

THE STARTING POINT

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

WHO AM I? This is the open-ended question of each and of all human life. Man has always and will always search for an answer, and every work of art and technology is an expression of his search. But the question remains unanswered and unanswerable. Even the greatest works of art and the greatest triumphs of technology, far from providing an answer, only underline the question with greater urgency. The prehistoric hand-prints and paintings on the walls of Lascaux and the footprints on the moon pose the same question. Who am I? Who are we?

Those are not two questions but two forms of the same question. No individual human being, no one race, no one nation, no one age can search for the truth of themselves in isolation from the totality of mankind. The tragedies of history have so often been the result of attempts to say who I am or who we are at the expense of others. But the ovens of Auschwitz and Belsen no more proved the supremacy and purity of aryan blood than the wars of religion proved the truth of God. Even as we speak of the great brotherhood of man we may be preparing to destroy those whom we judge to be the enemies of our ideal. The individual who does not fit into our particular group has to be eliminated either physically or psychically. At all costs the identity of the group must be preserved. But as we look back at the cost to ourselves and to others of that preservation, the question comes back with renewed force: who am I? Who are we? Who shall cast the first stone?

But how can we even begin to answer the question of our identity? It is not as if we were starting from scratch. We become aware of the need for an answer only when we are already in the midst of things. Some experience of agony or of ecstasy gives us a sudden fleeting glimpse of who we might be, as if of some tantalizingly familiar face glimpsed in a crowd. So often we travel comfortably in the dark, until a sudden shaft of light reveals a way ahead that can thrill or appal us. We can find ourselves born again out of what seemed the death of our achievements and ambitions, or standing empty-handed and solitary at the very moment of victory. We look for the chance to make a fresh start and wish vainly that we could begin all over again.

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However, there can only be one starting point in man's search for himself: his self-awareness in his present situation, himself as he is in the here and now of his daily existence. Obvious as this may seem, it remains the most difficult thing to achieve in practice. We are not really aware of ourselves in the right way. Apart from any unhealthy nostalgia or regrets about the past, we are blinded by the unspoken and unexamined presuppositions which effectively rule many of our attitudes. Our journey into the discovery of ourselves is programmed ahead by all sorts of biases and prejudices of which we are not even conscious. Unwittingly, we create absolutes out of what should be essentially relative principles and narrow the scope of our search beforehand. The result is that what should be guidelines have become a sort of railroad track, and any experience which causes us to jump the rails can only be construed as disaster.

For example, we tend to presume that we know what it is to be human, and that therefore we know who man is. But not so long ago slavery was considered a normal part of the human situation, and was hotly defended on biblical grounds. War and destruction of one's enemies was thought a noble human ideal. It was deemed a natural dispensation that certain classes of society should rule and others serve, simply by reason of their birth. The early pioneers of anaesthetics were attacked on the grounds that it was natural for man to suffer; and any interference in this was an attempt to thwart divine providence. That women should be treated as inferiors was again part of being human. Examples could be multiplied, not only on such a basic issue, but on almost every other level. Every jargon word, every one of the 'isms', all have inbuilt presuppositions which need constant re-examination. Without such investigation there is no real discovery, there is only a meeting again with what is already known.

In *The Politics of Experience*, Ronald Laing writes: 'Existence is a flame which constantly melts and recasts our theories'.¹ The greatest danger is that we regulate that flame in such a way that our experience only serves to harden and not to melt our theories. We begin with our definitions of ourselves, of God, Christ, the Church, society, and select our experiences or interpret them so that they reinforce our own definitions. Our efforts are dedicated to preserving a definition, and upon that altar we sacrifice the very realities our definitions should lead us to. We may indeed have a

¹ London, 1969, p 47.

starting point, but instead of journeying outwards from it, we turn around it in ever narrowing circles. Our experience becomes a repetitious charade, a make-believe substitute for real living.

True experience is always an opening out and an offering of ourselves to the unknown. It is essentially risk and discovery. Through it we have to be prepared to have our recognition of ourselves, and of the world we live in, mediated to us through others. We have to learn a new definition of ourselves different from the one we spontaneously offer or even try to impose upon others. 'Who do you say that I am?' is the question every christian must ask with his Teacher. This active, fearless offering of self to the world is the typical gesture of Christ and therefore of his followers. In this way we are able to receive, we can be graced by God.

