or idea of the thing to be designed. This thing does not yet exist, hence it must be in the mind of the designer in order to work toward its production. This requires the selection and adaptation of various things to a definite end not perceptible by the senses. It follows that no merely material substance can deal with what is at the time non-existent, namely, the end in view which directs the designer to the accomplishment of his purpose.

Chance, being a blind force, cannot select, adapt and combine various things to form a definite something, nor can anything purely material do so. Hence it is evident that neither chance nor sole matter can conceive and bring into effect a design. It remains that the designer must be a being possessed of something more than matter, and we call this something the soul or mind or intelligence. And since an intelligent being is a person, we know that the designer of the universe is a Person. This Person we call God.

Say, old man, I've got to hand it to you. You have certainly got me on your hook. But maybe it's because I'm not up in these matters that you win out. Perhaps if I were a lawyer I'd be able to wriggle off the hook.

Fine! I'm glad you referred to the law, because one of the strongest reasons for believing in a personal God is drawn from the nature of law.

Let's hear it, if you don't mind.

The reasoning runs thus: Law supposes a lawgiver. The universe is under law, therefore under a lawgiver. A lawgiver is an intelligent being, hence a person, whom we call God.

What do you mean by the universe being under law?

If you have studied physics or chemistry or astronomy, you know that everything in the visible universe is under law. Newton declared that the regularity of the firmament proclaimed an intelligent Maker. In point of fact, law so dominates nature that some people assert that a miracle is impossible, since it would be a violation of natural law. This point we shall discuss on another occasion. I mention it here to show that law governs the universe.

Well, couldn't chance explain all this?

Absolutely not. Could you, for instance, explain the exact schedule of railway trains by chance? The regularity of a railway is nothing compared to the regularity of the firmament. Millions of celestial bodies, each many times larger than the earth, are moving through space at terrific speed, each in its own prescribed course, and in perfect harmony.

Are we sure of all that?

Perfectly sure. As an instance, let me give you a single fact. Every day at high noon, when the sun crosses the meridian, a ball drops from a contrivance at the Naval Observatory at Washington. This gives the official time to the United States daily. Other parts of the country regulate their clocks by this timepiece, which receives its time from the world-clock.

Why do you call it the world-clock?

Because that's what it is, a timepiece which gives the exact hour of the day. And the world-clock not only never loses a second, but moreover never needs to be wound up or regulated. The finest watch or clock made by man is a clumsy contrivance compared to the world-clock. Now, you cannot imagine that a fine watch made by a man is the result of chance, can you?

No, certainly not.

In a watch there are many parts which have to be nicely adjusted to an intricate plan. Only an intelligent being is capable of such a process. Those who affirm that chance or anything else, except intelligence, could effect the nice adjustment that regulates the firmament, would have to believe that chance, or some form of mere matter, could select and adjust the mechanism of a clock.

I must admit that the arguments from design and law compel me to give serious thought to the exist-

ence of a personal God. But to admit that this person is God in the sense that Christians hold is another matter. It's one thing to believe in a personal God, but quite another thing to believe in your idea of God.

Just what do you mean by my idea of God?

You, or at least Christians, believe that God is a perfect being, good, just, all powerful and all-knowing. Facts, however, prove the contrary, and you can't argue against facts.

Right you are, provided of course that your facts are as you state them. Suppose we take up your main objections and see what they are worth. Let's begin with the beginning. Your first objection is that God is not a perfect being. Shall I proceed?

By all means.

You admit, of course, that something caused this marvelously designed and regulated world. This something was either the first cause of all things or not. If it was not the first cause, it was produced by some prior cause. This prior cause in turn was produced by a still prior cause, or not. We can thus keep going back and back until eventually we come to a cause which was not produced by a prior cause. This we call the First Cause. Do you follow my argument so far?

Quite readily.

Now this First Cause, since nothing existed before

It, was Itself uncaused. How explain Its existence? It existed always. For if It did not exist always, nothing would ever have existed. Unless something never had a beginning, nothing would ever come into being. We can not understand *how* something never had a beginning, but reason obliges us to admit the fact that something never had a beginning, for as said previously, unless something existed always, nothing would ever have existed.

I see, and I don't see. It seems so strange that something never had a beginning, and yet, as you say, unless there was something that never had a beginning, how could anything ever come into being?

This shows the limitation of human reason. We can by our reason see the *necessity* of something, without being able to understand how the matter can be explained. After all, we should not be surprised that the finite cannot understand the Infinite.

Why do you specify the Infinite?

Because the First Cause, God, is necessarily Infinite.

I'm at sea here. How can anything be infinite? Infinite means without limits or bounds. I don't see how anything can exist without definite limits.

