



## A LETTER TO M<sup>a</sup> ANGELES

*when she felt she was becoming an atheist*

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# **1. FAITH WHICH SEEMS TO MELT AWAY**

## **1. When you begin to feel an atheist**

Dear M<sup>a</sup> Angeles:

When you told me the other day you felt recently you were beginning to become an atheist, you probably expected an immediate reaction on my part. Perhaps you wanted to start a discussion on God or hoped without admitting it that this would help strengthen your faith. Perhaps also you were frightened the typical role of the priest would be sprung on you which would leave you with the same doubts as before or in an even worse situation. I have to admit it was this fear that held me back from showing any reaction, leaving your confession to be swallowed up in the course of ordinary conversation.

At times I think that, when I was younger and perhaps more fervent in my faith, I found it much easier to speak of God. And now, perhaps my faith is also weakening, for I find it much harder to speak of God.

Before, when one spoke of God, it was openly and frankly, though maybe we used ready-made formulas in a somewhat superficial manner I now find irresponsible. What I had read or discovered for myself I took as unquestionable truth; and when I preached it in turn to others, I was surprised they couldn't see such obvious things the way I saw them. Now I act differently: and I don't know whether it is through weakness or cowardice or because I am more aware of the complexity of what is at stake and have a greater respect for others and for God himself.

I fear that if I begin to speak of God in a shallow manner, I might paint a picture so banal as to be quite unacceptable; so simplified, or so simplistic, that it becomes no more than a clumsy caricature. The same will happen as happens to the lover who tries to describe his loved one to a friend who doesn't know her. It is totally frustrating to try and describe what a person is like; all the more so the more one values that person. I think that every effort to speak of God must carry a similar frustration, but multiplied to the infinite.

## **2. Questions that are not answered**

On the other hand I have learnt over the years to recognise that the difficulties many people have about God can be serious and deep, deserving of respect and not to be brushed aside by some tricks of reasoning. There are questions, doubts, suspicions that can't be swept away by pure logic. And I am convinced that, when the questioner comes away unsatisfied with the answers given, one cannot always presume this comes from a lack of will or straitforwardness.

I want to say to you with all this that your difficulties fill me with a great respect. I am aware that you have a great and sincere passion for the truth; but also that your experiences in life have been very hard; that nobody can solve with mere words the specific problems you have had to face and still face; and for that reason it would be inconsiderate and even offensive to

come up with over-facile solutions and wordy arguments.

If the only reply your confession of near atheism provoked in me was my silence, I think it was because I recognised in it something that is also happening in me. I too wonder at times if I really believe, or what I believe, or in whom. The training we have had, or perhaps just routine, makes it easy to say one believes in God.

### **3. God more than a word**

Till one day the realization suddenly comes that "God" is a word one no longer knows exactly to what it refers or what content it has. Of course there were times when we thought we knew more or less what "God" was: God was a good and allpowerful father, pictured as a venerable old man, alternately benign or angry, up there in the sky above the clouds, from where he could spy on everything we mortals did with nothing escaping his scrutiny. Or he was the wise architect or watchmaker who had constructed and kept running perfectly the great machine of the worlds. Or he was simply a being of infinite resources whom we approached in prayer certain he would solve all our problems by pressing one of the buttons on his control panel of the universe.

But one day, at some moment when God did not function exactly as we expected him to, the suspicion arose that, if this God guarantees all goes well in the world, he would be no more than the focus of all the illusions of a childish world where everything has to work to perfection, a dream that doesn't correspond to the reality we have to face of the continual and painful blows of our own experience. In this respect, I shall never forget something that happened recently in my own home.

### **4. Our childish logic**

As you know, a few months ago my mother died after several weeks of illness. The following morning we had the difficult task of explaining this to the little cousins who lived with their grandmother and adored her because she spoilt them. When we told 8-year old Mark that God had taken his grandmother and that she was in heaven, etc. he broke into tears and stamped his foot saying it was impossible, that every day he had been asking God that his grandmother should not die and that God could not have taken her. And in his childish reasoning he was right. But the reality of God doesn't correspond to childish reasoning.

I suppose by now the child will have forgotten his disenchantment since children have short memories: for them the past is soon swallowed up by the intensity with which they live the present moment and, apparently, they will hardly remember a few months ago they had a grandmother who made them happy and she was suddenly snatched from them. And certainly on the next opportunity they will continue asking God not to let happen something they don't want: and will therefore continue being victims of new disappointments. How many of these traumas, superficial or deep, conscious or subconscious, do we carry as partly healed scars into our adult life ?