We become aware of ourselves not as static creatures, but as beings of mood and change, who sometimes do not even recognize themselves. For the truth is that we are, only in the measure in which we are in the process of becoming. Our very being is essentially a becoming. To ask the question, who am I?, is to ask, who am I to become? There is little satisfaction and no hope in knowing where we are if we do not know where we are going. Restlessness and irritation with our present situation is as sterile and worthless as complacency, if it does not lead us outwards. Wolfhart Pannenberg has said somewhere that the future is the cause of the present. If I wish to know who I am, the answer can only come in terms of what I want, hope, imagine or determine that I shall become. It is this future which gives a dynamism to the present, for without it the present situation is simply an imprisonment.

But what of the past? Are we not, all of us, both the prisoners and the beneficiaries of a history for which we are in no way responsible? Essentially turned towards the future, do we not find ourselves shackled to the dead weight of what once was? Here we must be careful. For the past is never over and done with. The past itself was once a present, being controlled by a future which is now my present. Rather than an imposed burden of fatality, the past is a question which my being and actions are now answering. We need not, and should not, submit dumbly to the past, any more than we should boast emptily about it. We must interpret it, sift it through our present experience, so that we can hand it on, enriched, to our own future. A blanket rejection of the past, or a naive acceptance of it, blinds us to its values and puts us on the highroad either to repeating or perpetuating its mistakes and to losing whatever values

it had. Our responsibility is to give a meaning to the past which it may not have realized itself. The experience of resurrection is not a negation of the experience of suffering and death, but a positive interpretation of them. The future of one moment is the present of the next and the past of the succeeding one. This is the unity of our temporal condition, which can at times seem to be our greatest burden, but is the very condition of our becoming. Our responsibility is to man as a whole. To man in history, not to some abstract definition which we are trying to preserve, nor to some institution which we situate outside time and space. We do not know who this rational animal, man, is. We are in the process of finding out. But the data of our search is the total experience of man as we know him up to this present moment.

But even when we refuse to labour under a hangover about the past or bask in its 'glories', what of the future? Who can say what we shall become? Who can guarantee the ultimate destiny of mankind? It is not enough to answer this in individualistic terms. It is not enough to say that my becoming is to save my soul. The pre-occupation with individual salvation can blur the essentially christian vision of the salvation of all mankind. It is not enough that I guarantee my future, I must do it in such a way that my own becoming is a sign of effective hope for all mankind. It is possible to concentrate so much on the ultimate future that we fail to see that it must be of a piece with the immediate penultimate future which is the present-to-be. An abstract ideal expressed in terms of 'salvation' or as 'the will of God for me' can be used to minimize the importance of what has long been called the sacrament of the present moment. The will of God is not some secret blue-print in which my life is already mapped out. The one great lesson of the bible is that God works within the very movement of history. He uses the materials at hand, even though they are always deficient and sometimes apparently unsuitable. My life is not measured against an abstract plan, but against my coming to grips with my real situation.

Towards the end of his life, Ignatius of Loyola, who composed the famous *Spiritual Exercises* to enable a person to find and carry out the will of God, could still write that no one in this life can know how far he is furthering or hindering what God wants to work through him. Whatever interpretations have been later read into Ignatius, a sentence such as that should make us hesitate before we proclaim that the finger of God is here, and use such a phrase to

avoid taking up a real responsibility towards the future. This applies even more in the situation where a spiritual director or religious superior proclaims to his subject – this is the will of God for you. To say this is tantamount to saying – I am God. The future will always remain veiled and hidden. Each new age and each new experience can open up new dimensions which demand a constant reinterpretation of who I am and where I am going.

Man has always sought to find himself; but today there is, especially amongst the young, a heightened preoccupation with identity. This can lead to the attempt to fulfil oneself at the expense of 'the other', whether that 'other' is the rest of mankind or simply those who do not belong to my group, or to my world. Basic to the christian attitude to life is the fact that we never present to others the bill for our own fulfilment. For the christian fulfilment can only be thought of in terms of the growth in that love which gives itself more and more in each situation for all men; the love which, in Christ, is a sign of universal love. The love which is eucharist – food for all mankind.