You are quite right with regard to everything created, but the First Cause was not created. Since there was nothing prior to the First Cause, there was no one or no thing to limit It. Furthermore,

since everything that exists or may possibly exist must come directly or indirectly from the First Cause, it follows that It possesses everything without any limit whatever.

But you have said that the First Cause is not matter. How then can It possess everything possible?

There are two ways of possessing a thing, actually or eminently. For instance, Shakespeare possessed the drama of *Hamlet* eminently before it was actually produced. In like manner, Wagner possessed the opera *Parsifal* eminently before it was actually composed. So the First Cause, since everything owes its origin to It, possesses eminently everything conceivable or possible.

You say that everything owes its origin to the First Cause. Does that not make It the cause of evil?

This is an important matter and frequently misunderstood, so let me explain it carefully. Evil is of two kinds: (a) *Moral evil*, which relates to human morality or conduct; (b) *Physical evil*, which includes the various things which harm man, such as bodily pain, deformity, natural calamities, etc.

Moral evil has its source in the will of man, who uses this noble faculty against the will of its Giver. God, instead of being the cause of moral evil, solemnly forbids it. Conscience, which is the voice of the Creator commanding man to do good and avoid

evil, is evidence that the Author of human nature is not the cause of evil. It will thus be seen that evil has its source in the rebellious will of man.

Free will is one of the greatest human endowments. But if it is abused, it gives rise to the various crimes and injustices which plague the world. The Author of nature permits free will to have its way, otherwise it would not be free; but although He permits evil, He threatens dire chastisement to those who commit it.

If God permits evil, is He not responsible for it? No. The Creator made man free, but holds him responsible for the use of his freedom. God could prevent all evil if He stopped a man every time he planned to do wrong; but in thus interfering, He would make of man an automaton, acting not by his own, but by another's will. Would you want to be an automaton rather than a man of free will?

Of all visible creation, man alone has free will. *Animals* are governed by iron instinct which never varies; *matter* is governed by physical and chemical laws; the *firmament* is governed by celestial mechanics. All visible creation except man is like a train on rails, going in one line only. Man, however, may be likened to an automobile, which may go anywhere and in any direction.

It is for the Creator to decide whether or not to give to man free will with all its responsibilities, and He has decided to give it. All creation serves Him

necessarily, man alone may serve Him freely. It is this gift of free will that makes man the crown of visible creation.

I see your point, which is, that if the Creator wished to have any of His creatures serve Him of their own accord, He had to endow them with free will. But how do you explain that One Who is perfect creates a being who, He knows, will abuse the gift of freedom bestowed on him?

The answer is another question. Why does a father give his son an education which the son may abuse to his own detriment? The education is a good thing in itself, and no sensible person would choose to be deprived of it because it had possibilities of evil.

You leave out an important item. The father does not know that his son will abuse his education; but if, as you say, God is infinitely perfect, He knows all things, and consequently knows that the gift of freedom will be abused by some of those who receive it.

The answer is that God would not be infinitely perfect if He were not free to act as He chose. In giving man free will, moreover, He also gives him every inducement to use it aright. If, despite the good gift and the helps to use it aright, man chooses to use it against the Giver, he has himself to blame for the consequences. Man's most cherished endowments are intelligence and free will. Intelligence, however, would be of little significance if it could not be used at the will of its possessor.

We know that the Creator is absolutely perfect, that is, absolutely good, and yet He created a being endowed with possibilities of evil. This is called the mystery of evil. Since, however, the Creator is infinitely wise, we must conclude that He has the best of reasons for His procedure.

What about physical evil, such as deformities of body, disasters of nature, earthquakes, volcanoes, etc., which are not man's doing?

All these things are the result of physical or chemical laws which the Creator established in the beginning, and with which He does not ordinarily interfere. A volcanic eruption, for instance, is a sort of safety valve for the internal fires of the earth. It is good in itself, but if people are in its vicinity, it is a calamity for them. The same holds for earthquakes, tornadoes, storms at sea, etc., all of which are the proper effect of nature's invariable laws.

What about human suffering, deformities, disease and the various ills of mankind?

Sometimes these are the result, directly or indirectly, of man's neglect or abuse. When, however, they occur without the person's fault, as for instance, when one is born blind or deformed, it is a case in which we have to realize that He Who has the power and wisdom to create the universe, has also the wisdom to govern it. Of this we may be sure, that when the final reckoning is made, we shall see that no human being has been unjustly treated by the

Lord of Creation. When the design is fully displayed, it will show the goodness of its Author.

Your conclusion is, accordingly, that an infinitely perfect being must be wise as well as good, and that if we do not understand His ways, it is our duty to bow our heads in reverent submission to His dispensations?

