



Blessed are the atheists for they will find God

Bienaventurados los ateos porque encontrarán a Dios

Maria López Vigil *

The dogmas of Catholicism, the religion I was born into, no longer speak to me. The Christian traditions and beliefs as I learned them seem increasingly remote. They are answers. And faced with the world's mystery I have more and more questions.

I'm discovering sentiments like mine in many other people, above all young people and women, who don't deny God but are seeking a spirituality that truly nourishes the meaning of their lives. And in search of that treasure, where they will also find their heart, they are reviewing, rethinking, moving away from, heading in a different direction than and even outright rejecting the religion they learned.

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* Periodista y escritora. Redactora Jefa de la Revista Envío, de la Universidad Centroamericana (UCA). País de origen: Nicaragua.
E-mail: maria@untaljesus.net

What's happening to us? What has happened to me? I have grown, I have read and I have searched, because we live in a radically different world than the tribal, rural, pre-modern one in which my religion's rites, dogmas, beliefs, hierarchies and traditions were forged. The religious system we were taught speaks of an antiquated concept of the world. We can't keep walking in those shoes; they no longer fit.

Knowing as I do that Christianity in all its versions (Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Orthodox...) is powerful, but only one among many religions that exist and have existed on the planet over history, I can no longer believe mine to be the true religion. It would be an enormous folly to believe that my mother tongue, Spanish, is the best of all languages merely because I was born into it, am familiar with it and it's the one I know how to speak.

I now find the religious postulates I learned to be arrogant, because they are presented as absolute, rigid, infallible, unquestionable and immutable, impenetrable by the passage of time. Instead I'm finding humility—which has the same root, *humus*, as humanity—to be essential in the face of the world's mystery, which neither science nor any religion has fully fathomed.

Knowing as I do the riches encapsulated within all the varied human cultures, within the many, many worlds there are in this world, I cannot believe that “the” revelation of that Ultimate Reality that is God is in my religion and in the Bible. If I did believe it I couldn't avoid being smug. I would be unable to dialogue as equals with the thousands upon thousands of men and women who don't believe it, who have other sacred books, who seek God by other paths on which there are no holy scriptures to venerate and follow.

How can I believe in that dogmatic muddle, amalgamated with an outdated philosophy that states there are three different persons with a single nature in God and that Jesus is the second of those three, but with two natures? If my brain is

the masterpiece of Life, how can I believe what is absurd and what I don't understand? How can I believe that Mary of Nazareth is God's Mother if God is Mother? How can I believe in Mary's virginity without assuming that what that dogma expresses is rejection of sexuality, above all women's sexuality? How can I accept such a masculinized religion, and thus one so separated from that first intuition that presented God in the feminine upon seeing the power of a woman's body that gives life? How can we forget that, through that vital experience, God "was born woman" in the mind of humanity?

How can I believe in Hell without turning God into a torturing tyrant like a Pinochet or a Somoza? How can I believe in original sin, which no one ever committed anywhere, which is only the myth used by the Hebrew people to explain the origin of evil in the world? How can I believe that Jesus of Nazareth saved us from that sin if that doctrine doesn't come from Jesus of Nazareth but from Paul of Tarsus? How can I believe God needed Jesus' death to wash away that sin? Is Jesus the prophet merely a sacrificial lamb who placates divine wrath with blood? How can I believe Jesus saved us by dying, when what can "save" us from meaninglessness is how he taught us to live? How can I believe I am eating Jesus' body and drinking his blood, thus reducing the Eucharist to a magical materialist rite that evokes the archaic bloody sacrifices Jesus rejected?

Nonetheless, putting behind me so many beliefs from my learned religion, I am not leaving Jesus of Nazareth. Because just as my father, my mother and my sister and brothers are my affective referents, and as I think, speak and write in Spanish and it is my cultural referent, Jesus of Nazareth is my religious and spiritual referent, my ethical referent, the one I'm most familiar with for feeling my way along the path that opens me up to the mystery of the world.

Today, knowing as I do about the vast majesty of the Universe in which I live, with its billions of galaxies, I cannot believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the only and definitive incarnation of that First Energy that is God. Not even Jesus believed that dogmatic elaboration. It was created later and in contexts of struggles for

power that would scandalize Jesus. Today, instead of stating “I believe Jesus is God,” I prefer to think and say: “I want to believe in God as Jesus did.”

And in what God did Jesus, that swarthy man, “El Moreno de Nazareth”, believe? He taught us that God is a father, and also a mother, concerned to find us as the shepherd seeks to find his sheep and the woman her drachma, who anxiously waits for us, always shelters us, becomes indignant at injustices and at power that exploits and oppresses, takes the side of those below, doesn’t want poor or rich, wants no one to have too much so others must have too little, favors the equity and dignity of all, wants us all to care for each other, to live in community, wants neither nobles nor serfs, always gives us opportunities, laughs and celebrates, holding banquets to which all are invited, is happy and good, is an *abbá* and an *immá*.

All the world’s religions, every last one, are like each other in one thing: all claim to be the true one and boast that their divinities are the most powerful. All are underpinned by beliefs, rites, commandments and mediators. The majority of the commandments they establish are prohibitions, what thou shalt not think, shalt not do, shalt not say... And the mediators dominating the religions cover a wide range: they are sacred books, places, times and objects, and above all sacred people one must believe, obey and revere.

