

God, Man and Religion

By J. G. Vos

"For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36).

The Greek philosopher Archimedes said: "Give me a place to stand, and I will move the world." Whether we want to move the world, or to understand it, a standpoint or point of view is needed. What is your point of view as you look at life and as you look at religion? You have some point of view even though you may not realize it.

In academic circles there is a good deal of emphasis on objectivity. A scholar is supposed to present truth, not merely his own opinions about it. But really objectivity is impossible. All thinking, all writing, all discussion, is carried on from some point of view, whether this is recognized or not. All thinking is based on assumptions. The question is not whether we shall have basic assumptions, but what our assumptions are and whether we are consciously critical of them or not.

In his preface to the English edition of Windelband's *History of Philosophy* Professor James H. Tufts of the University of Chicago wrote:

"The moment we attempt any serious thinking

in any field, — natural science, history, literature, ethics, theology, or any other, — we find ourselves at the outset quite at the mercy of the words and ideas which form at once our intellectual atmosphere and the instruments with which we must work. We cannot speak, for example, of mind or matter, of cause or force, of species or individual, of universe or God, of freedom or necessity, of substance or evolution, of science or law, of good or true or real, without involving a host of assumptions. And the assumptions are there, even though we may be unconscious of them, or ignore them in an effort to dispense with metaphysics. To dispense with these conceptions is impossible. Our only recourse, if we would not beg our questions in advance, or remain in unconscious bondage to the instruments of our thought, or be slaves to the thinking of the past generations that forged out our ideas for us, is to 'criticise our categories.' (Copyright 1901; used by permission of publishers, The Macmillan Company).

So a viewpoint is necessary, and this involves basic assumptions which determine what we think and say about other matters.

As we consider the subject of religion, we soon find that there are really only two types of basic assumption possible, namely, the view which regards God as its highest category and interprets everything in the light of God, and the view which regards man as its highest category and

interprets everything in the light of man.

The one view regards God as supremely important, and adjusts its ideas of man and religion accordingly; the other view regards man as supremely important, and adjusts its ideas of God and religion accordingly.

All theologies and all philosophies and all religious systems can be divided into these two basic types; those whose most basic concept is their view of God, and those whose most basic concept is their view of man. A prominent theologian of our own day has said that many people think they are talking about God when in reality they are only talking about man in a loud voice. Dr. Benjamin B. Warfield wrote in one of his reviews:

"The 'problem of God' is to be solved for the twentieth century as for all that have preceded it, not by deifying man and abasing God in his presence, but by recognizing God to be indeed God and man to be the creation of His hands, whose chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever" (*Critical Reviews*, p. 251).

And the Reformer John Calvin wrote in his famous book **The Institutes of the Christian Religion**:

"So long as we do not look beyond the earth, we are quite pleased with our own righteousness, wisdom and virtue; we address ourselves in the most flattering terms, and seem only less than

demigods. But should we once begin to raise our thoughts to God, and reflect what kind of Being he is, and how absolute the perfection of that righteousness, and wisdom, and virtue, to which, as a standard, we are bound to be conformed, what formerly delighted us by its false show of righteousness, will become polluted with the greatest iniquity; what strangely imposed upon us under the name of wisdom, will disgust by its extreme folly; and what presented the appearance of virtuous energy, will be condemned as the most miserable impotence. So far are those qualities in us, which seem most perfect, from corresponding to the divine purity" (I.i.2).

What, then, is our basic viewpoint? Only two positions are really consistent. One is Biblical Theism; the other is Consistent humanism. Between these two consistent philosophies there are numerous inconsistent combinations and compromises which cannot prove permanently satisfactory, but must break down and perish in the end. These mediating views may be predominantly Christian or predominantly humanistic according as they gravitate to the one extreme or the other.

The apostle Paul in Romans 11:36, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, sets forth the viewpoint of consistent Biblical Theism: **Of God, through God and unto God are all things.** That is to say, God is the source of all things, God is the means of all things, and God is the end of all things.

From God all things have their origin, through God all things function, and unto God as their goal all things tend. The origin, energy and purpose of all that exists is God. This means, of course, the true God, the God of the Bible — the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The exact antithesis of the Biblical Theism is consistent Humanism, which asserts, in effect, that "Of man, and through man, and unto man, are all things: to whom be glory forever."

We might suppose that a third view is possible, namely that view which regards the impersonal universe of nature as ultimate, and would say, in effect, "Of nature, and through nature, and unto nature, are all things." But this naturalism, inevitably tends to shift into Humanism, for man is personal, and that which is personal is higher than that which is impersonal. In practice the naturalist becomes a humanist, for he sees nature as a construct of the human mind, as capable of manipulation by human intelligence, and as existing for no other reason than to serve man's desires and purposes.

