

before us as subject-matter. The question whether there may be a God or gods, and, if so, what may be his or their substance and attributes, do not here concern us. All we have to do in our present capacity is to ask ourselves strictly, What first suggested to the mind of man the notion of deity in the abstract at all? And how, from the early multiplicity of deities which we find to have prevailed in all primitive times among all human races, did the conception of a single great and unlimited deity first take its rise? In other words, why did men ever believe there were gods at all, and why from many gods did they arrive at one? Why from polytheism have the most advanced nations proceeded to monotheism?

To put the question in this form is to leave entirely out of consideration the objective reality or otherwise of the idea itself. To analyse the origin of a concept is not to attack the validity of the belief it encloses. The idea of gravitation, for example, arose by slow degrees in human minds, and reached at last its final expression in Newton's law. But to trace the steps by which that idea was gradually reached is not in any way to disprove or to discredit it. The Christian believer may similarly hold that men arrived by natural stages at the knowledge of the one true God; he is not bound to reject the final conception as false merely because of the steps by which it was slowly evolved. A creative God, it is true, might prefer to make a sudden revelation of himself to some chosen body of men; but an evolutionary God, we may well believe, might prefer in his inscrutable wisdom to reveal his own existence and qualities to his creatures by means of the same slow and tentative intellectual gropings as those by which he revealed to them the physical truths of nature. I wish my enquiry, therefore, to be regarded, not as destructive, but as reconstructive. It only attempts to recover and follow out the various planes in the evolution of the idea of God, rather than to cast doubt upon the truth of the evolved concept.