For a time it seems we have silenced them in the bustle of our daily life: but one day they awake, tear the veil of our subconscious and rise up like a black apparition, an awkward

question that risks turning into a terrible doubt. Is God nothing more than the key factor in a childish world that has little to do with the real world we discover through the hardships of life ?

## **5. When we feel ourselves atheists**

It is here we are overcome by the feeling that we are becoming atheists: the feeling can come all of a sudden in a moment of strange and fascinating lucidity, or it can grow imperceptibly until the day arrives when we become aware we have been won over and totally gripped by it. It is a painful and worrying feeling because we realize we run the risk of losing all our points of reference, overturning the whole framework of our understanding of things.

It seems something inevitable: the adult person reaches a point when the feeling cannot be avoided that God the most wise architect, God the watchmaker of the universe, the solver of riddles, the healer of wrongs, the God of providence who arranges everything well, that is, in line with our expectations, tastes or whims, is highly questionable or simply doesn't exist. The threatening question arises: Why God ? Wouldn't everything be just the same without him ?

The gods of our childhood soon fade away. As human beings, our reactions can vary. Either we abandon ourselves in despair to the drift of our immediate urges and desires, or to contemplating the mad scenario life projects around us, waiting for the final scene, unforeseeable, gratuitous, which is not the end or completion of anything. Or we can continue believing and hoping in the depth of our being that what for the moment is hidden from us and beyond our understanding is true after all.

We can all feel equally disconcerted. But there may be some who don't give up the search because they cannot accept there is no meaning, no direction, no explanation for everything.

The person who stubbornly holds to this view is searching for God, supposing God, demanding God. And if this attitude is consistently maintained, I would even say this person already believes in "God" because, in the final analysis, to believe in God is nothing else than refusing to accept that everything is pure chance without any meaning.

I write "God" between commas because we are not dealing with the imagined and ingenuous God of childhood but with the "God" who is the basis of reality and the ultimate explanation of everything, about whom, apart from that, we are unable to say anything. We cannot describe how or what such a "God" is like. We know such a reality by intuition and postulate it as necessary so that things can make sense and have meaning but it remains inaccessible to us, without face or shape we can recognise, a sort of unknown quantity, the "x" of an unsolved equation, whose value we cannot determine but, if the problem is well posed, must have some value and content.

Prescinding for the moment from a possible later revelation of divine reality as it is in itself, "God" in the first instance is the name or algebraic sign we give to the unknown in our own existence and the existence of the world as a whole. He is looking for God who, in the deepest part of his being and experience, feels that he would betray himself were he to declare that everything is meaningless, without *raison d'être*, incoherent and absurd.

## **2. TO BELIEVE ONE HAS TO LOVE**

A moment ago, while I was laboriously searching for the right words to express my thought, you came to my mind and I wondered about the expression on your face as you read the previous page.

I can imagine the suggestion of a smile, somewhere between benevolent and bewildered: we are already, I imagine you thinking within yourself, caught up in this subtle intellectual language which leaves one defenseless and even seems to convince, but then immediately arouses suspicion that the whole thing is nothing more than a verbal conjuring trick.

### **1. Where love is everything**

All this is far too abstract to convince me fully in a real God, true and definite, to whom I can entrust myself without fear as the most important thing in my life. If I have only produced this reaction in you, please accept my sincere apology. It is very difficult to put into words the depth and force of an intuition or the full and profound perception of the reality we are and live. I have no other recourse but to ask you to make the effort to go beyond the words to capture this intuition which I believe is valid for me and can only be for you to the degree in which you make it your own.

To help you, and tackling the same theme from a slightly different angle, I would say it's a question of trying to love the reality of what we are and which engulfs us, but with a love that is complete, absolute and lasting. The person who, with more or less resignation, rebellion or disillusion, ends confessing that his own being and his life with all it contains has no meaning, that things are because they are, a futile gesture supported by a strange and inexplicable illusion, the result of chance in which we find ourselves suddenly caught up without knowing why and which will eventually cast us away still not knowing why, such a person seems neither to accept nor love himself or others with a full and complete love consistent to the end.

