

A sociologist reflects

# Where has God gone?

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*For some time, sociology has questioned the many changing religious beliefs. Scholars highlight two opposing, interrelated tendencies: Religion is on one hand losing its role in society, and on the other, the demand for spirituality is growing. Silvia Cataldi is associate professor of sociology at the University of Rome La Sapienza.*

*God is dead.* This statement by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche expresses the feeling of Western societies today. It indicates the end of an era, but also heralds something new.

Sociology has been questioning changing religious beliefs in the contemporary world. Scholars highlight two opposing, interrelated tendencies: Religion is on one hand losing its moral role in society, and on the other, the demand for spirituality or religiosity is growing in individuals and groups.

## A first trend: secularization

Secularization can be understood as the process by which religious beliefs, practices and institutions have gradually lost their societal impact compared to the past. Previously, religions brought forward institutional tasks and there was a management of power. Instead, today, with the differentiation and autonomation of different realms, a clear separation of Church and State is now affirmed. Religious bodies have become a subsystem among others and lost their dominance and orientation relative to other systems. There is now recognition of the secular nature of government. Politics has been entrusted to civil authority and education emancipated from ecclesiastical authority in Western societies. Religious content, too, is now of lesser influence in the arts, philosophy and literature, with science gradually establishing itself as an autonomous discipline.

### *Rational thought and technological advancement*

According to Lutheran theologian and sociologist, Peter Berger and others, this has all been linked to the emphasis now given to rationality and technological advancement. In the past, humanity turned to religion to explain phenomena that were disorienting, while today one relies on science and process. In other words, in Western countries, conceptual mechanisms are increasingly based on science, while cultural beliefs and values have also become increasingly secular. For this reason, religion today is now more of a symbolic system among many other systems and is losing its influence.

### *Religion itself transformed*

But there is more. Renowned sociologist Max Weber speaks of organized religions becoming slowly transformed under the influence of rational thought into colder systems that are progressively more institutionalized and bureaucratic. In short, according to Weber this rational tendency has paradoxically led to an engulfing of these same religions over time.

Weber's theory explains several current phenomena, such as the widespread skepticism towards the Churches and various religious institutions evident in westernized cultures. Likewise, the sharp decrease in participation in religious rites is also relevant. In Italy, for example, the Italian National Institute of Statistics reports a drop in weekly worship service attendance over the past 30 years from 39.2% to 19.2% of the population.

### *Detaching religion from everyday life*

Western culture also perceives religion as no longer belonging to the public realm and often believers relegate their relationship with God, and transcendence, to the private realm such that it has little or nothing to do with daily life, work, family, politics and entertainment. Nietzsche himself realized that people today no longer base their morals on faith but rather see values as clearly distinct from faith and religious doctrine.

One might ask if there is still room for God in the western world or whether the religious decline is inevitably becoming seen as a kind of 'proof of its demise'? Sociologists respond to this question by pointing out that alongside the signs of crisis, there are also signs of emerging innovation.

## **Signs of innovation**

Like other societal spheres, religion is also experiencing an era of detraditionalization. The relationship with transcendence is distancing itself from traditional and dogmatic frameworks. Rather, there is a search for new ways of attainment and transmission.

### *The new movements*

One striking phenomenon is the 'new movements', the new forms of religious associations emerging globally, with the aim of fostering change. Emblematic of this in Europe, for example, is "Together for Europe", which brings more than 200 European movements and communities into dialogue. Numerous, recent movements within the Catholic realm have also been born, especially after the Second Vatican Council. They express vital spiritual and charismatic efforts of self-reform.

But this "movementist" phenomenon is not limited only to Christianity. Similar currents are noted in Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. They speak to the need to overcome a perceived 'formalism' of doctrine and dogma. There is a focus today on experiential service to others, asceticism and a return to the source.

### *Collaboration among religious institutions*

Another innovative sign is that of different religious institutions drawing closer, so as to understand one another and collaborate in joint service to humanity. This dialogue between Churches and Christian communities has long been recognized under the name of ecumenism, with its own characteristics relative to the broader dialogue between religions,

which is also very important. Sociologically, this can be explained both as a reaction to ongoing secularization and globalization, and as the effect of political and economic pressures.

However, we cannot fail to recognize the intrinsic value of this thrust towards dialogue among diverse religious communities. It stands for a willingness to recognize one another, but also undertake a shared journey, such as that around human rights issues. An example here is the joint drafting of the 2019 document entitled, "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Al-Tayyeb. This document spoke to the shared commitment of Catholicism and the Sunni Islamic world in protecting the rights and dignity of women and children, and in the fight against poverty. Equally important has been the commitment to peace by the major religions, beginning in Assisi in 1986, and continuing through today. Similarly, the ongoing meetings between Pope Francis and Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew, focused on the theme of ecology, are also powerful examples of this shared collaboration.

Although each of these events certainly involved religious leaders, they were also of major importance at the level of respective believers. Scholars have in fact emphasized that this convergence not only establishes mutual collaboration between institutions, but also leads to a popular renewal around ways of conceiving faith and the relationship with otherness. In other words, dialogue helps to overcome forms of closed identitarian ideologies.

### *Fundamentalism*

It is important to consider that alongside these innovations regarding religion, various kinds of fundamentalism are also multiplying. There is increasing orientation towards intransigent ways of living one's relationship with transcendence. Fundamentalism advocates a return to fundamental religious principles strictly associated with the authentic and infallible word of God.

Fundamentalist currents are visible today in all world religions: from Christianity to Judaism to Islam and often employ the internet as a propaganda tool today. It is therefore a way of returning God to the center of social and public life but in opposition to others and according to mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of the community of "true believers". In this sense, fundamentalism can also be said to express a strong 'demand' for spirituality.

### **Conclusion**

Is it only partially true that our world has become increasingly secular and without God in recent decades. It is most likely true in relation to the ritualistic and institutional religiosity of the past. But the yearning and need for transcendence is by no means dead. Indeed, a recent *Pew Research Center* survey reveals that faith remains an integral part of most people's lives worldwide, with 84% of individuals identifying with a religious group in varying ways. And it is expected that trends in the number of believers will increase through at least 2060. Thus, we need to be attentive to the changes around us, in order to see where God is present and acting today.