

## Chapter 2

### God Incomprehensible

Lord, how great is our dilemma! In Thy Presence silence best becomes us, but love inflames our hearts and constrains us to speak.

Were we to hold our peace the stones would cry out; yet if we speak, what shall we say? Teach us to know that we cannot know, for the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Let faith support us where reason fails, and we shall think because we believe, not in order that we may believe.

In Jesus ☩ name. Amen.

The child, the philosopher, and the religionist have all one question: ☩☩☩ What is God like? ☩☩☩

This book is an attempt to answer that question. Yet at the outset I must acknowledge that it cannot be answered except to say that God is not like anything; that is, He is not exactly like anything or anybody.

We learn by using what we already know as a bridge over which we pass to the unknown. It is not possible for the mind to crash suddenly past the familiar into the totally unfamiliar. Even the most vigorous and daring mind is unable to create something out of nothing by a spontaneous act of imagination. Those strange beings that populate the world of mythology and superstition are not pure creations of fancy. The imagination created them by taking the ordinary inhabitants of earth and air and sea and extending their familiar forms beyond their normal boundaries, or by mixing the forms of two or more so as to produce something new. However beautiful or grotesque these may be, their prototypes can always be identified. They are like something we already know.

The effort of inspired men to express the ineffable has placed a great strain upon both thought and language in the Holy Scriptures. These being often a revelation of a world above nature, and the minds for which they were written being a part

of nature, the writers are compelled to use a great many like words to make themselves understood.

When the Spirit would acquaint us with something that lies beyond the field of our knowledge, He tells us that this thing is like something we already know, but He is always careful to phrase His description so as to save us from slavish literalism. For example, when the prophet Ezekiel saw heaven opened and beheld visions of God, he found himself looking at that which he had no language to describe. What he was seeing was wholly different from anything he had ever known before, so he fell back upon the language of resemblance. As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire.

The nearer he approaches to the burning throne the less sure his words become: And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it. And I saw as the colour of amber, as the appearance of fire round about within it.... This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

Strange as this language is, it still does not create the impression of unreality. One gathers that the whole scene is very real but entirely alien to anything men know on earth. So, in order to convey an idea of what he sees, the prophet must employ such words as likeness, appearance, as it were, and the likeness of the appearance. Even the throne becomes the appearance of a throne and He that sits upon it, though like a man, is so unlike one that He can be described only as the likeness of the appearance of a man.

When the Scripture states that man was made in the image of God, we dare not add to that statement an idea from our own head and make it mean in the exact image. To do so is to make man a replica of God, and that is to lose the unicity of God and end with no God at all. It is to break down the wall, infinitely high, that separates That-which-is-God from that-which-is-not-God. To think of creature and Creator as alike in essential being is to rob God of most of His attributes and

reduce Him to the status of a creature. It is, for instance, to rob Him of His infinitude: there cannot be two unlimited substances in the universe. It is to take away His sovereignty: there cannot be two absolutely free beings in the universe, for sooner or later two completely free wills must collide. These attributes, to mention no more, require that there be but one to whom they belong.

When we try to imagine what God is like we must of necessity use that-which-is-not-God as the raw material for our minds to work on; hence whatever we visualize God to be, He is not, for we have constructed our image out of that which He has made and what He has made is not God. If we insist upon trying to imagine Him, we end with an idol, made not with hands but with thoughts; and an idol of the mind is as offensive to God as an idol of the hand.

☩☩☩ The intellect knoweth that it is ignorant of Thee, ☩☩☩ said Nicholas of Cusa, ☩☩☩ because it knoweth Thou canst not be known, unless the unknowable could be known, and the invisible beheld, and the inaccessible attained. ☩☩☩

☩☩☩ If anyone should set forth any concept by which Thou canst be conceived, ☩☩☩ says Nicholas again, ☩☩☩ I know that that concept is not a concept of Thee, for every concept is ended in the wall of Paradise.... So too, if any were to tell of the understanding of Thee, wishing to supply a means whereby Thou mightest be understood, this man is yet far from Thee.... forasmuch as Thou art absolute above all the concepts which any man can frame. ☩☩☩

Left to ourselves we tend immediately to reduce God to manageable terms. We want to get Him where we can use Him, or at least know where He is when we need Him. We want a God we can in some measure control. We need the feeling of security that comes from knowing what God is like, and what He is like is of course a composite of all the religious pictures we have seen, all the best people we have known or heard about, and all the sublime ideas we have entertained.

If all this sounds strange to modern ears, it is only because we have for a full half century taken God for granted. The glory of God has not been revealed to this generation of men. The God

of contemporary Christianity is only slightly superior to the gods of Greece and Rome, if indeed He is not actually inferior to them in that He is weak and helpless while they at least had power.