One cannot love, at least with full acceptance and surrender, what one suspects is absurd, inconsistent, deceptive. One loves life to the full because one intuits and understands, at least implicitly, that life has value, meaning, consistency, *raison d'être*. To love with a love that wishes to be absolute and total - and to love in such a way is one of the deepest urges in our being - implies that there is an absolute and total basis of value and meaning in what is loved.

### **2. Believe in life**

In this context I remember something I read about Manuel Azaña who was president of the Spanish Republic. In the last years of his life, exiled in the south of France, he received a visit from the Bishop of Tarbes. The president, thinking of the past and his political failures, was morally destroyed and had ceased to believe in anything. They say the Bishop insistently

repeated to him: "Admit you believe in this life so that I can tell you how to believe in the next life". I find this a very meaningful statement: one has to believe truly and fully in this world in order to be able to believe in God. One has to love truly and unhesitatingly the reality of this world in order to be able to love the reality of God.

Most people seem not to reach God because they don't dispose themselves to love, to affirm with sufficient force and consistency the world and their own existence in it. The person who is resigned to admitting life is nothing more than a collection of meaningless events or an illusion, with difficulty will be able to admit God exists. In spite of this, one should have great respect for people, like Azaña and so many others, who have been struck so hard by life that they cannot bring themselves to love fully either themselves or the world it has been their lot to live in.

Such people are living through a dark night: but they can be helped to discover, in the depths of themselves, the small light which will enable them to accept the possibility of self love and love of others. But if a person is so shattered by life that even this is impossible, perhaps the most humane thing for the moment is to respect their pain in silence: a pain which is obviously greater than any general discussions about God.

Such pain needs a different treatment which doesn't follow rational paths but must seek to uncover the mysterious ways of God's love, capable of breaking through even the blackest night of human grief and death in an un hoped for and incomprehensible manner, becoming an abandoned God, a suffering God, a dead God, a failed God on a shameful and atrocious gibbet.

There are human situations in which one can only speak of God's love by affirming it is so real and so great that it can really identify with the most painful and desperate human situations.

### **3. Isn't it all a dream of mine?**

I remember hearing you ask this question more than once when we were talking about God. One can reach the conclusion that only in admitting a God can one affirm that life and existence in the world have a full and genuine meaning. But is this enough to be certain God exists ? I admit I need something to provide a full and definitive explanation of everything and that, not finding it in any of the proved and known realities, I postulate an unknown reality to meet this need which I call "God". But is this a sufficient guarantee that it exists ? Couldn't it be that this need and desire for full meaning is no more than a dream of mine which corresponds to nothing ? Couldn't it be that God is no more than the subjective and illusory projection of my desires for fulfillment and the infinite, themselves equally subjective and illusory ?

Objections such as these, which are at the heart of all modern criticism of religion, are all the harder to dispel in that they come from considerations that contain an element of truth. In strict classical theology it used to be said that only the person who seeks the Absolute finds the Absolute, only the person who looks for God finds God. In other words, a yearning for the Infinite and for fulfillment is in some way an indispensable prerequisite for discovering God.

One could even say that, to discover God as a concrete reality, in some way one has to have made already an option for God, even though confused and implicit. This option occurs in the moment one decides not to give up, not to rest satisfied until a truly full and definitive meaning is found. Most people are not habitually in such a disposition and so they can live normally prescinding from God.

To satisfy the immediate needs of our daily existence or to stifle our curiosity to know, it is not necessary to pose these fundamental questions about the full and ultimate explanation of things: it is enough to know that a particular concrete product has certain concrete uses, or that a certain phenomenon can be explained by certain immediate causes. This is the role of science, of technology, of practical knowledge. And there is so much to discover and do in this field, so many challenges to face in order to survive, most people lose their awareness that beyond the immediate concrete questions, they can and should pass to the more fundamental question that requires a full and definitive reply.

It has often been said that science is like those chinese boxes which, when one opens one, there is another inside, and then another, and so on. As soon as we find a solution to a problem or puzzle, we realise that it in turn contains other problems or puzzles.

Science, or life itself, are stories that never end: what happens is that their products can be so entertaining, so fascinating, so overwhelming that we completely forget problems of beginnings or endings, of the meaning of history.

#### **4. To seek God: a reasonable choice**

In this respect I said to you above, commenting on the classic principle that only the person who seeks God finds God, that there has to be a previous personal and subjective option for fulfillment, for wholeness, for full meaning, in order to reach God as Absolute. But does this mean that, since this option is described as personal and subjective, it is necessarily an illusion and non-objective ? I don't believe so.

