

A Reporter in Search of GOD

by HOWARD WHITMAN

A great revival of interest in spiritual life finds millions of Americans seeking to understand and reach the Deity. A writer joins in their quest

I KNOW the perfect solution to the world's problems," the mechanic said. The scene was a small garage in New England. The mechanic, greasy-handed, was working with his head cocked upward at an odd angle under a car on a hydraulic lift.

"The perfect solution?" I queried.

"Yup," he said, shooting a blob of grease into a spring knuckle. He came out from under the car, straightened his head and said, "Man ought to abdicate and let God take over."

I set those words down in my notebook. They took their place beside so many similar words I had heard from the lips of Americans everywhere. A woman sitting next to me on a cable car in San Francisco had said, "Human beings have made such a mess of this world. I wish God would take it back and run it Himself." A businessman in little Kutztown, Pennsylvania, had remarked, "Mankind has had its chance—and muffed it." An old farmer near Ashtabula, Ohio, had crackled tersely, "Only God can save the world now."

Americans everywhere are turning to God as they never have before. Some, like the mechanic, want to throw in the chips and let God take over. Some just want God to pull their chestnuts out of the fire. Some, badly frightened, are rushing to the security of God's apron strings. Some sincerely want to find God and abide with Him.

Whatever the shading of motive, millions of Americans who previously may never have been sure, or even cared, whether God was in His Heaven are turning to Him now.

Churches are filling up. They are dusting

off pews they haven't used in years. Memberships are zooming. Many, like the Oak Park Christian Church in Kansas City, Missouri, have had to hold duplicate services to accommodate the crowds. Evangelists, from Billy Graham to pretty Kathryn Kuhlman, are packing 'em in. People are gobbling up religious books as though they were spiritual headache tablets. And one earthy metropolitan newspaper featured the story of Jesus in the very same big, black type it customarily reserves for dope rings, murders and Hollywood divorces.

The Reverend George W. Lucas, of the Bethel Baptist Church in Dayton, Ohio, described the feeling which people have nowadays as a "heart hunger." He said to me, "Everybody is feeling for something, listening for something. People are hoping they can catch a bit of that something as the rush goes by."

At a medical school in the Midwest, I met a young man who was dropping out in his final year. He had decided not to be a doctor. He was going to be a minister instead.

"Why?" I asked.

The youth, tall, Lincolnesque, with heavy black eyebrows, replied, "I've been cutting man apart for several years now. But I've never found what I've been looking for. The soul never showed up under my microscope."

A businessman in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, Harold U. Landis, head of the Penn Oil and Penn Lumber Companies, remarked crisply, "More and more people are willing to sit down and listen. They are realizing there is more to life than meets the eye."

Undoubtedly you, too, have seen, or

sensed, this "reaching out," this search for God. As a reporter, I have joined it. I have set out toward the small towns and the big cities, toward the factories and the farms, toward the big crossroads and the obscure corners of America—toward wherever the search may lead.

This is my first report. Later reports will deal with the search for God—for values to hold on to, for meanings of life in a tense, bedeviling age—as that search goes on in millions of hearts, perhaps in your own. A reporter's inquisitive nose will be poked into the basic beliefs of scientists, nature lovers, intellectuals, even atheists; into the out-of-the-way sects and crackpot fringes. Later reports will tangle with such puzzlers as the value of prayer, the question of fate and the riddle of life after death.

But in this first report I want to deal with first things first. Why are people turning to God? What do they mean by "God"? How do they propose to reach Him? How understand Him?

"People are turning to God," said Bishop Henry Knox Sherrill, "because they've learned something from history. They've learned that mankind cannot save himself by himself."

We sat in the bishop's study on Fourth Avenue, New York, and saw out the window some of the wondrous towers of steel and stone which man had built. I remembered how that morning, in one of the towers, I had seen a busy little man tacking up notices about where to run in case it should come toppling down.

Bishop Sherrill continued, "Until now,



PHOTOGRAPH FOR COLLIER'S BY ANTON BRUEHL

people felt that man himself could work out everything. 'Progress' was the answer to all his problems. He thought he was going up an escalator. All he had to do was learn more, invent more, progress more—and the world would get better and better. Now people can see that something has been left out of the picture. What has been left out is God."

Something deep inside of people seems to tell them that. That's why they're reaching out. Bishop Sherrill, presiding bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church and president of the new National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., summed up the mood of today: "Man's necessity is God's opportunity."

But certainly man has found himself in a spot before. He's been bogged down so many times. What's different about this time?

The difference, as I found it, is that now—for the first time—people feel really helpless. They've never felt really helpless before. They've always had some ace up their sleeve: science, technology, mass production, medicine, psychiatry, education, government, League of Nations, United Nations.

Do they think any of these things can save them now?

"No," said one of the men I met. "We have exhausted the tangibles!"

So people are turning to God.

It's not just a "save me, save my skin" kind of turning. It is not all foxhole religion. Much of it is the sincere "heart hunger" the Reverend Lucas of Dayton talked about. People are not merely quaking; they are searching.

When the National Council of Churches was being formed last November, the Reverend Ralph W. Sockman, of Christ Church in New York, declared, "Never since the first century have conditions been so ripe for a new apostolic age. The dangers which threaten the world, the longings for peace and brotherhood in the hearts of common men, the visions of unity caught by church leaders—all furnish a striking parallel to the conditions confronting Christ's first disciples."

