



## The Climb toward God<sup>1</sup>

FREDERICK SONTAG

Pomona College, Claremont, California

In the quest to find God, that classic by St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, stands out as a model. Our literature is full of other religious quests, new and old, such as Kazantzakis' *The Saviors of God*, and there is little evidence that the search for God had died out or calmed down in modern times. Of course, many demand certainty in their religious lives; for them God is easily to be found and readily domesticated, or so they say. Comfortable as such a secure relationship to God might be, it would be more believable if: (1) millions did not still find God to be a difficult object and divinity's location obscure; and (2) all those who offer us pictures of God agreed with each other. The agnostic and the skeptic always serve as a check on our assumption that gaining knowledge of God can be easy or obvious. Disputes between religions continue.

The major difficulty along the way of our religious quest, of course, is that almost all agree that God is never seen with the naked eye. Thus, we are always dealing with a divine indirection which makes the use of symbols and analogies a continued necessity. Many object to this lack of concrete verification and find it impossible to accept. Still, new pilgrims continually appear and find themselves intrigued with the attempt to find God. Life presents many challenges, but surely the climb toward God remains one of the most daring. How can one look for a divinity who cannot be seen or search for a God who has announced that a direct approach is impossible and may result in death? Even God's reported actions and communications vary. They come to us through selected instruments, never directly, and thus are still hard to discern today.

All scriptures, even those whose composition may have been divinely inspired, remain controversial and difficult to interpret with precision, in spite of a momentary confidence that modern scholarship could "break the code" and be definitive. God did not write these documents directly but used fragile human scribes, and a group whose skill varied in quality at that. It does not seem that God

<sup>1</sup>This essay was written on ideas suggested in "Seven Summits" by Dick Bass and Frank Wells with Rick Ridgeway; April 1986; Warner Bros., Inc.

could have wanted certainty, or to have statements directly attributed to divinity, or else the transcripts would have been codified in a manner less subject to controversy and disagreement. Of course, it has been said that we can see God better in the lives and actions of some of our saints: Buddha, Moses, Mary, Paul. True, human lives rather than printed words may be the best concrete location to seek divinity, but surely we are looking at human embodiments again and

not directly into the face of God, even in the case of Jesus or Mohammed.

We should not overlook our “spiritual athletes,” such as John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Kazantzakis, etc. They offer us instruction on the approach to God. Still we need a symbol or a set of symbols, some human action or experience, to use as a solid anchor to hold us steady in our approach to God. Kazantzakis uses the metaphor of an intense inner/spiritual struggle that manifests itself in physical agony. John of the Cross uses the image of emptying the soul, purging it of all sensuous content. As a consequence, the soul is plunged into a “dark night” in which it seems lost and disoriented. Such purging, John tells us, painful as it is to endure, cleanses the soul and opens it to the possible vision of God.

## I. MOUNTAIN CLIMBING AND SEARCHING FOR GOD

Mountain climbing has fascinated many in spite of its physical dangers. It intrigues even those who cannot fully understand its attraction, given the life-threatening dangers and extreme physical demands. Let us use mountain climbing as a symbol of the search for God and see if any of its aspects illuminate our relationship to God. In the first place, serious climbing is not for everyone. And certainly this is the case where God is concerned, in spite of the purveyors of popular religion who want to make everyone personally acquainted with God in an easy manner. Saint Augustine’s claim to the contrary, as a total human group we do not seem to have been made so as to be “restless until we rest in Thee” any more than all are destined to scale the world’s highest peaks. It is for the devotees, the determined, if not the obsessed; it is a venture only for the strong.

Some of us are not constitutionally suited either for mountains or for God. A few find mountains and/or God a challenge which absorbs them throughout life. But many can neither fathom this fascination nor follow it. Why would one want to scale the world’s highest peaks in weather conditions that are often inhuman, particularly when the chances for loss of life and failure are high? We lose as many in the climb toward God as we do on treacherous peaks. Any attendant in an insane asylum can point out the inmates damaged by their intense search for God. God is a familiar name within those padded halls, just as mountains have always sent their share to hospitals, permanent injury, and the morgue.