So we come down in two consistent but mutually exclusive and irreconcilable viewpoints, namely Consistent Theism and Consistent Humanism. The issue is simply this: Shall God be God or shall man be God? Biblical Theism says God shall be God. Humanism says that man shall be God. The first humanist was Eve, who believed

the serpent when he said, "Ye shall be as God."

Let us consider the three affirmations of Romans 11:36 as they are viewed, first, by consistent Biblical Theism; second, as they are viewed by consistent Humanism; and third, as they are viewed by what we may call inconsistent Theism, the type of compromise viewpoint which stands somewhere between consistent Theism on the one hand and consistent Humanism on the other.

We shall consider these three viewpoints not as they are related to the physical universe or the world of nature, though that might be a worthwhile study, but rather as they are related to the field of religion, and in particular to man's salvation from sin and suffering.

The most basic concept of consistent Theism is **God Unlimited by Man**. The most basic concept of consistent Humanism is **Man Unlimited by God**. The most basic concept of the middle-of-the-road view in its typical and common form is **God Limited by Man**.

Each of these philosophies or viewpoints tends to interpret everything in terms of its own most basic concept. Thus consistent Theism interprets everything in terms of its most basic concept, **God unlimited by man**. Consistent Humanism interprets everything in terms of its most basic concept, **Man unlimited by God**. And the typical form of the middle-of-the-road view interprets

everything in terms of its most basic concept, **God limited by man**.

Consistent Theism regards God as supreme over all. God is limited only by His own perfect nature. Nothing outside of God Himself imposes any limitations on Him. He is the source of all that exists and of all possibility of existence.

Consistent Humanism regards God as non-existent. This is pure atheism. If the existence of God is admitted at all He is said to be merely an idea in the mind of man, having no objective existence outside of the human mind.

The middle-of-the-road view regards God as limited by man's free will. It is said that when God created man with free will, He limited Himself, and today, to quote a well-known evangelist, "God's hands are tied." He can only wait for man's free will to make the important decisions. This involves the notion of God giving up that which is essential to His being God. That is, it involves the notion of God giving up His attribute of being **unchangeable**. This view regards God after creating man as different from God before creating man.

L The Source of Salvation

"Of him are all things" — all things, including man's salvation.

1. According to Biblical Theism man's sal-

vation was planned by God in eternity. You will find this teaching stated with unmistakable clearness in the whole Bible — Old Testament and New — but especially in the Gospel according to John and the Epistles of Paul.

Sometimes called "election" or "predestination," it is set forth in the first chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, where we read that "he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:4-6).

God in eternity elected particular persons to eternal life. According to Biblical teaching salvation was planned by God the Father, purchased by God the Son and is applied by God the Holy Spirit.

God the Father in eternity elected persons to eternal life; God the Son in human history purchased their salvation by His sufferings and death on the cross; God the Holy Spirit gives them new spiritual life and works repentance and faith in them so that they eventually participate in the benefit that was planned for them in eternity and purchased for them on Calvary.

2. According to Consistent Humanism, man really does not need anything that can rightly be called salvation. Humanism holds that man was not created by God but is a product of natural evolution in a world either of blind chance or blind fate. According to Humanism, man has never fallen and is not sinful. His defects are only signs of immaturity; his sufferings are only growing pains. He is evolving to higher and better things. Neither man's nature as a whole nor his will has been corrupted by sin. He is completely the master of his own destiny, as is shockingly asserted by that utterly humanistic poem *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley:

Out of the night that covers me
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,

I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.

3. According to the third viewpoint, namely inconsistent Theism, the source of man's salvation is a decision of man's free will, foreseen by God from eternity. God has elected to salvation those whom He foresaw, from eternity, would by their free will decide to accept His offer of salvation in Christ.

This view regards salvation as made **available** by God but made **actual** by man. God is the source of what is called "a chance of salvation," but man's free will is the source of the actual experience of salvation. As stated by the evangelist above referred to, God's hands are tied; He can only wait for man to make the decision. This viewpoint regards God as limited by man's free will. It is therefore an implicit denial of the sovereignty of God — indeed, of the Godhood of God.

II. The Means of Salvation

1. According to Biblical Theism, salvation is wholly a work of God, not at all a work of man. "It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). Even those parts of the process of salvation in which man is consciously active are really the working of God in man.

