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## **What are we talking about when we talk about God?**

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## **What are we talking about when we talk about God?<sup>1</sup>**

Knowledge of religions and intercultural dialogue

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Today's subject is aimed at students from different backgrounds. Held together by an interest in social and economic studies, some will already have a personal interest in the religious or faith dimension. Some will be totally distant and indifferent.

To the latter I would like to say that one can be distant from a practice and a belief of faith, but one cannot be indifferent to what religions have represented in history: if one deals with social studies, economic studies, community management, we cannot fail to know anything about the cultural (and therefore also religious) dimensions that have accompanied the various social aggregations over the centuries. Religions are products of history, as I will try to say, and as is evident at least starting from the diversity of their paths in the geography of the world and the diversity of their doctrinal and public systems over the centuries. This is as far as the past, of which we are children, but also as far as the present is concerned, given that religious regurgitations – and not of the best kind – are once again dominating every part of the planet. And given that there are still those who find within their faith a path of meaning to face the difficulties of humanity.

While for those who have a faith, or at least recognize themselves in a tradition, I would like to draw attention to the fact that a minimum of historical and critical knowledge of the texts and history of the religion that we find ourselves living is needed (because otherwise: what does one believe in, if one cannot find a foundation for what one believes in?). We also need a sense, first and foremost, of one's own tradition, because we must know the moments of downfall, of crisis, of deception of our own belief, given that we live in a plural world and at least on paper each tradition must have the same value as another. And then we must also keep in mind that faith is certainly also a leap into the dark, into the unknowable, into the mystery; but everything that develops around a conviction, a belief cannot today, in the 21st century, ignore historical knowledge and scientific knowledge. It can certainly be a path that develops on a parallel plane. But it cannot claim to be a truth that undermines every other dimension of research.

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<sup>1</sup> This translation was not reviewed by the author.

Therefore, we are all required to reflect on the religious phenomenon. Because it too is culture.

## Talking about God

So: what are we talking about when we talk about God? Yes, there are religions without God. But I believe that parallels can be drawn between all religious traditions. I would say, as a premise, that every tradition claims to possess the truth and claims to impose on others its own vision of the world, its own belief and everything that follows from it (laws, morals, customs and so on). For example, the history of Christianity is a history of the affirmation of truth and is a history of the imposition of truth. It is also something else, of course: Search for truth. Doubts. Transformations. Attention to others. But it has established itself on the one hand for the attractive force of a thought that overturns the order of the world. But on the other also for its adherence to worldly power. The same goes for every other religion. And in this sense we should not only talk about religions, but about ideologies, worldviews, beliefs, precisely. But there is something specific in the religious fact. Because religions have been and still are - even if often in a mystified way - a powerful instrument of social cohesion, a powerful enchanting siren, and therefore they must be considered as such.

Although we must not forget that religions, in their laborious and complicated emergence and structuring, are not born to enchant or to force, but rather, if I may speak in a strongly metaphorical way, to structure communities, to give an order, an order to the community, to regulate impulses. And so from the very beginning, and always, this double soul has been at work in religions: of pacification and antagonism, of research and absolutism, of protection and condemnation.

And so I believe we must accept the fact that today, at the moment in which we hear this word - God - or any of its equivalents resounding in the mouths of unscrupulous politicians, of the manipulators of the world (yes, even Elon Musk has in mind to act like God and bring salvation to the creatures of this world), of the slaughterers of innocents, of the masses who blindly follow their magic flute players, we must try, by mobilizing all the forces of intelligence, to delimit the meaning of this name.

Perhaps we can try to think differently about this thing to which we have given the name of God, and instead recognize the immensity and unknowability of what we are immersed in, and the responsibility that each of us has on this earth.

It seems to me that we could go to a more radical rethinking, even with respect to what the historical method and criticism, and exegesis, have taught us for some centuries now, and in particular in the last one. The history that flows, the criticism that always elaborates new tools have cleansed our gaze of many misunderstandings, and of many ignorances. But on the other hand there persists as a sort of caesura between the acquisitions of the historical and critical method, of the questioning thought of contemporaneity on the one hand, and on the other a fixity, an immobility in the categories of thought that recite the same words pronounced in the councils of centuries and centuries past, or in the liturgies

that today no longer speak to hearts and minds, or in the repetition of slogans that become increasingly empty.

## **The story of a name**

Today, perhaps a way out could be to take the path of history.

