

A Yearning Too Deep for Words

*I do not look for God because I think it is what I am supposed to do;
I do it because I need to, because of a longing that is not of my own
creation.*

—JOHN OF THE CROSS

MOST OF US ARE looking for a home. We're displaced people. The average American moves every five years, deals with an increasingly frantic pace of life, and has fractures, if not in the immediate family, then in the extended family. Many of us have lost our link to the past. The traditions that spoke to our ancestors no longer speak to us with the same conviction.

We find ourselves on a turbulent ocean called the Twenty-first Century, where through the internet, satellite television, air travel, and cell phones the world is at our doorstep. Vast horizons are open to us as never before. It is an incredible, fascinating time. It is also a bewildering and anxiety-ridden time.

Now, more than ever, we need a home—not just a physical home, but a spiritual one.

A recent television show depicted people trying to live like pioneers. One of the experimental pioneers said, "There are twelve-step groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous. In these groups people start group sharing with, 'Hello my name is John and I'm an alcoholic.'" He continued, "I

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often feel we need support groups, not only for the chemically dependent, but for all of us living in the Twenty-first Century. In such a group I would start by saying, ‘Hello my name is John and I live in the Twenty-first Century’ . . .” These are overwhelming times.

When people had job security, came from stable homes, and lived in the same place their whole lives, spiritual homesickness was less acute. Now, when everything seems tenuous, we need a spiritual anchor.

Whether we act on it or simply dream of it, all of us instinctually return to our origins—to our roots. It may be to the desert to discover ourselves in its stillness (Psalm 46:10). It may be a return to Ireland to find our relatives and family name. It may be a pilgrimage to Lourdes in France, where seekers report healings and direct communication with God.

We yearn to take the journey of Abraham and Sarah—the journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land. This is particularly true in America. The Spanish conquistadors, the Puritans, the pioneers and colonizers all searched for an earthly paradise. And the migration of seekers continues—flocking to Bali or India to find their guru, to California to find the sun and its gardens of Eden, or to that church with the new young minister who promises heaven.

Most of us are searching for a Promised Land where we can lie down in green pastures, be led to still waters, and restore our souls (Psalm 23:2–3a). We yearn for the tumultuous waters to still. We long to catch our breath and connect with something far deeper than our disconnected Twenty-first Century selves. We thirst for a refuge that transcends our fragmented, internet-surfing minds. We thirst for a spiritual home that is as spacious as the starlit desert sky, yet as intimate as our spouse’s body who occupies our bed.

We thirst for something at the edge of our tongues, for a spaciousness that creates space where there is no space, for light-hearted presence of mind that brings humor into the humorless situation, for something at the tips of our tongues that echoes the invisible freedom of monarch butterfly wings.

EXPOSURE TO THE WORLD’S RELIGIONS

I grew up all over the world and took in the world’s religions by osmosis. Countries outside the United States where I’ve lived include Indonesia, Bolivia, Yemen, Uganda, and India.

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Many of my peers have been exposed to the world's religions. And as a result they can no longer accept the unquestioned Christian dogmas of previous generations. Their worldview has expanded and now their faith needs broadening to stay relevant.

The task of integrating Twenty-first Century insights with Christian tradition is daunting, so many of my peers reject Christianity wholesale. Others jump ship to other spiritually rich religious traditions that speak credibly to Twenty-first Century challenges.¹ Still others retreat from organized religion in order to fashion tailor-made spiritualities borrowed from various traditions.

My approach was different. I believed Christianity has the spiritual depth to weather the Twenty-first Century storms. And I passionately sought out this depth.

The spiritual vigor I looked for wasn't taught in my childhood church. I was taught many valuable lessons of community life and humble service, but the essence of Jesus and the deep spiritual underpinnings of his teachings eluded me. I think they also eluded the minister of my youth. Yet I instinctively knew that the language to express the deepest spirituality of Christian tradition existed. So I searched.

In college and graduate school Christianity wasn't in vogue. In fact, Christianity was openly lambasted by my peers. Given the general hostility toward Christianity, especially on the West Coast, it is little wonder so many drift away.

The progressive minded Christians with whom I went to school lamented the state of American Christianity as a whole, which often champions pop-culture sentimentality and devalues reason. Yet, these progressive Christians were unable to find an alternative that gets to the heart of Twenty-first Century challenges.

My progressive Christian friends today often find themselves in mainline denominations that are losing numbers yearly. These denominations lack a unified theological stance. At worst they're wishy-washy about their faith in Christ. Or at best they appeal to the historic Jesus. Their faith also lacks the passion of their evangelical and fundamentalist sisters

1. Many within Christian tradition honor pluralism and interfaith dialogue and so speak credibly to Twenty-first Century challenges. The problem is this pluralism usually doesn't cohere with sound theology. In other words, the theological underpinnings of the pluralism most often seem new-agey, vague, out of step with the roots of the tradition.

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and brothers. And the lack of conviction and passion is a big part of the perpetual decline of Mainline Christian Churches.²

The alternatives seem to be passionate yet closed-minded Christianity on the right or open-minded yet watered-down Christianity on the left. Hence the title of Jim Wallis' book, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*.