It has to be described as subjective and personal in so far as I am the person who takes it and to the extent that I can take it deliberately or pretend to avoid it. But it is not a subjective option in the sense of being fanciful, gratuitous and irresponsible, something I take without reason or because I feel like it, being perfectly able to remain content and at peace if I don't take it.

We are dealing with the only truly reasonable option and, in this sense, the only truly "objective" option. Because here is the most objective reality I can find: here am I, and here are the series of phenomena I call "the world": and all this either has a true reason for existing, a real base, or it is necessary to admit that it is without base, unintelligible and thus condemned to being unreal.

Of course I can admit it is all unexplainable *for me*, but I cannot claim it is all unexplainable *in itself*: because to say something is unexplainable, unintelligible, without basis *in itself* is the same as saying it is unreal, cannot exist and has no objectivity.

I don't wish to say by this - insisting on what I was suggesting a moment ago - that I am always able to decide what is the basis of reality: it could well be I have not succeeded in discovering it: but what I can't say is that something real which exists does not have sufficient basis. To deny the sufficient basis of something is to deny its reality.

## **5. We all have our gods**

For this reason I make bold to assert there can hardly be "atheists" who are truly lucid and consistent in their atheism, since no one can affirm, unless by a mental juggling act, that what exists has no ultimate basis, no reason or principle to explain why things exist as they are rather than complete nothingness. In fact, the whole world demands some form of Absolute, some principle of total explanation. What happens is that some, who say they reject the idea of "God" and proclaim themselves atheists, argue that the world, matter, the forces of nature, or even chance, are in fact "absolutes", sufficient in and by themselves.

There are forms of atheistic materialism that are no more than an absolutization of matter with its attributes and potentialities: to argue that matter contains its own self-explanation and is sufficient reason for what exists is, in fact, to attribute divine qualities to matter and proclaim it is "God".

Others will insist that the absolute, precisely because it has to be the basis and explanation of everything, has to exist in some other form or level of reality, different from what is being explained. The first, insisting the world of experience is self-explanatory and contains within itself sufficient reason for all that exists, call themselves "atheists" and deny God. The others, insisting on some "great beyond" with God as ultimate reality and basis of everything, see themselves in radical and incompatible opposition to the first. But I suspect in both there is an embarrassing impreciseness of thought and language which prevents them understanding each other when in fact they may be much closer than they think. When some affirm this ultimate reality and basis of everything is nothing other than matter itself, perhaps one can say that in a certain sense they are right, at least if they conceive matter not only as something I experience here and now but also including all that is necessary to explain its existence: that is, matter *with* its justification and ultimate *raison d'être*, which will include the *raison d'être* of its attributes and potentialities. To conceive matter as a self-sufficient and self-explanatory principle of everything may not be so much a denial of God as the introduction of a divine principle and qualities in the heart of nature itself. I would go so far as to affirm that such a concept cannot simply be dismissed as illegitimate, incoherent or absurd but could be, in some way, in perfect accord with what I have been explaining to you. For it could well be that this concept is stating no more than the intuition that matter, or any other form of reality, cannot be understood without including in some way its ultimate basis and reason for existence: that matter exists and changes in total and unbreakable dependency on its ultimate basis.

So the expression "everything is explained by matter" seems to me acceptable as a statement that in fact the absolute principal of everything acts and shows itself in and through secondary causes that in a broad sense we can call material (because even what we call "spiritual" is always bound with the material in our experience.) In other words, "God" or the absolute principal and foundation of everything, cannot be accurately described as something "outside" or "beyond" matter or any other reality which necessarily forms part of totality.



"God" is in matter and matter is in God.

## **6. God: the centre of being**

Now I really do feel you must be tired of my mental gymnastics. Forgive me. Perhaps I am splitting hairs in our discussion and being over subtle. But I still want to write you a few lines about those who insist, on the other hand, that God is transcendent, "outside" and "above" matter and everything in this world.

You probably feel these represent the genuine "theist" tradition, and probably also you yourself when you ask if there is a God, which is equivalent to asking if there is a higher reality "outside", "above", "beyond", "before", etc., etc., the reality we experience in this world.