Trying to understand how the idea of that God was born, how it becomes – in the case of the religions that have established themselves in the West – the one God, the God of history, the God who draws near to a people, to creatures (or in some passages to all of humanity), the God of mercy who sometimes, however, expresses himself with a brutality that is unacceptable to contemporary ears, the God of one and the God of all, the God with many faces and many names.

All this is narrated in Scriptures handed down to their time, but which show the struggle of a people – and of peoples – to find a home in the world, to give themselves justice and freedom, to be on the side of those who are small and suffer abuse, to understand how to defeat the oppressors of the weak and the defenseless. This is the story that still makes us tremble with emotion. See the efforts, the hopes, the desperations that humans have been able to elaborate to give themselves – and us – civilization. And how many failures of these efforts they have tried to remedy. Without perhaps succeeding, but showing a way, a path. And this effort, this toil has sometimes been given the name of “God”. Almost to give authority to the search for that good, that justice. Exegete, philologist and biblical scholar Thomas Römer, who also received an honorary degree from the University of Tel Aviv, speaks of the “invention of God”, referring to the fact that, according to the most recent historical research, the one God of Israel was not born in Israel, but from sedimented traditions, reworked, in a very vast region, in the midst of a mass of divinities, which very slowly, in the case of Israel, merge into the one God, the God linked to that particular people, who then became – contradictorily – the God of all peoples. The “tension between inclusion and segregation, between cohabitation and conflict” is what makes “two different monotheisms” live in the Bible. And this, as we can see unfortunately dramatically, is the opposition that continues to arise within contemporary communities. Perhaps it would be useful to bring all this to light. Then by freeing the word “God” from an uncritical obedience to tradition, and bringing it back into the magma of history that built it, it would perhaps be possible to save the word “God” by returning it to the travail of the “path of man”: to build communities and to try to give meaning to existence.

Knowing, realizing, but not only among scholars, that the one God is a late construction of the scribes who over the centuries have compiled that complicated and often contradictory library that is the Bible, I do not find it at all a reductive perspective with respect to that brilliant, grandiose elaboration of a search for meaning to which those who preceded us gave the name of “God”. It does not distance me from the desire to delve further into those words, and to extract the essence of the limping attempt to create community, to build civilization.

The entire Bible, and all religions ultimately, are caught in the contradiction between a universalist and an individualist instance: between the God of all and the national God; the God creator of heaven and earth, of every living being and every human creature and the God who chooses a people, the God who brings peace and the God who imposes war and extermination, the God of forgiveness and the God of vengeance.

We must take charge of these contradictions, dissolving them in the moods of history that generated them, and trying to understand how they can be translated into the language of contemporaneity, without however denying the value of "formation" of humanity to which they contributed.

Today, if we do not translate ancient words into "contemporary thought", if we do not take into account the symbolic language used in those Scriptures stratified over time, if we silence within ourselves the dark side that those words convey together with the light side, if we neglect the intention behind the texts, we risk proposing empty words, which no longer have any hold on the new generations and within the complicated world structures we are experiencing.

"God" is a mobile word, which has a history. Making it "immobile" means, in the end, putting it in a corner, taking away its value. Or giving it a totally arbitrary value, to the point of perverting armed clashes in its name.

## **With God and without God**

Ultimately, one can live "with God" and "without God". Millions of people live, create, love, suffer, think, act with the same hopes and the same despairs whether they have a God or a faith, or whether they feel alone in the universe.

It seems to me that we should drop the unspoken but tenacious presumption of considering ourselves ultimately a better "pole" than another because in faith we touch the truth – and it is always a superior truth – or because in a proud atheism we believe we are free from superstition, credulity, illusions.

What matters is that in acting we take into account an "evolution" of human thought: for which we know that no truth is given to us to possess; that on this earth the very diversity of each is the guarantee of a debt of equal dignity towards every human creature; and that each is responsible, for what is his responsibility, for every single clod of earth and every single atom of sky, as well as for every living creature.