Our repentance, our believing, our praying, are truly our own acts, yet in a deeper sense they are at the same time God working in and through us. And apart from that working of God they would not exist at all. For man is a fallen being. He has fallen into sin, and this has corrupted his nature so that he loves evil rather than good. This sinful condition is called "total depravity" — a term which has often been misunderstood. It does not mean that any human being is absolutely evil, nor that any man is as wicked as he could become, nor that anyone in this life is as wicked as he will be in hell.

Total depravity means that man as a total personality has been damaged and corrupted by sin. The word "total" concerns the extent of man's sinfulness, not its degree. There is no element of the human personality that has not been corrupted, distorted and defiled by sin. All parts of man's nature have been damaged by sin, **including his will**.

Therefore man in his sinful condition cannot make a decision in favor of God and righteousness — he cannot originate a love for God and for righteousness in his own heart, because he is sinful by nature and his will is enslaved to sin.

"Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?" (Jer. 13:23). No, for they are part of his nature, and he cannot change his own nature. Only God can do that. The Bible there-

fore describes man as being "dead in sin" (Eph. 2:1) — not "sick in sin" but "dead in sin." And this condition of deadness includes man's free will. It is therefore impossible for man to initiate the process of salvation in himself by using his free will.

Consistent Biblical Theism, therefore, regards the accomplishment of salvation as a work of God. It is partly a work of God **for** man, and partly a work of God **in** man. When Christ died on the cross to pay the just penalty for our sins, that was a work of God **for** man. When the Holy Spirit gives us a new heart, that is a work of God **in** man.

Even where man is active about his own salvation, both the impulse and the power of performance are the working of God in man's personality. The Bible plainly so teaches. In fact, even our good works, the Bible says, were fore-ordained by God that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10).

2. According to consistent Humanism, the beginning, middle and end of man's salvation is by his own works and efforts — if indeed it can be called "salvation" at all. For Humanism does not believe that man is really lost in sin or that he really needs salvation in the proper sense of the term. What the Humanist really believes in is individual and social improvement by ethical culture, moral enlightenment and soc-

ialization. Man builds his own ladder and climbs on it to ever greater heights of attainment, according to Humanism.

3. According to the middle-of-the-road view, or inconsistent Theism, man has fallen and is sinful, but not entirely so. This view affirms that man's nature in general has been corrupted by sin, but there is one part of his nature that has somehow escaped this general corruption and breakdown, namely, man's will.

While God is regarded as the source and means of salvation in general — that is, of the availability of salvation, or of "a chance" for salvation — still it is held that man is the source and means of salvation at the one crucial point, namely the initial decision to forsake sin and accept Christ. God, it is held, saves men from all kinds of sin except one, namely **unbelief**. From that one sin, unbelief, man must first save himself by a decision made by his own free will. As soon as man makes that all-important decision, God goes into action — His hands are no longer tied. He forgives the person's sins, causes him to be born again with a new nature, and adopts the person as a member of the family of God. But man's free will must make the decision first.

Further, inconsistent Theism fails to do justice to the truth that every stage and step of the process of salvation from **first** to last is a work of

God — the truth that "It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Salvation is often looked upon as a sort of fifty-fifty affair, and it is said that "God does his part and we must do our part." This is a failure to recognize that repentance, faith and all Christian graces are actually gifts of God and that we do not and cannot provide them of ourselves. As Augustine said long ago, we never have even a single good thought except by the grace of God working in our life. He prayed, "Give what thou commandest, and command what thou wilt." This prayer is eminently Christian and Biblical, but it greatly irritated and disturbed Augustine's opponent Pelagius, who was a promoter of the middle-of-the-road view in a form leaning heavily toward Humanism. Pelagius held that we should pray for all kinds of blessings except virtue; we need not and should not pray for virtue, because, he said, we can provide this of ourselves by our own free will.

III. The End of Salvation

1. According to consistent Theism, the end or purpose of salvation — the supreme end or purpose of it, that is — is the manifestation of God's attributes and perfections, especially His love and His righteousness. The salvation of man is not intended primarily for man's benefit, though it certainly involves man's highest benefit, but for God's glory. Consistent Theism has a God-centered view of the purpose of man's sal-

vation. Man is saved for the glory of God, not primarily for the benefit of man.

2. According to consistent Humanism, the end of our purpose of man's salvation is simply the progress of the human race. Humanity, it is said, exists for its own sake. The reason for everything human lies within the human personality. Man exists for man, not for God, just as God is said to exist for man, not for God.