At first this approach seems correct and has deep meaning. But it can also be highly confusing and misleading. Because if the adverbial expressions I put between commas are interpreted in a local, spacial or temporal sense, we have to say they cannot be properly applied to God. God is not exactly "outside" the world or "above" it, nor is the world exactly "outside" God or "below" him.

In reality God is wholly within the world and wholly outside it: such expressions, applied to God, cannot mean separation or temporal or spacial distance. They express what in philosophical language is called "ontological difference", which means that God cannot be conceived as another reality on the same level as the other realities in the world which are objects of our own experience, nor even as the sum of all these realities. God is something on a different level, a reality with a being and characteristics that are sui generis and radically different from all the other realities we experience.

This implies that there are two types or categories of reality that are totally irreducible: one is essentially autonomous and self-sufficient, and the other essentially derivative and dependent. And it is this essential irreducibility and not some spacial or temporal separation that the adverbial expressions between commas were trying to express. In the language used by theologians, we say that God is both immanent and transcendent, that is, at the same time inseparable from the world and irreducible to it: a reality that is at the heart of everything - "the most intimate of my inner self" said St. Augustine - but which surpasses absolutely everything. Or, as the philosopher Zubiri put it in a formula which expresses it perfectly in so far as it can be expressed, God is "transcendent in earthly things".

## **3 TO PLACE ONESELF BEFORE THE MYSTERY OF REALITY**

I once read somewhere that our situation with respect to God is in many ways similar to that of a foetus with respect to its mother: the foetus enjoys in its mother's womb a life that in some ways is its own and which cannot be simply identified with the life of the mother. But at the same time its life depends entirely on the mother's life and draws its vital strength from it.

The mother's life "transcends", surpasses, is independent from the foetus's life which it

controls totally and makes possible. When the foetus is already sufficiently developed, one can say that in some way it "feels" its mother's life: it feels the pressure of the walls of the uterus and even kicks against them; but it doesn't "know" its mother as it will know her after birth, able to distinguish her as an "object" of knowledge, even though in the most elementary manner through touch, sight and hearing. The comparison is suggestive but, like all comparisons, it doesn't hold on every point.

## **1. How can we affirm what we don't know ?**

We are in God, we live through God and for God who is the basis of our existence: but God's life and being surpass us completely. We can say that in some way we "feel" God in so far as we recognise him as necessary, as a condition for our own existence: but we cannot really "know" him, precisely because he is so immersed in our own life. As happens with the foetus and the knowledge the mother may have of it, we lack distance and perspective in order to know God; at the same time we lack the capacity to know God, the adequate faculties to see God.

Here we meet the basic characteristic of our most strange relationship with God. Though so close and intimate to us, God is absolutely unknowable, unattainable to us as he really is.

We would like God to be an "object" of our knowledge or experience, to be able to take him in and understand him from outside as we take in and understand other objects in our knowledge and experience. But this is not possible.

For us, to know means to define an aspect or part of reality, to identify it, detach it from the immense backcloth of other realities, to note its characteristics, immediate causes, ways of acting, how it relates to other realities: all these operations, and others similar, single out the particular reality as a precise and well defined "object" I can know. This cannot be done with God. As the first and absolute reality that determines all the rest, God has no basis and nothing can determine or limit him. Since he is the explanation of everything, he himself cannot be explained by anything else. If there was something that could explain God, that something would itself be God. God is absolutely inexplicable and gratuitous in the sense that he exists for himself, like something there purely and simply for and by itself: to exist he doesn't need anything outside him.

And so, because everything that is, is for itself, God cannot be properly understood from outside himself, by someone or something different from himself. The most we can say is what God is not: he is not like any of those realities that don't contain within themselves the reason for their own existence but which depend on other realities to condition and determine them in their limited and finite being. Of God we can only say he is not dependent, not limited, not circumscribed, not finite, not determined, not conditioned by anyone or anything.

## **2. Questions abound**

I don't know if I can help you understand what I am trying to say by inviting you to make a small act of imagination. Imagine that, by the touch of a magical wand of one of those witches in children's stories, you suddenly become able to know absolutely everything that

exists, has existed or will exist in the whole universe: all the causes, beginnings, characteristics, relationships, and the innermost being of all things, peoples and events so that nothing at all would hold any secret for you.

