

Atheism, crisis and opportunity

Is this the 'night' of God?

Enrique Cambón

Enrique Cambón has been a professor in several Latin American and European institutions, and an author of numerous publications, including an essay entitled, An absent God who disturbs and provokes (Effatà Ed. 2019). We asked Cambón to speak to the central hypothesis of this work for our Ekklesia readers.

Throughout human history, God's paths have been as numerous as the earth's inhabitants, reflected J. Maritain in his book, "Search for God". Every era has perceived God through crises, events and the search for new answers uniquely suited to the times. If this is true, then what characterizes our own era, where certain images of God have now become obsolete? What aspects – even if not yet fully developed – might contribute to making faith in a Christian God still possible today?

One day, several close colleagues committed to evangelical Christianity in Latin America felt their experiences and convictions – though valid – no longer responded fully to their own needs of today. I had not heard from them for many months, before finally managing to reach out to inquire as to how they were doing. "It is very difficult," they commented, "We are far from the Church and skeptical, not because of something that happened to us, but rather because of a series of things we have been reflecting on. We are questioning everything, starting from God's existence. We live in a world where God no longer manifests Himself. Beyond faith and the Church's witness, there are no longer any signs of God. We experience that God does not listen to prayers and feel a cosmic loneliness. God is simply not there when we need Him most. How can one rationally justify belief in God?"

I was not surprised. Their words essentially spoke to two realities that I believe are at the root of the precipitous decay of much of Western Christianity. The first is a need to again rethink the faith experience and how faith realities can be presented, to meet the needs of today. The second reality concerns the very "existence of God."

We will not focus on the first reality because it is impossible to do so briefly and much has already been published on this. Rather, the second assumption is of principal interest here. Therein lies the root of every other doubt of faith today. This second reality of the 'existence of God' presents questions for which complete answers are often lacking. My friends' thoughts reflect themes that challenge believers today. Belief, I think, involves trying to answer existential and intellectual challenges in the most meaningful way possible.

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Countless testimony bears witness to increasing numbers of people for whom the religious dimension of life is no longer relevant nor of interest, as well as others for whom there is a desire to believe but also an 'inability' to do so. Let's look at a few emblematic examples.

In Martin Scorsese's recent film, *Silence*, with its focus on 17th century Christianity in Japan, a young, imprisoned Jesuit who is aware of the tortures being inflicted on Christians, speaks to God within himself, saying: "I have struggled all my life with your silence". This resonates for me as more than the anguished call of a believer. Rather it seems an expression of a cry that rises to heaven ever more clearly in this era of humanity today. In fact, a search for this complete quotation in the original 1960's novel from which the film is based (by Japanese Catholic author, Shusaku Endo) reveals no such phrase. Not for nothing did the screenwriters feel it necessary to add such a phrase today!

Another testimony is that of the well-known Italian journalist and scholar, Indro Montanelli. Now close to 90 years old and still without answers, he is quoted as having said: "I would give up years of my life in order to have faith"¹.

Atheism has always existed, not least because of God's clear, powerful silence and seeming absence and 'non-intervention' in human sorrow and tragedy. Today, however, we also perceive these same realities with a lucid intensity surpassing that of the past. Therefore, I believe the challenge to belief today is not so much one of atheism, but of the "night of God" as it is lived today, and perhaps even more so in the future.

Atheism and the triune God²

Could this be "due" to the Triune God being "a hidden God" (*Is* 45:15), a God experienced "as absent" and who "permits evil and suffering without intervening" and turns a deaf ear to our prayers?

To respond, we need to briefly summarize the uni-trinitarian life in God. Given that we often speak of Christianity bringing us to discover God as Love, it is not surprising that in God there exists both relationality and plurality.

In fact, love requires three realities: the Lover, the Beloved and Love. A full, loving relationship is one of gift, acceptance and reciprocity. Thus, it is understandable that theological texts speak of the intimate life of God in this way: *the Father* is eternal source of Love; *the Son* (in the eternal Trinity) is the acceptance of Love that returns to the Father with infinite gratitude; *the Holy Spirit* is the bond of Love between lover and beloved.

By speaking of God as three Persons who are One, we are saying that God is Love, that God is gift in three different forms that bring the Other into existence in a triplic essence. A well-known theologian expressed the intimate life of God as "the *gift-of-self*, the only mode of *being-self*"³. In grasping this, we should not be scandalized by God's ways of acting in human history, the cosmos and in the intimate relationship with each one of us. It is a 'letting God be God.' In this way, what constitutes for many a major obstacle to faith can instead be transformed into the strongest indication of God's existence. And God's 'omnipotence'? It, too, is an omnipotence of Love, freely manifested in this 'Trinitarian style'.

If God is Love, it is understandable that he relates within himself, and thus toward humanity, by making the other truly himself and thus responsible and free. An

‘interventionist’ God in the face of human difficulties, or one forcing ‘proof’ of his existence upon us, would no longer leave room for human freedom and therefore prevent the possibility of loving in turn, reciprocally. A God who "barter" (I give you eternal life if you live as I say.) or needs ‘payment’ through suffering. . . would not be Love. Such a God therefore is neither credible nor plausible.

Thus, we can see God instead as One who encourages, sustains and waits with infinite patience and mercy. God knows, as no one else does, the ways in which we have been made (it is God who created us in this way). God does not impose himself nor replace us. Rather God makes room and "cancels himself", notwithstanding all the risks that come with human freedom. In this way, we too can become capable of loving as God loves. His "absence" and "silence" say to humanity: ‘I do not force you by giving undeniable proof nor "blackmail" you with promises of a blessed eternity if you live according to certain rules. I do not "use" you to increase my glory. In a word: "I love you"’.

Does such a concept produce darkness?

What if I choose to believe without proof or an ‘experience of God,’ or without powerful mystical happenings? Can my faith – expressed also through selfless love for every neighbor – still guide me, hand in hand, through the darkness? Can God be felt even in the midst of a “night” that seemingly produces a sense of his absence?

I can respond affirmatively not only from my own personal experience but as an expression of others. “*Even in the midst of the darkness and suffering that the sensation of his absence causes*”, writes philosopher Giulio Gorello, “*one is able to be touched by God and experience his closeness.*”⁴ Similarly, one also gleams a sense of this from two paradoxical sentences of the French mystic and activist, Simone Weil. “*God can be present in creation only in the form of absence.*”, she said, and “*God’s absence is the most wonderful witness to God’s love*”⁵.

¹In C.M. Martini - U. Eco, *In cosa crede chi non crede?*, Liberal, Roma 1997, p. III.

²Cf. W. Kasper, *Il Dio di Gesù Cristo*, Queriniana, Brescia 20119, p. 418, passim.

³A. Manaranche, *Il monoteismo cristiano*, Queriniana, Brescia 1988, p. 210.

⁴A book by the late philosopher Giulio Giorello (edited by A. Carioti, with contributions by other authors) published in the series *I Saggi del Corriere della Sera*, Milan, n. 6 (2021).

⁵S. Weil, *L'ombra e la grazia* (Gravity and Grace), Rusconi, Milano 1963, 114 – 117.