

The God Show

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One evening I was in a Roman restaurant having a conversation with a well-known evangelical theologian and his wife. For years he had been taking an interest in inter-religious dialogue and the dialogue with non-believers. His perceptions and outlook were somewhat gloomy: there did not appear to be any sign of progress whatsoever on the horizon! It seems increasingly that people simply have no sensitivity regarding the religious dimension, almost as if they have lost the very means to even be aware of or acknowledge its existence.

We live, at least in Western countries, in the age of secularization, a phenomenon which, in an inter-connected world, has progressively more impact on other cultural spheres as well. This then is the background to the provocative title of this issue of *Ekklesia: Believing: possible in today's world?*

There are a large number of factors at play and a variety of contexts. Silvia Cataldi speaks about these from a sociological perspective in her article *"Where has God gone?"* and this is echoed in other contributions.

Secularization, observed the famous Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, is not only something which is external to us but has also taken root and changed how people perceive themselves. The question is: *"How can we speak about God today?"*.

The fact is that a significant part of humanity lives, what can be described as, *a dark night of God*, i.e., where God seems to be absent and is not seen or felt. Some of the giants of the spiritual life have undergone this experience such as Thérèse of Lisieux in the last stages of her life and Theresa of Calcutta who – unknown to everyone – felt a complete absence of God for decades while paradoxically being one of the most evident icons of faith in God for millions of people. How can we explain and interpret this apparent absence of God? This is what Enrique Cambón confronts in his piece: *"Are we in the age of the dark night of God?"*.

One thing is certain, little by little Heaven seems to have clouded over and for many even disappeared; a heaven where countless generations managed to find God in his transcendence, perhaps because they needed to and, at the same time, encountered him in the marvellous harmony of creation and human experience. God however, observes the Lutheran pastor, Michael Jonas, in his article *"Two approaches to faith"* – comes to us in other ways and above all in his Word which, we can say, reopens Heaven.

Here is a question: will this eclipse of God in society and in the conscience of many also be providential in some way? Could it not be that the ascent to God in his transcendence has been obscured so that we can, in a new and fuller way, discover

God in his immanence, in his having become flesh, here beneath Heaven: God here on earth?

God, not above the clouds or beyond the stars, but whose life pulsates – if we freely make room for it in our hearts and in our relationships. God who does not barge into our lives, sparing us from disaster, earthquakes, wars..., but God in Jesus who takes our wounds upon himself to the point of abandonment and who, with infinite gentleness, knocks on the door of our innermost being and who, if we listen to him, speaks to us and guides us, barely whispering so as not to overwhelm us, sustaining us with his grace and the breath of his Spirit. God who pours his Love into our hearts if we follow in the footsteps of the Crucified and Risen One and who even makes us his body: with the arms, eyes and mind of Christ (*cf.* I Cor. 2:16)

If this is how things are then God's current obscuring is for all of us who have had the gift of being able to encounter him and know the light and energy of his Word, a powerful invitation. This invitation – Bishop Hemmerle explains – is to be what we are called and enabled to be: *a social icon of God*. Christian Hennecke, with his experience-based contribution, exemplifies what this means. There are other 'iconic' experiences in this issue of *Ekklesia* which we will leave to you to discover.

We live in a time when the Church is rediscovering – also in the Catholic sphere – its synodal nature. This is not about a particular way of organizing the Church but, rather, a different way of how we relate among ourselves and with everyone else: being respectful of the freedom of others, welcoming and listening in order to discover in others and witness the presence of God who became flesh. It is the way to enter into a constructive relationship with the new generations and to reinvigorate the fabric of the Church and to renew society. Above all, however, it is the way to be community, as Church – to use one of Chiara Lubich's happy expressions – *The God Show*.