For this reason I really think very simply and without wanting to profess any atheism, which for me is another form of idolatry, nor presuming to have discovered who knows what, that the Jewish and Christian (and Muslim) God is the complex, powerful, ingenious "invention" of a people, merged into the elaboration of many peoples. It could also be called "Myth", or that of "destiny", through which in

the Greek world they tried to elaborate a way of being in the world: seeking justice, freedom, equality, brotherhood. Seeking beauty and goodness. Aspiring to truth. Knowing that we humans are a mixture of truth and lies, of ferocity and loving kindness, of greed and benevolence. And knowing that we are small grains of dust in an unknowable, unpredictable and eternally changing universe. What we have called "God" up to now is the "nameless", as the Bible itself suggests. It is the infinite matter that surrounds us. It is the "spaceless", the "timeless". One of our physicists, whom I find of great interest and who is also a splendid populariser, Guido Tonelli, titles one of his books on matter "The magnificent illusion". He understands well, of course, that more or less until the early twentieth century it was inevitable that people would think of the material universe as a system in eternal equilibrium, opposed to the transience and fragility of our bodies. But today the new science forces us to overturn what he calls the great prejudice of stability and persistence of the material universe that surrounds us. Everything is fragile, everything is in motion, everything is transitory, nothing is eternal. Why shouldn't we carry out the same process for God, hypothesizing that his "birth" – that is, invention – is nothing other than the unacceptability for humans to rest on something fragile, transitory, unstable?

Ours has been called the age of disenchantment. In fact, new enchantments are always ready to seduce and trap us. But it wouldn't be bad to try to free ourselves from some illusory chimeras, precisely to reach a greater awareness of the responsibility of humans on this earth.

"God" could then be the name that has been given to the enigma of living, knowing that we are alone in this wonderful and terrible universe that surrounds us, and we could be brought back with greater force to our daily responsibility, to our task of saving what little is in our power of the earth and of our humanity.

## **What remains?**

We might ask ourselves at this point: If we think that the God narrated in the Scriptures and in the history of faiths is not a "person", but is an "invention" (to simplify); and that today we can deconstruct him by returning him to a horizon without borders that questions us, contains us, amazes us, consoles us; if the paths suggested in the Bible as paths to build humanity and civilization have to do with the laborious journey of the human in the search for justice, in the construction of humanity, in the dream of freedom, in the dream of mercy – if we think all this: what do we do with that immense heritage of wisdom, culture, tears and blood, passion and love, pain and mourning, dream and hope that not only the Scriptures, but the entire history of Judaism, Christianity (and obviously also of other religions) carries with it?

But does deconstructing and revealing really mean giving up? Or is there another way?

The narratives about God that we have inherited do not have any less value for this. They are precious “traces of the journey” to study, to consult, to question in order to draw a map in our journey. As such, they are not “truths”. Rather, they are tiny sparks of reality that, from time to time, illuminate our steps.

A scholar of the last century called the Bible the “great code” of the West. Today, I struggle to think of a single code that can contain all the stratified and indecipherable reality of contemporaneity. Even the codes to be deciphered have multiplied. Instead, we could call it a great heritage, a great “treasure” of humanity, which is not afraid to compete with other treasures. But which gives a very precious and essential contribution in understanding, containing, orienting the restless jolts of our lives.

If there is someone who finds comparison, comfort, support, help in the words, figures, rites, liturgies inherited from this tradition, why should he ever abandon them? But without keeping within oneself that suspicion, that uncertainty, that dormant doubt that takes away freedom, air, and breathing space in the practice of devotion.

A great treasure must be enjoyed and protected. Not hidden and neglected. It is made into “study” and “memory” and “teaching”. And what must be sought is not at all costs the sense of a “purpose” in the history of the world, but how to continue to seek that minimum common denominator that allows us to create more community and less ferocity, more friendship and less enmity, more construction and less destructiveness.

## **Conclusion**

I understand well, I believe, the value of all the ecumenical and interreligious work that has been done in the last century, and that – intermittently – continues here and there to sow seeds of peace and growth in many parts of the world. And defeats must not discourage us from this, which is a practice of downsizing one’s own identity and of effective openness to listening to others. But it is also true that this practice – top-down in any case, and which retains a core of identity closure – should be forcefully accompanied by a practice that, in the world and in relation to the world, no longer has anything religious, but relates to each “other” as to ourselves. We are first and foremost creatures, human beings who need bread, a home, work, affection, education, knowledge, the ability to build, to create. Keeping this ability to relate in the foreground, and only in the background – or I would almost say covertly, cf. “the discipline of the arcane” by Dietrich Bonhoeffer – we can also be Christians, Buddhists, Jews, atheists, unbelievers, or whatever else we are given to believe in. But if our faith contradicts this common citizenship in something, it is better to throw away the faith than the citizenship.