But where does all this begin? Can we ever be sure enough to start? A great deal of emotional energy is wasted in the futile search for the ideal starting point. Futile, for the simple reason that there never will be an ideal starting point. Any starting point tends to be as arbitrary as the choice of January 1 to make resolutions. In the business of living the starting point is always now. It is always this slightly or highly unsatisfactory situation in which I find myself. We are all people in a state of incompleteness, divided in ourselves, living in a world which is also incomplete and divided. The temptation to wait until everything happens just right, has to be constantly resisted. We have to begin from what we are and from where we are. To want a perfect me in a perfect world before I begin is to want the end at the beginning. The lesson of God's love in the bible is a constant reminder that he not only can, but always does, take us as we are, and asks only one step at a time and the readiness to accept any further steps that the first one may lead to; but we must not ask for any guarantees about the nature of the second and third or the ten thousandth step.

In order to begin we have to learn to leave go, to loosen that grasp on ourselves which is the equivalent of burying our talent in the earth. But how many find themselves discontented with themselves as they are, and yet without the courage to leave go and launch out in the search? There seems to be no road out of the

impasse, and yet there is. Eventually we must either choose to turn in more and more upon ourselves or to accept to share our own inadequacy with others, or rather to accept that our inadequacy is shared, that it is part of the human situation. To idealize ourselves or others can only lead to unreality. All our idols have feet of clay just because they are idols – the product of imperfect people. There can be a deal of self-deception in the comparison of myself with others to the detriment of myself. This acceptance of a shared experience of inadequacy demands nothing short of an act of faith. To say that we all seem unequal to our task, that we are all more or less unsuccessful human beings, that we do not love as we should, that we have not got the concern we know we ought to have: to say this and then to start out, this is real faith.

For there must be faith and trust at the beginning. Life is a journey into the unknown and the unpredictable, in the belief and trust that God is there. And how do I know he is there? I do not know in the sense that I see him there already; I know he will be there because he is with me here and now. The fact of his presence now is the only guarantee of his presence then. He is the faithful God. But how do I recognize him now? Some psychologists will answer that God is simply invented in order to compensate for this sense of inadequacy. But this does not answer the question of the *raison d'être* of that very sense. Why should I have to search for myself? Why should I feel unequal to the very human situation which defines me as I am here and now? The truth is that there could be no sense of inadequacy were there not some perception of adequacy. For at the heart of all the discontent and dissatisfaction and fear before life, is the awareness of all that is good and true and lovable. There are glimpses of a vision of joy which make me realize that I am not called to inadequacy but to fulfilment. It is this mixture of experience, this patchwork of joy and sorrow, of love and fear, of sureness and uncertainty in my life which leads me to know that God is here and now. God is not simply a convenient explanation for the inexplicable. He is the God of life who makes me want to go on loving when I am invited to hate. He is the God of hope who gives me strength to go on when things are really hopeless. To recognize this is to know God, whether or not I put a name on him.

The name the christian will put on him is, of course, Jesus Christ. He is the one who shared our inadequacy to the point of death, who also knew discouragement, weariness, fear, and sorrow. Jesus who

loved man as man has never been loved, who became the man for all mankind, the first-born out of the hopelessness of humanity. He shared with us what we know is human life, and God was with him even through death. This is how I know. And I know it further through the community of faith and hope and love to which this leads me. A community which is signified by the institutional Church but which goes far beyond any institution. For such faith and belief inevitably lead to the recognition of belief even in those who profess no belief. It leads to the recognition of the presence of God even where those in whom he is present do not recognize him. Any true belief or hope or love carries this hallmark of universality of belief and hope and love in all mankind. I cannot love mankind and only believe and hope in myself.

And what is the absolute guarantee that this starting point is not an illusion, that it is not a false start? In the abstract, conceptually, there are guarantees which I can invest with the note of absolutes. In the practice of human living there are none. As I live my life I am constantly going to find myself saying: this could be otherwise, it need not be so. I do not live in a world of concepts, though they are part of my world. I live in a world of the relative, the transient, the changing. A world where at times my own existence and the existence of God are being constantly called in question. And why should this not be so, if life is really a quest and a search and not simply the meaningless repetition of sensations?

There will never be a final answer to the question, who am I?, till there is a final answer to the question, who are we? Therefore I must not look for an answer but continue to ask the question not only of myself but of all men. I will discover myself only in the measure in which I set out to discover mankind. The more I penetrate to the heart of the mystery of man the closer I shall come, perhaps without knowing it, to the one who is the heart of that mystery, who himself came to seek and find this lost sheep that is man, and who gave his life in that search so that the quest should continue even to the end of time.