

GOD'S SEARCH FOR MAN

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

GOD IS NOT the one who is lost. We are. In the game of hide and seek, he is the one who seeks: whilst we, all too often, try to hide. And the terrible thing is that we can call our hiding place, religion. But such is our egoism that we prefer to think of our search for God rather than of his search for us. As if we were paying him a compliment by finding him! But the whole bible is the history of God's search for man: a search that began when Adam and Eve hid in the garden, continued when the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost, and goes on every minute of our human lives. He is the hound of heaven whom we flee down the nights and days of our fears and misconceptions about our pursuer, when so many of our spiritual problems would be resolved if we would only give ourselves up to the joyous experience of being found.

The truth is, of course, that if God were not looking for us we would never dream of searching for him. But we tend to begin from an unconscious presupposition that it is up to us to look for God. This makes of God an elusive will-o'-the-wisp, whose game is to lure us on whilst eluding our grasp. Could there be a more false image of the God who died to save us? Of the good shepherd who goes out to find the one lost sheep? Of the husband in Hosea who seeks out his adulterous wife to renew her with his love? Of the risen Christ who seeks out his frightened and despondent disciples? The extraordinary thing is not that we should find God but that we should be able to miss him, and then start blaming him for our own blindness.

Because the initiative in our search for God comes from him who created our inmost self, and who guarantees that if we seek we shall find, we can have complete trust that our quest will not be in vain. When the Lord speaks simply and, as ever, from the heart, our only response can be to take him at his word with the same simplicity. We shall never really search, passionately and wholeheartedly, unless we are convinced that God can be found. That conviction is the first bold step along a road which will end we know not where, except that it will end in God. But we shall never even begin to seek unless we open our hearts to that divine hunger for man: the hunger which is the root of man's restlessness and refusal to be satisfied. Some

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spark of the fire that the Lord came to cast upon earth must glow in us if we are to set out on the road towards God. Without that we settle down complacently and allow the greatest adventure in human life to pass us by. Or, just as bad, we smother that spark into the cold ember of a disgruntled and reluctant experience of what could be life in abundance. There is nothing godly about a life that is tantamount to throwing in the sponge before the fight has even begun, no matter how much pious ribbon we wrap around the sponge.

We can find God because he wants to be found. This is the beginning of our search. But how much does God want to be found? As much as he wants anything, with all the power of an infinite love. We sing that the Lord fills the earth with his love, but we act as if he did not. For if the love of God does fill the earth, this can only mean that everything in creation can take us to him. Nothing is irrelevant to our search and nothing can lead us astray except what we choose to pervert. God made man in his own image and likeness; and what wonder that the heart of man burns with the same flame of God's great desire. God looked over all he had created and found it was very good; and what wonder that creation is nothing more or less than an expression of God's love, the very language of his desire to draw all mankind to himself. The whole cosmos is a vast panorama of God; but so often we view it through the wrong end of a telescope, and reduce it, and by the same token, God, to what we call human dimensions, and eventually end up with a stunted notion of our own humanity. There are more subtle ways of having false gods before us than worshipping clay idols.

A false god, when he is seriously worshipped, inevitably reproduces a false human being. We can leave it to the philosophers to decide whether it is better to have a false worship of the true God or a true worship of a false god. The point is that we should beware of projecting onto God limitations that simply do not exist. We must indeed search for God; but we must not dictate to him how or where or when he can be found. Nor must we construct from our own blurred vision some sort of identikit picture of the one for whom we are searching. Mary Magdalen was looking for a corpse and was blind to the living who stood in front of her, whom she glimpsed only through her despairing tears.

The true God is Spirit, and those who worship him do so not on this mountain only, nor in Jerusalem only, but in spirit and in truth. Perhaps today we are beginning to experience for ourselves the truth

of Christ's words. The past two decades have witnessed a broadening out of religious experience. Amongst the institutional christian churches there has been the growing recognition of the validity of each other's religious experience, a realization that after all we are all talking about and with the same God. This is happening on two levels. There is the level of what one might call theological ecumenism, where the theologians are coming to a growing mutual understanding on the mechanics of the whole business. They, the grammarians of religious experience, have their essential role, but must of necessity move behind those who are already speaking a new language. That language is spoken on the other level by those who seek the christian God from their hearts, but who have little interest in theological niceties such as processions, spirations, communication of idioms, and other fascinating attempts to explain how the Trinity manage to stay together. God, as is his wont, has shattered the narrow mould of language into which theology was constricting him, and we are back before the God of the mystics who leaves us speechless.

It is important to see this broadening of religious experience in its historical context. It is not something that has appeared like a phenomenon from outer space. Rather, it is a deep current that has always been there, surging in the depths of christian religious experience and now coming to the surface. It is the Spirit speaking in and to and through the churches in the language of the bible which is history, poetry, myth, imagery and experience, rather than the language of clear and distinct ideas which inevitably tends to circumscribe God. How wise was the dying St Thomas who said that all that he had written was so much straw.

There is no doubt that today institutional religion is taking a beating. So many are seeking and finding God outside the limits of the institutions that some of those within wring their hands in horror over the whole business and yearn for that old-time religion. They feel threatened by what is happening, as if in some way it invalidates all their previous experience. Nothing could be more false. It would be as if the christian experience invalidated the thousands of years of the religious experience of Israel. But how can you persuade those who feel threatened that they are simply being challenged? Especially when they have faithfully served God in a religion that offered everything of security and stability, and seemed to be the one unchanging thing in a fleeting world. There is no facile answer to the question. But if today the prodigal is being wine and dined, we

can only pray that we do not fall into the soured righteousness of the elder brother.