As is true for God, surely a number of attractions draw climbers to the peaks. First, it is the excitement that only a few will make it. It is not a mass sport. In spite of popular talk about God, true dedication to the divine search is at least as rare as scaling mountain peaks. Second, there is the limitation of physical capability. Only a minority can hope to be physically and psychologically equipped for such a dangerous sport. Similarly, rather than all of us being equally prepared to seek God, only a few are actually built to endure the delays and overcome the obstacles. Most of us have happier, easier, less lonely pursuits in mind, just as more play tennis or golf or drink than climb Mount Everest.

Third, perhaps the most important attraction, both for God-seekers and for mountain climbers, is the sheer thrill of standing on one of the world’s highest peaks and looking down on the world below. In the ice and cold at the top of Mount McKinley, you survey the world from above in the same way you imagine God did on the day after creation. You are on top, alone, and the world is below, awesome yet seemingly lifeless. One who captures a comprehensive vision of

God must feel as if he or she has achieved a similar vantage point while the same cold winds blow about. The thrill is to be able to look at the world from a vantage point from which few see it, from the top of Kilimanjaro or from God's point of view of the world. Both are superhuman reversals of our life as it is normally lived out, confined close to the earth. Walking on the moon must provide a similar experience.

Fourth, there is always a sense of having been selected out for a dangerous task, or at least of being drawn into an impelling and absorbing enterprise. Religious people have described this experience as being "called" or "elected." Another image is that of being pursued by the "hound of heaven" in a divine but unrelenting chase. Mountain climbers all seem equally driven, equally obsessed, equally capable of suddenly rejecting the dangers and the challenge. They are as possessed as God-driven women and men are.

Finally, there is a sense that such a pursuit, of God or of the world's highest peaks, gives life a certain significance that ordinary pursuits, no matter how materially or socially successful, never seem able to do. The primary satisfaction lies in the pursuit, in the climb.

All serious climbers know they cannot start out without receiving professional training from experts, without studying how those who have gone before have succeeded or failed. What routes and what techniques did they use that proved to be blind alleys and which were successful? How can these be copied or improved upon in order to reach the same or greater heights? What must one read or do to prepare? How long will it take? When will one be ready for the assault? Are there certain times and opportunities which must be seized or lost forever? Whom shall one choose as comrades in the attempt? But the mountain climber has one clear advantage over the God-obsessed one: the climber knows he or she cannot go it alone but needs a support team. The God-seeker too often thinks the pursuit can be done alone, perhaps because the glaciers to be crossed are unseen. But monastic communities have learned that they must "seek God in community." If so, how shall we go about selecting our approach?

Do many God-climbers lose their way and their lives just as peak-scalers do? Surely, and many more than those who are physically harmed by climbing. Minds are more easily damaged than bodies. Some constitutions can't stand the strain and uncertainty, and many are broken and disillusioned because they sought and could not find. For these, the New Testament promise that those who seek shall find is an ultimate irony. Nevertheless, those who reach the peaks seem to feel that success is worth the loss of those who could not make it. Someone must reach the highest places. For a few to reach the top at least shows that it is possible for humans to do so. It sets our goals higher to know that some can and have seen God, have stood on top of the highest peaks. The ordinary religious follower then knows that God can be reached, even if by the few and even if the ascent is dangerous. God is

accessible, even if only rarely. The peaks can be revealed and God can be made known, even if infrequently and to a dedicated few.

Can one who has scaled the peak tell another who is not particularly attracted by the danger what the experience is like and what makes it so absorbing? Yes, to a certain extent. Those who do not wish to climb read books about climbing. Words can be forged together to convey a certain magical power in either physical or religious exercise. Yet those who climb toward God or up mountains can never quite tell another just what the experience at the top is

like. Some things one must attempt for oneself or know that they can never be fully understood. But if we ourselves wish not to try the ascent, that is no reason to disparage or discourage those who do. Why deny that peaks can be scaled or God be seen just because we have not been there ourselves? Perhaps Nietzsche's madman who comes down from the mountain to announce to the world that "God is dead" simply got discouraged, turned back, and never made it to the top.