Well then, at this moment you can and should still ask: why is all this ? Why this immense web of beings, linked to each other by such a complicated chain of causes, effects and relationships ? Why has all this existed and why does it still exist, instead of nothingness, the absolute darkness of non-being ? This question, the all-embracing question about the existence of everything, confronts us with the mystery of the universe and its reason for existing. And we have to confess we don't know how to reply to such a question, but it has to have a reply.

We can't say for what reason the world exists, but it has to have a reason. And that which we can't say what it is but which has to exist so that everything else can exist, is what we call "God", the key to the world's mystery.

When, after passing in review the sum of human knowledge about things in the world, one reaches the frontier or limits of that knowledge, discovering there the mystery of the world, it is then that the mystery of God emerges, awesome and frightening.

Perhaps this all seems to you very intellectual and abstract. But I presume to suggest in ending this section that at the heart of it all there is something very simple and vital which affects us in the deepest part of ourselves. Unamuno expresses it with great force and simplicity in his "Sentimiento trágico de la vida". He says: "The hunger for God grabbed me, and my spirit's distress made me feel, in his absence, his reality. I wanted there to be a God, for God to exist."

I just want to add, for my part, that this God is not merely the object of a subjective and capricious desire, as perhaps might be thought at times by the tormented philosopher of Salamanca. Because my hunger for God, my need for God, are real and objective facts that I can't deny without denying what I am. What is needed to satisfy this real hunger and real need, has to be something that is real and existing.

One could object against this type of reasoning that "the existence of thirst doesn't guarantee the existence of a fountain". But if one considers this objection in depth, it seems to be a sophism. Because if thirst exists, that is, if there is a being that needs water in order to exist, the water needed for such a being to exist also has to exist. If the water didn't exist, then neither could the being that needs water to survive. The existence of beings who suffer thirst and cannot exist without water leads me to conclude that in their living space there has to be water, even though I cannot say where or how it exists. In the same way, my existence and the existence of a world where beings "hunger and thirst for God" which can only be explained or make sense by postulating the reality that explains everything which we call "God", obliges me to recognize and admit the real existence of God, even though I cannot say how or where he is.

### **3 The awkward mystery**

A moment ago I started to speak of God as "mystery" and I am frightened this word might

cause you some unease. I have already met people who don't like the word: they think it is an easy trick we priests use to impose on someone something we can't explain and which, even worse, has no basis in reality at all. But for me to affirm a mystery is not an easy way out but an awkward necessity; it is not the act of an ostrich which buries its head in the sand so as to avoid the difficulty but rather a courageous act on the part of a human being who takes the risk of wanting to see clearly and in depth the reality of his situation in the world.

A human being's situation in the world can be assessed from two viewpoints which I am going to explain to you in the words of two influential European philosophers. They are radically opposed views, determined more perhaps by the personal talent of each and the environment in which he lived, then by explicit and conscious reasoning. The first is represented in one of the principles of Christian Wolff, an 18th century German philosopher influenced by the rationalism of Descartes: "Clarity is the sign of truth: obscurity is the sign of error."

The other attitude can be expressed in the words of the Italian thinker Giambattista Vico: "Clarity is the defect of human reason, rather than its strength: because a clear idea is a finite idea, and no one has proved that finite reason provides an adequate measure for reality."

The basic views expressed in each of these phrases already determine beforehand whether one can or can not recognise the existence of God. The first can have a perfectly valid meaning: it is true that obscurity is often a sign we are chasing a shadow, something unreal or fanciful. In such cases obscurity is a sign of error, the falseness of the object or the way it is perceived. But, taken as a principle with absolute and universal validity, the first of the phrases quoted could lead to attitudes which, on examination, appear highly suspect and unfounded.

If the principle is taken as absolute, it would be equivalent to affirming that human reason in general - and even perhaps my own individual reason - is a sufficient measure of reality; or, in other words, nothing can exist or is true beyond that which I can understand. Is this reasonable? Is it "clear"? Do I have the power to set myself up by myself as judge of reality, of what exists and what doesn't exist? I fear this is the attitude of the ostrich which, since it doesn't want to see what it doesn't understand, hides its head in the sand and declares that what it doesn't want to see doesn't exist.

The second attitude seems to me more cautious and prudent and, for that reason, more human. I cannot set myself up willy-nilly as judge of reality, of what can or cannot exist. I cannot guarantee my reason is capable of understanding or encompassing everything that exists. To be sincere, it rather seems I have grounds to think the scope of my understanding and knowledge is very limited and that reality floods over it on every side.