If what we conceive God to be He is not, how then shall we think of Him? If He is indeed incomprehensible, as the Creed declares Him to be, and unapproachable, as Paul says He is, how can we Christians satisfy our longing after Him? The hopeful words, ¶¶¶ Acquaint now thyself with him, and be at peace, ¶¶¶ still stand after the passing of the centuries; but how shall we acquaint ourselves with One who eludes all the straining efforts of mind and heart? And how shall we be held accountable to know what cannot be known?

¶¶¶ Canst thou by searching find out God? ¶¶¶ asks Zophar the Naamathite; ¶¶¶ canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know? ¶¶¶ ¶¶¶ Neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, ¶¶¶ said our Lord, ¶¶¶ and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him. ¶¶¶ The Gospel according to John reveals the helplessness of the human mind before the great Mystery which is God, and Paul in First Corinthians teaches that God can be known only as the Holy Spirit performs in the seeking heart an act of self-disclosure.

The yearning to know What cannot be known, to comprehend the Incomprehensible, to touch and taste the Unapproachable, arises from the image of God in the nature of man. Deep calleth unto deep, and though polluted and landlocked by the mighty disaster theologians call the Fall, the soul senses its origin and longs to return to its Source. How can this be realized?

The answer of the Bible is simply ¶¶¶ through Jesus Christ our Lord. ¶¶¶ In Christ and by Christ, God effects complete self-disclosure, although He shows Himself not to reason but to faith and love. Faith is an organ of knowledge, and love an organ of experience. God came to us in the incarnation; in atonement He reconciled us to Himself, and by faith and love we enter and lay hold on Him.

¶¶¶ Verily God is of infinite greatness, ¶¶¶ says Christ, ¶ the enraptured troubadour, Richard Rolle; ¶¶¶ more than we can think; ... unknowable by created things; and can never be comprehended by us as He is in Himself. But even here and now, whenever the heart begins to burn with a desire for God, she is made able to receive the uncreated light and, inspired and fulfilled by the gifts of the Holy Ghost, she tastes the joys of heaven. She transcends all visible things and is raised to the sweetness of eternal life....

Herein truly is perfect love; when all the intent of the mind, all the secret working of the heart, is lifted up into the love of God. ¶¶¶ ☺

That God can be known by the soul in tender personal experience while remaining infinitely aloof from the curious eyes of reason constitutes a paradox best described as

Darkness to the intellect

But sunshine to the heart.

Frederick W. Faber

The author of the celebrated little work *The Cloud of Unknowing* develops this thesis throughout his book. In approaching God, he says, the seeker discovers that the divine Being dwells in obscurity, hidden behind a cloud of unknowing; nevertheless he should not be discouraged but set his will with a naked intent unto God. This cloud is between the seeker and God so that he may never see God clearly by the light of understanding nor feel Him in the emotions. But by the mercy of God faith can break through into His Presence if the seeker but believe the Word and press on.

Michael de Molinos, the Spanish saint, taught the same thing. In his *Spiritual Guide* he says that God will take the soul by the hand and lead her through the way of pure faith, ¶¶¶ and causing the understanding to leave behind all considerations and reasonings He draws her forward.... Thus He causes her by means of a simple and obscure knowledge of faith to aspire only to her Bridegroom upon the wings of love. ¶¶¶

For these and similar teachings Molinos was condemned as a heretic by the Inquisition and sentenced to life imprisonment. He soon died in prison, but the truth he taught can never die. Speaking of the Christian soul he says: ¶¶¶ Let her suppose that all the whole world and the most refined conceptions of the wisest intellects can tell her nothing, and that the goodness and beauty of her Beloved infinitely surpass all their knowledge, being persuaded that all creatures are too rude to inform her and to conduct her to the true knowledge of God.... She ought then to go forward with her love, leaving all her understanding behind. Let her love God as He is in Himself, and not as her imagination says He is, and pictures Him. ¶¶¶

¶¶¶ What is God like? ¶¶¶ If by that question we mean ¶¶¶ What is God like in Himself? ¶¶¶ there is no answer. If we mean ¶¶¶ What has God disclosed about Himself that the reverent reason can comprehend? ¶¶¶ there is, I believe, an answer both full and satisfying. For while the name of God is secret and His essential nature incomprehensible, He in condescending love has by revelation declared certain things to be true of Himself. These we call His attributes.

Sovereign Father, heavenly King,

Thee we now presume to sing;

Glad thine attributes confess,

Glorious all, and numberless.

Charles Wesley