High altitude climbers refer to the zone above 26,000 feet as the "death zone." There is a red line above which climbing becomes not only difficult but dangerous. The thin air confuses perception and judgment; even the best can make fatal mistakes. Most of us, of course, do not know what it is like to live up there in the "death zone." Could anyone, except those who climb the world's tallest peaks or who climb close to God, know what the final approach is like? Egalitarian empiricists think each person alike has the ability to judge what God is like, but our climbing analogy questions this wisdom. Perhaps only the few who become experienced professionals can know what the approach to the top is like, or even if it is possible. Although most of us are excluded from that last experience, at least we can read what those who have been there say and try to imagine it for ourselves.

There is caution in the biblical saying, "No one shall see me and live" (Exod 33:20). The final approach to God is not without extreme danger. The desire to scale the highest peak or to see God may be our most dangerous human undertaking, and, ironically, the more so the closer we get to the top. Given the majesty of God and the tallest mountains, why should we imagine it otherwise? It is difficult enough to walk on level ground or to deal with ordinary people. Surely gigantic peaks and galaxy-creating Gods are proportionally more difficult. They are the province of the few who have special energy and a special attraction. They are for the really "beautiful people." In a real sense, anyone so driven can do no other than attempt to scale the peaks or to see God whatever the risk of personal damage.

## II. MOUNTAIN PEAKS OR DUSTY STREETS

If the difficulties and exclusiveness of these endeavors are such as depicted in this analogy, what are we to do with the central assertion of Christianity that God has stooped low and come down to us in simple garb? If we think this is an easy assertion, then perhaps we have been to too many Christmas pageants and seen too many manger scenes. As originally narrated in the gospels, the story must be amazing, unexpected, unpredictable—the world's leading miracle. It is as if mountain peaks had become flat or lowered themselves even to city streets. Of course, odd things do happen; such stories just might be true, in spite of what Christians have done to domesticate that startling suggestion.

Whether or not, as Christians report, God has stooped low and come to us,

what we see before us are simply men and women, cattle, and straw in a manger, not the very image of God. Divinity does not appear as such in the New Testament, but only incognito. Almost all failed to recognize the divine in the incarnation. In fact, the very idea that God might reverse the majesty of divinity and appear in humble, unsophisticated form incensed the religious orthodox of the day. It was blasphemy to suggest such an unfitting thing. To toy with divine majesty is like to get you struck down for touching the ark or crucified for violating religious prescriptions. Dangerous is the attempt to reduce God's majestic mountain peaks to ordinary

dusty paths, where defenders of pious religions become outraged.

Knowing how difficult it is to scale the world's highest peaks, how few succeed, and what exceptional people they are who do, shall we rule out Christianity's odd proposal about a God-come-down-to-earth and call it damaging to divine majesty? Is it dishonest to suggest that an impossible climb is actually easy and open, even to the weak and inexperienced? From the history of the world's spiritual athletes, we know how difficult it has been for those who sought God and how rarely success has been granted. Yet, if we do not bind God to our prescribed ways of behavior, but allow divinity its full power and range of options, God could do such a strange thing as to stoop low. But for humans who do not surrender power easily or willingly that would certainly be an unlikely form of divine behavior to imagine. Try inviting the Queen of England out to a pub.

The Easter story may be miraculous, but the Christmas story is nearly unbelievable. The God who creates universes is found in a stable, his birth subject to indignities? What an odd way for omnipotent Gods to conduct their business. Surely God could have done what was desired for humanity in a less drastic, less absurd way. Why not a world-wide TV spectacular announcing the divine program, beamed via satellite to every remote corner? Why not allow the really brave and strong to continue to try to scale divine peaks, with appropriate rewards for the strong, persistent few? Strange behavior—any climber will agree—for the mountain to come to Mohammed. Just strange enough that millions have been unable to see God in such an unlikely form. They still seek divine majesty far off, oblivious to the chance that God has already reversed the protocol, that the climb up to the peak has been rendered not only not restricted to a few superhumans, but even obsolete—if you can believe such an odd tale.