God has always gone out to seek and to save the lost; and there is a valid way of interpreting the modern religious scene in precisely those terms. Pope Pius X (or it may have been XI) said that the scandal of the Church in the nineteenth century was that it had lost the working classes as a body, in the majority of european countries. God now seems to be inviting us to go out and lead them back or, better still, like the good shepherd, carry them back on our shoulders and be glad of the burden. The growing social concern among many christians is not the reduction of religion to politics, but the understanding that God is concerned about every level of human living. We may be sunday christians, but there never yet existed a sunday God.

It seems that the great papal social encyclicals are at last having their full effect, and that christians are going out to meet the God of the oppressed, of the poor, of those who suffer injustice. It is heartening to know that this is the same God of Israel whose severest strictures were levelled at those who trampled on the poor and at the same time paid him lip service. The massive inequality that exists on a world scale is becoming a matter of growing concern to thousands of christians. And whilst the gospel of social justice is certainly not new, the christian conscience is undoubtedly becoming more widely sensitive to it. The uneven distribution of wealth and the problem of world hunger are felt more and more as the personal concern of each and everyone who goes by the name of christian. Nor should we be surprised to find that the Prince of Peace is making his message of peace heard in the world today. It has taken the useless holocausts of two disastrous wars to make us reflect in depth on the christian gospel of peace and non-violence. God speaks words of peace and reconciliation in the hearts and with the lips of many who would not even call themselves christian, and invites men to walk in his way, which is salvation and not destruction. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of love and unity, drawing all things into the unity of God; and the movement for world peace seems to represent one of the strong currents of the Spirit at work in the world today. The slogan – make love not war – has certainly been interpreted a little too biologically by some; but surely it is better to shout that slogan (if there has to be a slogan) than to slaughter Saracens to the cry of *Deus vult!*

Here again the critics may object that social concern and peace

movements go hand in hand with a permissive society. They appeal to the abandonment of moral values, usually meaning sexual morality, the breakdown of family life, and the rejection of the notion of marriage as a permanent state. This is obviously not to be condoned. But our reflections should not be coloured by some fantasy that society was ever non-permissive. The strict 'morality' of the calvinist and the puritan permitted them to engage in ruthless and savage wars in the name of religion. The rigid façade of victorian England permitted child labour, racism, and the commercial exploitation of other countries. But 'permissive', in the modern sense of the word, the victorians were not. At least not in public, and not before the children. There is no need to abandon the real values of the past. But at the same time we should not be blind to the real values emerging in the present world, or condemn those who proclaim them, just because we disapprove of their sexual habits. Even a cursory reading of the bible should teach us that. Abraham, father of those who believe, would certainly not have got past any Catholic Marriage Advisory Bureau.

If we are to go out to meet God, we must learn from him to take ourselves and others as they are. This attitude should have nothing of complacency but everything of realism. God writes straight with the crooked lines that we his sons and daughters are, as long as we will let him. The history of mankind has shown that God is a master at working through the limitations of mankind; and it is arrogance for any of us to pretend that we are the exceptions. Even less should we become nervous because God also works outside the limits of our carefully constructed institutions. It took a vision to make Peter realise that the holy Spirit was working beyond the limits of judaism, and there are visions in the world today for those who have eyes to see. And their purpose is the same. To broaden out the narrowness of our vision of God and help us worship God in Christ in the name of all mankind.

One of the most interesting religious phenomena of today is the growing interest in eastern religions. Many have had their first religious experience or have found again the God they had lost through contact with the religions of the east. The God whose light guided the wise men of the east to Bethlehem seems to be inviting western christians to make the same pilgrimage in reverse. Faddism and chicanery are certainly present in the cult of the east, and we should be adult enough to expect them and discount them. But we should be glad that another window has opened on our western

world, and admire an experience of God that, at its best, cannot but enrich our own. Even though we ourselves may not be able to dance to their music, we can still admire and thank God for it. Real faith in Christ should make us open to recognize his truth and his presence in whatever from it may appear, and no matter how strange that form may seem to us.

It would seem that today God is inviting us again, as he so often invited his people of old, to break away from the narrowness of sectarianism and nationalism and, in the name of Christ, to seek the universal God in all the breadth of his universe. Are we then to be angry, like Jonah, when we find the love of God active in places and amongst peoples we regarded as 'heathen', to say nothing of all the animals? Or grumble when the Lord of the harvest gives equal pay to all? God is teaching us that he is to be sought and found, but that he is not to become our private possession. We find him in order to allow ourselves to be possessed by him, but once we begin to behave as if we had God in captivity, we can then expect him to react as he did when Israel fell into the same error. God never stops in his search for us, and we must persevere in our search for him; for it will be the work of our whole lives. Had Columbus sat down in the Caribbean, and spent his time looking back over the sea to Europe, the whole vast hinterland of America would still be undiscovered. Whatever we have found of God, there is always infinitely more to be discovered.

Yet wherever our quest might lead, it must always begin and end on the same level – the level of the heart. For God seeks us out first in the depths of our being, in our hidden fears, joys, sorrows and loves. He, the personal God, comes to us in that central core where we grow as persons. When we seek him we are also seeking ourselves. As we find him progressively, we shall in the same measure gradually find ourselves. But this one search, for it is one movement, will demand that we abandon the masks of many false selves, just as we will have to abandon many false gods along the way. Most important and most difficult of all, we shall have in some way or other to go through the experience of being lost, perhaps even of having lost God; for how can we seek unless we feel that something must be found? But in the final discovery there will be a joy that no man can take away from us.