But if people are reaching out for God, do they know what it is they're reaching for? People I talked to everywhere, in country stores, along busy thoroughfares, on farms and in skyscrapers—all of them used the word "God" without hesitation. But just what did they mean by "God"?

In my reportorial rounds I came upon many definitions of God, perhaps all the same. A schoolteacher said, "God is wisdom." A businessman said, "God is nature." Many people said, "God is love." Others said, "God is truth," "God is mercy," "God is the creator," "God is the supreme being," "God is the Father."

In Rochester, New York, I heard this discussion between a minister and a biochemist. The Reverend Murray Alexander Cayley, of

the First Presbyterian Church of Rochester, had taken me to the home of the biochemist. I was an extra man on a pastoral visit. We had eaten a fine dinner of roast beef. Now the biochemist, the minister, their wives and I sat about in the living room—and the question of God came up.

THE BIOCHEMIST: To me, God is intelligence. God is the sum total of intelligence in the universe—the supreme intelligence.

THE MINISTER: I'd say God is infinite spirit.

THE BIOCHEMIST'S WIFE: Just what do you mean by that?

THE MINISTER: That's always the trouble when we use words. Words are finite. How can we use them to describe the infinite? Anyway, I'll try. I'd say God is a spiritual reality, an intelligent personality, best described as infinite wisdom, love and power.

THE BIOCHEMIST'S WIFE: It's hard to picture anything like that.

THE MINISTER: Of course. A student of mine had the same trouble. He finally described God as an "oblong blur."

THE BIOCHEMIST: Why be so mysterious? I can observe God every day—in terms of supreme intelligence—right on my laboratory

you've seen is the results of power—the manifestations of power. Can you see electricity? Oh, you can see molecular and electronic activity caused by electricity. You can see a bulb light, a spark jump. But can you see the essence—the power itself?

THE BIOCHEMIST: Well, we know it's there.

THE MINISTER: Precisely. *We know God is there.*

THE BIOCHEMIST'S WIFE: Isn't it easier just to think of God as a person? I don't mean any special person. That is, He wouldn't look like anybody in particular. But He would be, well, more or less in the shape of a person.

THE BIOCHEMIST: You mean an old man with a white beard sitting on the edge of a cloud?

THE BIOCHEMIST'S WIFE: Oh, I know it sounds childish. But when I pray to God, I like to think of Him as being something definite, not a particular person, but—in the general shape of a person.

THE MINISTER'S WIFE: Yes, what difference does it make? If you find it easier—if you're more comfortable thinking of God that way, why shouldn't you?

THE MINISTER: It puts you out on a limb. The scientists will look up into the sky with their telescopes and report back that your "person" isn't there. They'll tell you that if anyone were up there, he'd fall through space and be burned up by friction.

THE BIOCHEMIST'S WIFE: Then where is God?

THE MINISTER: Everywhere.

THE BIOCHEMIST: Just as I said—the force and the power behind everything. The supreme intelligence.

THE MINISTER: Exactly. The infinite spirit.

The man of science and the man of religion agreed, in the end, that they were looking at the very same thing—even though they stood at different windows.

There are lots of windows to look through.

The Reverend Albert D. Betts, a Methodist minister from the little hamlet of Travelers Rest, South Carolina, gave me a rich, inclusive definition. Said he, "God is the creator and governor of the universe, the all-knowing, the all-just, almighty, supreme intelligence. God is spirit. God is light.

God is love."

"One could give a hundred-and-one definitions, and all of them might be truthful approximations," remarked Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, of The Temple in Cleveland. He tilted back thoughtfully in the chair of his book-lined study and offered this one—"God is the thinking and creating Mind of the universe. He is the source of all its laws, physical and spiritual. The universe is a manifestation of God."

Having given the definition, the rabbi sat forward and said, as if humbly to withdraw it, "Perhaps (*Continued on page 82*)

Howard Whitman, a veteran magazine writer, embarked several months ago upon a search that many millions of Americans are making—a search for God. In the accompanying article, he reports on the first steps of his spiritual journey, telling why Americans are turning to God, what they mean by "God" and how they propose to understand and reach Him. Later articles, to be published from time to time, will tell what he learned from Protestants, Catholics and Jews about their quest for God, will report on the religions of men and women in many walks of life, and will take up such questions as prayer, and life after death. Mr. Whitman was born in Cleveland in 1914 and educated at Western Reserve.



Howard Whitman

After jobs on the Paris Herald, the London Daily Express and the Daily News of New York, he became a full-time magazine writer six years ago. He has published 47 articles in Collier's. His home is in Westport, Conn.

table. I put two chemicals together, they act upon each other, and there you have it. They act upon each other in accordance with absolute natural laws. There is intelligence, sense, rhyme, reason to the way they act upon each other. That intelligence, that power behind the immutable law and design of the universe, is my concept of God.

THE MINISTER: That power, you say?

THE BIOCHEMIST: Yes.

THE MINISTER: Well, you're a scientist. Have you ever seen power?

THE BIOCHEMIST: Certainly.

THE MINISTER: No, you haven't. All



Jim Gurnea