I am aware that all my knowledge, even though it may embrace everything the wisest of men have ever known, is but a small island in an ocean of unexplored reality; no more than the fringe of a landscape whose deep secrets I am incapable of penetrating. I can't even pretend I know myself fully or adequately.

My own being and existence are really a mystery to me. And the same is true with the events of my immediate experience: they are there, given before I try to understand them; the understanding of them I have doesn't determine what they are but rather the opposite: what they are determines what I am able to know about them.

I know something about myself, about things and the world which surrounds me, but the question is always there: What am I really myself ? The things about which I know something, what are they really ? And so once again we come to the basic question: Why do I exist, why do things exist rather than absolute nothingness ? Being - mine and that of everything - is something "given", something which is simply there without depending on me, my will or my understanding, is truly for me a mystery. I myself am a mystery, the whole world, all that exists is a mystery, that is something I cannot explain by myself or for myself. But I cannot resign myself to admitting that what is unexplainable **for me** should also be unexplainable **in itself** - because I cannot conceive something exists that doesn't have a reason in itself, a basis, a fully sufficient explanation - I have to postulate that, though it cannot be known directly by me, there exists in itself the reason, the basis and the explanation of everything.

The person brave enough to penetrate the depths of the mystery of self-existence and the existence of the world, finds the door which opens up to the mystery of God. Because both mysteries, that of the world and of God, are no more than the convex and concave sides of the one great mystery of being and reality.

#### **4. To give in to the mystery ?**

We shouldn't hide the fact that to lose oneself in the depths of these mysteries is uncomfortable and unrewarding because it is like losing oneself in uncharted territory. This explains why many resist venturing on such a journey, preferring to remain in the well-trodden domains of what is perfectly well known and identified by reason.

Atheism and agnosticism - with all their variations - fill their ranks with those addicted by principle to rational clarity and security, and therefore allergic to the very mention of the word "mystery". As the field where they harvest rational certainties is large and extensive - since it is the whole scientific field, the thousand technical dreams of every day-, they can find in it sufficient occupation and support not to feel the need to adventure out to other less known territories. To believe in God is to move away from our normal ways of thinking and behaviour. Because, normally, we prefer to remain in the sphere of what we believe we know. We like our assertions to have an object, a content in some way precise or at least defined or definable. But in the case of asserting God this is not possible: we are asserting something essentially unknown, unreachable, unexpressable.

This does not mean an assertion without any object: but, for being an assertion that is merely postulated and not known or experienced directly, we can be left with the feeling of not knowing if we are really asserting anything, and perhaps sometimes we are asserting nothing. To affirm God as a reality essentially intelligible in itself and for itself, but also unintelligible for and by us, without face, or shape, or an idea which can describe for us what he is in himself, is something that makes for awkwardness and even dizziness. It pulls us out completely from our normal ways of thinking and speaking.

#### **5 To believe is to disorientate oneself**

Even worse, our discomfort can be total when we realise that asserting God is not like an intellectual or notional assertion of something we then don't worry about any more.

To believe in God is to make oneself dependent on him, which means changing the perspective we have on ourselves, our reason, our interests, the criteria by which we measure and judge things, in order to recognise that the centre is now elsewhere and that the reason and assessment of all this is not in ourselves but in him. To believe in God, as expressed in one way or another by all religions, is to go out of ourselves and entrust ourselves to him, abandon ourselves to him. Is it possible to abandon oneself to a reality we don't know and which we begin by declaring essentially unknowable ?

It is not without reason students of religion have reached the conclusion that for a religious person God is a "mysterium tremendum", a mystery which produces fear and trembling. The strange thing is that, being so, men have not succeeded in breaking away from it completely. And the reason is that, in spite of the fear and trembling, men cannot fail to see that this "tremendous mystery" is no more than the reverse face of their own mystery and the mystery of the world. To deny or attempt to ignore it would be to deny or ignore oneself.

## **6 Behind God's face**

This letter is becoming much longer than I had intended. And worse, I am aware that up till now I've done no more than try to establish a starting point that will enable us to set out on the path towards God. To follow this path, or at least to plot a possible route as if on a map, lies outside the scope of this letter. It will have to be the subject for more leisurely conversations, if God grants us the time for these. For the moment, with a firm commitment to put an end to this letter, I shall try to give a few pointers towards the direction it seems our pursuit of God should take.

