



Seeking God Today

Certainly the gospel proclaimed in the Scriptures and the Christian church declares that the God of Israel and of the whole world seeks us. But does this central truth of Christianity rule out a search for God on our part? That does not seem to be the case. The Old Testament speaks of the soul's thirsting and yearning for God (Ps 42:2; Isa 26:9). The New Testament speaks of seeking God's kingdom (Matt 6:33) and "the things that are above" (Col 3:1). Augustine's *Confessions* are an exercise in seeking after God, and in the first chapter of his *Proslogium* Anselm exhorts himself and his readers: "Yield room for some little time for God; and rest for a little time in him. Enter the inner chamber of your mind; shut out all thoughts save that of God, and such as can aid you in seeking him; close your door and seek him."

On the basis of these few references it appears already that the search for God belongs to the biblical and classical tradition of the Christian faith. It is not confined to the fringe of the tradition. Indeed Anselm goes on to say that it is because we have been created in the image of God that we are mindful of God, may conceive of God, and love God.

And what of today? Walter Capps reminds us in his essay in this issue that some twenty years ago the death of God was announced, and it was expected that we would become increasingly secular. But that expectation has not been realized. On the contrary, there has been a resurgence of religious commitment and vitality. Not all that has come about can be considered salutary. But the fact is that over the last twenty years we have witnessed a host of phenomena which could not have been predicted: the rise of neo-Pentecostalism and evangelicalism, the quest for spirituality and the filling up of Roman Catholic retreat houses with Protestants, and a renewed interest in liturgy, the Eucharist, and prayer. Cults of every description and the electronic church flourish.

This issue of the journal seeks to gather together various facets of the search for God today. *Paul Knutson* discusses the various forms of piety which exist in congregations and suggests how they can be preserved from mutual destruction and gathered to make common cause in building community. *Walter Capps* discerns evidence for "an open, intense, and even passionate interest in transcendence in America today." He bases this observation primarily on the emergence of the New Religious Right, which he credits with bringing this awareness to the fore in spite of much that is unattractive about it. *Paul Sponheim* contends that belief, although important, has a limited role in the quest for God.

How so? At least three ways can be discerned: the nature of a person's relationship with God eludes full formulation; the activities of many who do not claim belief in God disclose aspects of what can be labeled a quest for God; and even protests against conventional beliefs in God—even a "prophetic atheism"—may in fact be a quest for God as being other, transcendent,

and yet never forsaking humankind. *Hugh Feiss* and *Michael Foss* take up the subject of the “mystical” in religious experience and discipline from Roman Catholic and Protestant perspectives respectively. Feiss gives it a broad definition, addresses objections to it, and sketches ways in which it can be given shape in salutary ways. Foss analyzes the roots of Protestantism’s generally negative attitudes toward the mystical, suggests that the bulk of mystical writing in the history of the church does not correspond in fact to the caricatures made of it, and then calls for a reappraisal of mysticism within the evangelical tradition. *Mary Potter Engel* addresses issues regarding our images and language about God. She develops theological arguments for going beyond the still dominant “Father” imagery and language. She contends that all images and terms which limit accessibility to God are inadequate and need to be superseded. Taking radical monotheism seriously, she suggests that God is the “Great Mysterious” and that our language about God should be revised to correspond to this reality. *Ted Peters* suggests five items concerning the doctrines of God and creation which ought to be considered as we approach the turn of the century, and which are at the same time in touch with the post-modern consciousness. *Peter Van Ness* seeks to make a contribution to “an ecumenical theology of Christian sacraments, preaching, and worship.” He comes to the task out of a Reformed perspective and delineates nuances in the understanding of the sacraments in major reformers (Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli) and the theological and ecclesiastical traditions which followed them. He then goes on to propose away in which symbol and reality can be held together on the basis of a renewed understanding of language which overcomes the splits between sacramental sign and grace and between Word and Sacrament—splits which have characterized much of Protestant worship up to the present day.

The Resources section contains three essays. The first, by *Richard Nysse*, leads us to take another look at the biblical imagery of God as a warrior figure, which is often viewed negatively. He shows how pervasive the imagery is in the Old Testament and helps us to see how necessary it is for the biblical view of God and its concern for justice. The essay by *James Von Frank* is related to the search for God through a kind of discourse which differs from others in this issue. It is meditative and reflective. In response to personal tragedy and pain, he reviews once again the familiar accounts of how Jesus and Socrates faced death, and he reminds us that “life—all existence—becomes infinitely precious” in view of our facing death in a way that is modeled on Jesus’ own experience. That seems fitting particularly in the present season of the church year. Finally, *Frederick Gaiser*, in the Texts in Context essay, provides us with an excellent study of the texts from the Psalms which are assigned by the ecumenical lectionary for the Sundays of Easter in the weeks to come.