NEED FOR A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SPIRITUAL ANCHOR

We throw our faith anchor into the Twenty-first Century Ocean and find our rope isn't long enough. The length of rope that worked for our ancestors no longer works for us. The ocean has gotten deeper. The uncharted globe has become the pluralistic global village accessible by internet, cell phone, and global positioning satellites.

The spirituality that sustained our great-grandparents doesn't seem to have enough breadth to weather the postmodern storms. When confronted with interfaith dialogue, we lack adequate answers and the holes in our faith become apparent. When all we knew was fried chicken and spuds, it satisfied. But now, across the street there's chicken curry at the Thai restaurant, Tandoori chicken at the Indian restaurant, and Kung Pao chicken at the Chinese restaurant.

The world is shrinking. And now we have access to anything, including powerfully rich spiritual traditions from the East. So, if we're going to stay with Christianity, it will have to withstand comparison shopping. Accepting Jesus as personal savior, going to church weekly, and hearing comforting words about deliverance on the last day may no longer sustain us. This may have worked for our ancestors and it may work for traditional people who have chosen not to look past their back yard. But there are many, including me, for whom the standard exclusive model of Christianity doesn't completely satisfy.

So where do we go?

The *God-shaped hole*,³ as Augustine put it, yearns to be filled in every generation. The yearning for God may be more acute in this generation than ever before. For we live in an age of spiritual homelessness—an age of spiritual poverty. Not only do we find homeless people walking our streets.

2. See *Mainline Christianity* in glossary (Appendix A).

3. In Augustine's *Confessions* he wrote "My soul is restless, Oh Lord (God), until it rests in thee." From this sentence the phrase "God-shaped hole" was coined.

We also find the spiritually homeless—people without an anchor—people without the enduring stability and roots that come from generations-old faith communities. In America alone, there are increasing numbers of people disconnected from their spiritual source. In fact, it is estimated that thirty-five million Americans have lost their faith.⁴

Like many spiritually homeless Westerners I've had a longing too deep for words. I've been searching for a spiritual home for my head and for my heart in the Twenty-first Century. This book is about that search. . .

The Alexandrian Mystics' teaching about Jesus has the power to restore the faith of our ancestors. It has the power to answer the Twenty-first Century challenges. It can heal Christianity's present divide. It can heal our polarized tradition, careening towards fundamentalism on the one hand and rootless new age Christianity on the other.

Although virtually unknown, there was a coherent and long standing legacy of Christian mystics—a legacy passed down through generations of monks and clerics in and near the city of Alexandria, Egypt between 312–454 CE. For one hundred and fifty years there was consensus among the early Christian mystics about Jesus' essence. I've sought this teaching my whole life and it is now my spiritual home.

REFORM AND RENEWAL IN THE CHURCH

Many Christians today don't have a spiritual home. Part of the reason is the lack of a frame of reference for Mystic Christianity. So, many flock to mystics of other world religions.

I believe the teachings of the Alexandrian Mystics have the potential to cure spiritual homelessness and spawn reform and Christian renewal.

Christianity needs deep change or it will slowly diminish in influence and die out as it has in Europe. People no longer want a status quo social club. That's why fraternal orders and social club churches are going extinct. In the Twenty-first Century staid ceremonial niceties don't inspire deep commitment and transformation. People want a holistic way of seeing the world. People want a way of life characterized by the profound reverence and ecstatic celebration of the mystics.

My mission is to make the Alexandrian Mystics more accessible. For authentic and deeply rooted mysticism is the highest expression of faith and people instinctively yearn for it. The Alexandrian Mystics took God seriously—put God at the center. And we yearn to do the same. We need a

4. Sanford, "If God Disappeared" Lecture.

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primal model for understanding Mystic Christianity. For mysticism glues together the disparate fragments of a tradition, uniting and revitalizing it.

As attested in numerous writings of The Alexandrian Mystics, union with God through prayer is the central focus.⁵ Thomas Keating, a contemporary Benedictine Monk, speaks of Christian enlightenment as *Divine Union*. Our fragmented Twenty-first Century lives need the experience of unity, even if it's only for an hour in meditation or in worship. The early Christian mystics are the wellspring of this dream.

The average American moves every five years. Over fifty percent of marriages fail. Teen suicide, gun violence, terrorism, and environmental devastation continue to escalate. And technology continues to rocket, whirl, orbit, and overwhelm. In response to our anxious and fragmented world we seek holistic vision. Yet, unfortunately, Christianity often becomes another arena of conflict, partisan politics, and *us versus them*.

More than ever, we need Christian leadership and teaching that reflects wholeness. The Jesus Paradox of The Alexandrian Mystics has the power to heal souls yearning for a deeply rooted mystical homeland. It has the power to heal divisions in the body of Christ.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- 1) Do you think the “spiritual homelessness” Smith talks about is real? Why or why not?
- 2) Do you lament the state of Christianity as a whole today? Why or why not?
- 3) Do you think the spirituality of our great-grandparents can weather the postmodern storms? Why or why not?
- 4) What do you make of the “God-shaped hole” that Smith claims needs to be filled in every generation?
- 5) Application question: Is Christianity “in vogue” in the circles you frequent? Explain.

5. In my estimation the most significant of these writings is *The Philokalia*. Maximus the Confessor and Saint Peter of Damascus make the top of my list of Philokalia writers.