When you read the good news of the Gospel, when you grasp its essence, you discover that Jesus was not a religious man. He was a layman constantly at odds with the pious and sacred men of his time, the pharisees and priests. Jesus didn’t propose beliefs, but rather attitudes. We never see him practicing any rite, but rather getting close to people. He turned various commandments around from the way the pious of his time interpreted them. He respected neither the sacred places (he prayed anywhere) nor the sacred places (“Sabbath is for the people, not the people for Sabbath”).

Jesus was a spiritual man and an ethical teacher. He didn't want to found any religion, and is thus not responsible for any of the dogmas power constructed on the passionate memory of those who knew him. Jesus proposed a human relations ethic. He inspired a spiritual and social movement of men and women who, in seeking God, sought justice and built their dream, the Kingdom of God, which he conceived as a utopia counterpoised to the reality of oppression and injustice it was his lot to live in his country and in his time.

When no person is sacred, all people become sacred. When no object is sacred, all objects deserve to be cared for. When no time is sacred all the days of my life become sacred. When no place is sacred I see in all of Nature God's sacred temple. This Jesus also taught us.

The irreverence, provocation, grace, humor, audacity and newness of Jesus of Nazareth's spirituality have for many centuries been imprisoned in Christological dogmas. That dogmatism makes us prisoners of a single way of thinking, encloses us in a cage. It doesn't let us fly because it doesn't let us ask, suspect, doubt... The bars of that cage cause fear. Fear of disobeying the authorized word of those who "know about God," the hierarchs of religion. Fear of punishment for thinking and for saying what we think.

Today, knowing I live around one star among so many, in a current zone of a common galaxy, grouped together with other equally unremarkable ones in an ordinary cumulus, as a prestigious physicist describes this "cosmic neighborhood" that is the Earth, I can't help but feel that the certainties and rules of a religion organized by a hierarchical bureaucracy that has betrayed Jesus' message in so many things are petulant and fossilized, irrelevant to my life.

I find myself closer to the Life Jesus defended and dignified in that religiosity, that spirituality that is reverence and awe regarding the world's mystery. I find more spiritual meaning in the "cosmic religiosity" about which Einstein, a Jew, spoke when he said: "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the

mysterious.” Einstein recognized that experience of mystery as “the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science and... also engendered religion.” But he added that the knowledge and emotion of “the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty,” even if “only accessible to our minds” constitute “true religiosity.” And he concludes, “Enough for me the mystery of the eternity of life, and the inkling of the marvelous structure of reality....^a

I don't know if that formulation is enough for me, but I do know that I find it significant because it opens me up to new questions, ones that religion, the religious system in which I was educated, didn't open for me. Rather it closed me, filling me with set, pre-established answers, many of them threatening, anguishing ones that generate fear, guilt and unhappiness. A religious system that obliges us to think of God in only one way, imposing on us severe moral strictures and lack of compassion and obliging us to follow routine, rigid rites and forms of worship, dehumanizes us. It's time to humanize ourselves.

Do I believe in God? What is faith? “It's a love,” an illiterate peasant in the Dominican Republic responded when I asked him many years ago. I've never forgotten it. I sensed an explanation as profound as it was simple.

If there is God, it is what moves me always toward love, toward others, be they people, animals, trees... That movement, that impulse is to share, to relate to, to care for, to make myself responsible, to dive into that well of water at the bottom of which is everything alive. Friendship is the happiness of never being able to touch the bottom of that well. That is love: a bottomless well from which to be able to drink. That must be God. I feel God in the love I have for those I cherish.

If there is God, it is beauty. The feast of Nature's beauty: the stars in the sky, dogs' eyes, the shape of leaves, birds' flight, colors and their shades and tones, the sea... I feel that all that immeasurable, always surprising list of beauties—all

similar, all different, all related, which I can neither encompass nor understand, that dazzle my eyes and my mind, that science discovers and explains—has God’s “signature.” I feel God at the base of all the beauty I see in everything that exists.

If there is God, it is joy. I feel God is closer than ever in celebration, in music and dance, in the undefinable forms happiness adopts when it is profound, in the word, in company, in celebration, in achievements, in the creative effort and very especially in people’s smiles and laughter.

If there is God, it is also justice, the justice that the history I know and in which I’m living has never guaranteed to good people, has never guaranteed to that poor and illiterate peasant who defined faith to me as “a love.”

But God is always beyond all love, all beauty, all joy, is always unreachable, unnamable, indecipherable; always beyond whatever idea of God I make for myself; beyond my own desire and longing. Maimonides, that great Jewish thinker of the Middle Ages, wrote a theological-philosophical treatise with this fascinating title: “Guide for the Perplexed.” In it he said that the only appropriate language for describing God is through negative attributes: what God is *not*.

I don’t find even a modicum of that perplexity in the religious system I was born into. It is with that thinking and feeling that I have been attempting to build a spirituality, convinced as the poet León Felipe once said, that no one takes the same path to God as the one I am on. Spirituality is a personal path while religion is a collective corset, a heavy yoke, in Jesus’ view.

In Willigis Jäger’s book, *The Wave is the Sea*, that Benedictine monk remarks that a sagacious person once called religion a trick of the genes. He takes very seriously the view that when the human species reached a sufficient evolutionary level to be able to pose questions about its origin, its future and the meaning of its existence, it developed the capacity to provide an answer to those questions. The result of that process is religion, which for millennia has performed its task magnificently and is still doing so today. Religion forms part of human

evolution. And if today we are reaching a point at which its answers no longer satisfy, it's an indication that evolution has taken a step forward and a new capacity is emerging in humanity to understand ourselves as human beings.

Despite the mistaken paths and the lost time, I'm so happy that I developed that capacity before dying and am able to live in the time of that step forward.