

Reaching for the Invisible God, by Philip Yancey

reviewed by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [August 1, 2001](#) issue

I am not a pastor, but a pilgrim, septic with doubt." With this disclaimer, Philip Yancey embarks on another quest to tell the truth about the Christian life "without overselling it." He succeeds brilliantly, in no small part because he interprets the intricacies of his own faith journey so well. The language of journey saturates these pages. Readers get to walk and climb through all kinds of interesting terrain where Yancey's mind regularly treads.

He may not be a pastor, but Yancey writes with a pastoral heart about everyday struggles to trust a God whom we cannot see. That's why this popular theologian continues to sell so well. If "popular" means "readable," Yancey has mastered the art, presenting ideas with nuance and insight. His distaste for big inert words--words like omniscient, impassable and imperturbable, which he finds other theologians using to describe God--inspires his own desire for accessibility. Yancey asks the big questions simply, not simplistically. Problems are more interesting to him than solutions. Ambiguity always has a place in his pages.

The book's strategy is to identify helpful parallels between our human ways of relating to one another and our possibilities for knowing God. Just as we establish human relationships by first learning people's names, then spending time with them, giving gifts, making sacrifices, sharing happy and sad times, laughing and weeping, revealing secrets, making commitments, fighting, arguing and ultimately reconciling, so Yancey believes we get acquainted with God. The parallels are not exact, as God's infinity and invisibility guarantee. But the author is willing to explore at least the outlines of a comparison, given his tolerance for uncertainty and his respect for trust. He writes, "I have focused on a relationship with God from the human point of view [because it is] the only point of view I have."

It would be misleading to suggest that Yancey lacks an appreciation for the mystery and transcendence of God. He cautions against chumminess with the Divine, he is

careful not to put words into God's mouth, and he is profoundly aware that worship, not friendship, is the Bible's chief mode of portraying our relationship with God. Even as he establishes a fascinating personality profile for God--God is gentle, God is shy, God hides, etc.--he is quick to exhibit restraint. "I have learned one absolute principle in calculating God's presence or absence, and that is that I cannot."

There is a memorable section on a faith that "acts as if." Here we get the healthy reminder that trusting and obeying God usually precede confidence in God. "It's much easier to act your way into feelings than to feel your way into actions." Yancey contends that our very pursuit of God often makes possible an honest engagement with God. This line of reasoning offers a refreshing antidote to the emotionally driven religious experience that excites our era.

Plenty of other theological treats are tucked into the book. One marvelous chapter suggests that if Americans had a deeper appreciation for arranged marriages we might be less inclined to center our relationship with God on mutual attraction. Since God does not receive us on the basis of our high-quality performance or sex appeal, why should we choose whether or not to like God or relate to God based on our adolescent notions of love--on whether God seems to offer us desirable results?

Throughout *Reaching for the Invisible God* we hear Yancey's not-so-subtle disappointment with features of his evangelical past that denied a role for doubt and downgraded the experience of those who lacked a voice-to-voice conversation with God. But he also gives us the pithy grace and holy passion we have come to expect from him. His writing is rooted in a wonderful combination of biblical familiarity and personal pilgrimage. Tapping the minds of great thinkers from across the ages, Yancey invites readers to reach for the richness of a life grounded in togetherness with God. He admits to the many challenges of nurturing such a relationship. But like Simon Peter (Lord, to whom shall we go?) he sees no alternative worth our energy. "The only thing more difficult than having a relationship with an invisible God is having no such relationship."