Yes, it comes to that. That is the meaning of *faith*. If God explained all His ways to us, we should see such goodness and justice in them that there would be little merit in faith. But as it is, we sacrifice our noblest faculty, our judgment, by trusting absolutely to His wisdom and rectitude.

That is pretty hard at times, and I must say that one reason why I have been an atheist is the amount of misery and suffering I have beheld in the world, and the fact that injustice is so rampant.

And whence, do you think, comes your sense of justice, which cries out against the suffering and injustice which shock you?

Why, it comes from my very nature. Something within me feels outraged at some of the things I behold.

Which means that your sense of justice, since it is natural, comes from the Author of nature. And do you suppose that He Who gave you that sense of justice has less justice than you?

Really, that is a view of the matter that I never considered.

No one can give what he does not possess either actually or potentially. You may open a water-faucet, but it will give no water unless there is water in the reservoir with which it is connected. And that water will be of the same quality as that at the source. Since every endowment of man comes from the source of human nature, it follows that whatever of justice man may have, the Author of human nature has much more, infinitely more.

I'm surprised I never adverted to that fact.

Whenever you are tempted to doubt the goodness and justice of the Creator, reflect that it was He Who gave us our mothers. No one who has experienced the goodness and devotion of a mother can doubt the goodness of Him Who endowed mothers with their tender and loving nature.

I'm beginning to see the truth of those words of the Bible: "The fool hath said in his heart there is no God" (*Ps. xiii, 1*).

You might add those other words of the Bible: "The way of a fool is right, in his own eyes" (*Prov. xii, 15*).

And now that we are on the subject, I'd like to give you a little further evidence for belief in God as a Personal Being.

I'm only too glad to go into the matter further, for I know that some of my friends will give it to me hot and heavy when they know that I am no longer an atheist.

The proof I now offer for the existence of a personal God is based on the fact that a judge must be an intelligent being, a person. A law supposes not only a lawgiver, but also agencies for the enforcement of the law. No legislator is indifferent to the observance of the laws he enacts. Unless a law has sanction, it will be violated with impunity.

I'm afraid I'll have to interrupt you. Just what is meant by sanction?

Sanction means the power to enforce law. That is why a penalty is always attached to the breaking of a law, and a tribunal established for passing judgment on the accused. The judge in such cases must hear the evidence, weigh it, decide on the innocence or guilt of the accused, and mete out just punishment to the guilty. Only an intelligent being can perform these various functions.

Now, conscience is the law of the Creator, commanding man to do what is right and refrain from what is wrong. This law is written on the heart of every human being who has attained the use of reason.

Pardon me, but I have been under the impression that there are various tribes and groups of people

who seem to have an altogether different view of morality from ours. This would seem to indicate that conscience is not a natural, but an acquired attribute.

While there may be different codes of morality among various persons, due to circumstances, every human being knows that he should do some things and refrain from others. The fact that conscience pertains to man wherever he exists means that it is part of his nature, and hence from the Author of nature. This law of nature supposes a judge who will render to every man according to his observance or violation of it. The Maker of man alone is qualified to judge a man's conscience, since only the Maker knows it.

I suppose that is why a man cannot get away from his conscience, no matter how hard he tries, because he cannot get away from himself or from the Author of his nature.

You are beginning to moralize, I see. That's a good sign. Shall I pass on to another proof of the existence of God, or have you had enough?

Please go on. That last proof is just what I want for a lawyer friend of mine. I'm sure it will appeal to his type of mind.

You know, different people are impressed by different arguments. A proof that will convince one person may not affect another at all. That is why it's

a good thing to have various ways of demonstrating the same truth.

Well, let's have another.

The proof I am now offering is based on the fact that mankind everywhere and at all times has worshiped in one form or another a personal Power above, who influenced its destiny. It is true that at one time it was thought that certain benighted tribes, in out of the way places, had no religious worship. This false notion was due to their timidity and suspicion of strangers. Later, when the missionaries and others had gained their confidence, they revealed their various religious rites and practices.

Yes, I've read of those instances you refer to, and I often wondered who taught them their religious worship.

That's the very point I am approaching. Nobody taught them. It was a prompting of nature, a religious instinct. It manifested itself sometimes in very crude forms, but was, nevertheless, their way of acknowledging a personal Power above, to whom they owed reverence and submission. Unless they believed in a personal deity, worship would be meaningless. The fact that mankind everywhere and at all times has worshiped a personal deity means that such worship is inbred in human nature, and that consequently belief in a personal God has its source

in the Author of human nature, and is therefore true.

If you will pardon an interruption, may I question the universality of worship? Are there not many persons, atheists for example, who do not worship a personal deity?