It is this Humanist viewpoint that is back of the proposal to plant the human race, if and when space travel makes this possible, on other planets. Scripture tells us that God ordained this earth as the home of the human race — "The heaven, even the heavens, are the Lords; but the earth hath he given to the children of men" (Psalm 115:16). There are Humanists who would like to seed the vast reaches of outer space with the stock of mankind — this fallen, corrupted, selfish, covetous, lustful, discontented, never satisfied, unhappy humanity — because they know nothing and no one higher than man, and regard the progress and self-gratification of humanity as the ultimate goal and purpose of existence. "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in derision" (Psalm 2:4). Nothing has aroused human pride more than the incipient success of man's efforts to conquer space. We recall the pride of the king of Babylon, who said in his heart: "I will ascend into heaven, I

will exalt my throne above the stars of God I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most "High" — but God said to him, "Thou shalt be brought down to hell" (Isaiah 14:13-15).

3. According to inconsistent Theism, the end or purpose of man's salvation — the supreme end or purpose of it, that is — is human happiness and welfare. This view is not always clearly or consciously held; there are variations. But the middle-of-the-road view always tends to place its emphasis on man's happiness and welfare rather than on the manifestation of the perfections of God, as the reason for salvation. It is sometimes said that God's objective is to seek the greatest good of the greatest number for the longest time. This is inadequate as a view of the end or purpose of salvation because its center of gravity is in man rather than in God. Note that Romans 11:36 teaches that "unto God are all things" — therefore the supreme purpose of human salvation must be for God rather than for man.

In Conclusion

The present headquarters of consistent Humanism is the Kremlin of Moscow, and the out-reaching arms of this poisonous, idolatrous man-worship are found in the subtle instruments of Communist propaganda throughout the world.

Even apart from thoroughly consistent Humanism, the leavening influence of Humanistic thought has influenced much of the thinking and religious life of the Free World. Pure Christianity, characterized by consistent Biblical Theism, is not dominant nor flourishing today. The weakened, inconsistent views are more popular and certainly easier to accept. But they cannot stand permanently. In the end the battle is sure to be drawn between the two mutually exclusive but consistent philosophies of life — Biblical Theism and anti-Biblical Humanism.

It is hard to hold the position of consistent Biblical Theism. Because it concerns the relation between the infinite God and finite man it is bound to baffle our human reason — the more so because our reason has been weakened and darkened by sin. Consistent Biblical Theism provides no easy solutions of the great problems of existence. But it has one tremendous advantage — it is TRUTH and the victory of the eternal future must belong to it.

More than half a century ago Horatius Bonar noted the trend toward a man-centered view of life and wrote a poem entitled **The Coming Creed** which highlights the shift from Biblical religion to man-flattering, man-centered Humanism. Bonar's poem is even more relevant today than when he wrote it. It is fitting that this study be closed by quoting this poem which manifests such a true insight.

The Coming Creed

By Horatius Bonar

The creeds have gone, so speaks the age,
The era of the sects is past.
Forward! In spite of saint or sage,
True freedom has begun at last.

The Christ of God is now no more;
The Christ of man now sits supreme;
The Cross is part of mystic lore,
The resurrection morn a dream.

The age's progress fears no God,
No righteous law, no Judge's throne;
Man bounds along his new-found road,
And calls the universe his own.

Not faith in God, but faith in man
Is pilot now, and sail, and oar;
The creeds are shrivelled, cold and wan;
The Christ that has been is no more.

Old truth, which once struck deep in hearts,
Fights hard for life, but fights in vain;
Old error into vigor starts
And fable comes to life again.

Old mischief now becomes earth's creed;
The falsehood lives, the truth has died;
Man leans upon a broken reed,
And falls in helplessness of pride.

He spurns the hands that would have led,
The lips that would have spoken love;
The Book that would his soul have fed,
And taught the wisdom from above.

The ever-standing cross, to him,
Is but a Hebrew relic vain;
The wondrous birth at Bethlehem
A fiction of the wandering brain.

He wants no Saviour and no light;
No teacher but himself he needs;
He knows not of a human night,
Save from the darkness of the creeds.

Eternal Light, hide not Thy face:
Eternal Truth, direct our way;
Eternal Love, shine forth in grace;
Reveal our darkness and Thy day.

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NONE OTHER LAMB

By CHRISTINA G. ROSSETTI

None other Lamb, none other Name,
None other Hope in heaven or earth or sea.
None other Hiding-place from guilt and shame,
None beside Thee.

My faith burns low, my hope burns low
Only my heart's desire cries out in me
By the deep thunder of its want and woe
Cries out to Thee.

Lord, Thou art Life tho' I be dead,
Love's Fire Thou art, however cold I be:
Nor heaven have I, nor place to lay my head,
Nor home, but Thee.