At various times and owing to various circumstances, certain individuals and groups spring up who deny a personal God. These are the exceptions that prove the rule. Unless the generality of mankind believed in a personal God, atheists would not be conspicuous. Furthermore, most atheists in unguarded moments give evidence of belief in a personal God.

The great attraction of atheism is that it makes its adherents a law to themselves. This is apt to bias their judgment and make them over-ready to accept specious arguments in favor of their views. Atheism is more or less an academic state of mind, superinduced by cruel or unpleasant personal experience of one kind or another. Some atheists are such because, although sincere, they regard one side only of the question, closing their eyes to whatever opposes their views, but welcoming every specious pretext that favors them.

You must admit, however, that many very intelligent men have embraced atheism.

Yes, and you yourself are an example. But, as you have admitted, the proofs for a personal God are so

convincing that, ordinarily, one who considers the matter from both sides and is open to conviction, must see that atheism does not rest on a sound logical foundation.

There are various other reasons also which account for atheists, among which are: intellectual pride; the spectacle of suffering, injustice and other human casualties; some just grievance which has embittered one's life, etc., etc. Atheism, however, being something negative, a denial of a personal ruler of the world, offers no solution for any of the problems of life. Instead, it deprives man of the greatest solace and strength in the hour of affliction which comes sooner or later to every mortal.

How would you answer an atheist who is such because he cannot reconcile the idea of a good God with the prevailing suffering and injustice among mankind?

The first thing to insist on is the fact that the Creator, because He is the First Cause and source of every perfection, is by His very nature absolutely perfect. This means that He is goodness itself. In the light of this truth we must conclude that whatever happens is caused or permitted for a wise and beneficent purpose, even though we may not know what this purpose is.

If a child saw its father, whose kindness of heart was beyond question, do something which seemed to

be harsh, the child would spontaneously say that what was done was right. And if someone objected, the child would say: "You don't know my father; if you did, you'd know that he would not do anything unkind." In the same way, knowing that God is goodness itself, we must infer that whatever He causes or permits is dictated by goodness, even though we are unable to understand it. The wisest man that ever lived is less able to understand God and His ways than a child at its mother's breast is able to understand its mother.

Nevertheless man is a reasonable being, and is justified in drawing obvious conclusions from facts.

That is true if man has all the data to judge by. But man has only the data of time, and lacks that of eternity, which is essential in passing judgment on the Ruler of time and eternity. Perhaps this may be made clear by an example.

General Robert E. Lee, of the Confederate Army, was known as the kindest of men. Yet, at the Battle of Gettysburg, he ordered regiment after regiment to charge against cannon and bayonet, thus to face almost certain disability or death. Regarded apart from its purpose, such an act was doubtless that of a monster of cruelty; but to one who understands the end Lee had in view, the act was one of heroic patriotism, aimed at preserving the life of the nation. No one who understood the circumstances

under which Lee acted would think of accusing him of cruelty. So, no one would ever accuse God of cruelty if all the data were at hand for judging His dispensations.

I grant that anyone who acknowledges that God is infinitely perfect, and goodness itself, would refrain from passing adverse judgment on His dispensations; but as a matter of fact, people who accuse Providence do not believe in a benevolent deity.

And that is why it is necessary first of all to convince such a person that the First Cause of the universe is necessarily infinite in everything, in knowledge, in wisdom, in power and in goodness. No reasonable person can logically deny that the Origin of everything in the universe must possess every conceivable virtue and quality in the highest degree. On that truth as basis rests the fact that God is infinitely wise, infinitely powerful and infinitely good. Such a Being is to be revered and trusted. It is faith in God, as the good and wise Ruler of time and eternity, that justifies the trust His followers put in Him, and enables them to bear resignedly and cheerfully the vicissitudes of life.

Religion is not an opiate to render man numb to the trials of life, but rather a vital force which gives him an incentive to do and endure cheerfully whatever things duty may entail. Life is probation and the grave is not the goal. True religion, based on belief in a personal God, guides and supports the

wayfarer of time to the portals of a blissful eternity. The Son of God became man in order that the children of men may become the children of God. "To as many as received Him, He gave them power to be made the sons of God" (John i, 12).

The main reason why the world is in such dreadful confusion and in such a state of brutality today is that mankind in considerable numbers has turned its back on God. Communism and other godless doctrines have reduced to slavery nations that hoped to find in these false systems a panacea for human ills.

Atheism may shout a denial of God to the four corners of the world, but it has never brought and never will bring comfort and strength to a broken heart or a blighted life. Faith in a personal God has cheered the oppressed, comforted the suffering, sustained the victim of injustice and given courage and strength to millions of men and women to face the battle of life and win a glorious eternal victory.

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