If we can say no more about God than what I have been proposing above, that is, he is a "mysterium tremendum", an unknown, a necessary reality but absolutely unknowable and inexpressible for us, then I believe such a shadowy and inaccessible God will inevitably leave us unsatisfied. Such a "God" remains at the level of a pure and abstract philosophical principle, too remote for us to be able to experience him as a genuine determining factor in the everyday decisions of our lives.

A "God" whom we can only say has to exist, but whom we can't say what or how he is, though intellectually necessary, risks leaving us wholly indifferent. To become interested in him, we would need to know if, in any way, he is interested in us; if we are "somebody" for him; if somehow we matter for him so that he can matter for us. Because if not, perhaps the best thing we can do is leave him in peace and organize our own immediate lives as best we can.

To enter into a religious relationship with God, we would need to know, however imperfectly, who he is and how he is; we must be able to give him a face, a shape, a name, something more than a mere cypher to denote the wholly unknown. This in fact is the chief task of all religions: all seek primarily to sketch a face or a shape, to express in some way what God is like. But in this task we expose ourselves to many delusions.

Many centuries before Christ, an old Greek philosopher noted with irony that, if cows and horses had gods, they would see them as a "Cow" or a "Horse"; and that the Ethiopians make their gods black and snub-nosed like themselves. In other words, when man seeks the face and shape of God, he is likely to give him his own face: if not, he gives him the face and likeness of the things he most esteems, is most impressed by, or the things he most fears.

When man on his own wants to give God a face, what he does is create an idol, make a God in his own image and likeness; until the day arrives when it becomes obvious that it is not and cannot really be "God". Not only the motley objects adored in primitive religions are idols - gods made to man's image - but our own childish gods and even the gods of many refined religious and theological concepts of educated people who with great devotion have shaped their own image of God.

When people try by their own efforts to forge an image of God, however refined and spiritual it might be, the image offers no guarantee of representing divine truth: it might have more or less accurate or approximate characteristics, but in the final analysis it remains an image made by the hand - or the mind - of the person: an idol.

God, as I said before, is the Great Fundamental Mystery whose existence has to be postulated to explain the existence of everything else. We cannot say who or what he is like, but that does not mean to say he is totally and absolutely unknown to us: if we don't know what he is like in himself, at least we know him by what he is for us. For us he is an invisible and unimaginable presence, but the real and effective basis for our being and that of the world.

God's mystery begins to reveal itself somehow in the mystery of our own being, in the fact that we exist. The moment we recognise this, we recognise ourselves as existing in the presence of God's mystery, based in him, supported by him, dependent on him. And being, as we are, desirous of knowing everything and possessing the truth, we cannot fail to want to know and possess this mystery as well, in so far as it is possible.

## **4 IN SEARCH OF A FACE**

In this truly perplexing situation which obliges us humans to investigate the mystery of God but at the same time being unable to find a satisfactory reply by ourselves other than merely reducing God to an "idol", is it still possible to think of a way out of such an impasse ?

If the searcher for God cannot find an adequate reply to his questioning, could it be that God himself will in some way provide a reply? If it is true God takes an interest in us, that we count for him, he should have some way of letting us know, of showing us what he is and what he wants to be for us.

Obviously we can't take it for granted beforehand that God wants to communicate with us: the most we can do is be on the lookout, lying in wait to see if in fact, in some unimaginable and surprising way, he does communicate himself, unveiling and revealing the depths of his mystery.

### **1 Can God communicate with us ?**

This self communication of the very mystery of God, if it takes place, will inevitably be subject to a somewhat unusual logic. On the one hand it will have to be a communication through realities or signs really accessible to us, which fall within the scope of our understanding. But, on the other hand, these realities or signs have to present themselves with sufficient strength and guarantee that they really do refer to God's mystery and express it effectively. Is this possible ? Can we presume that something exists which is at one and the same time accessible to us and a real expression of the unknowable mystery of God ?

We have to confess these questions leave us somewhat perplexed and that, with all honesty, we have to say we don't know how to reply. Because with any reality - words, sign, event or person - that we begin to suspect might be God's revelation to us, how can we recognise it really is so and not merely a groundless suspicion or illusion ? How can we ever be able to say "this is a revelation of God", "this is God's presence", "this is God", if we have no previous concept or adequate image of God ? Because to "recognise" means to observe and affirm the presence of something already somehow known. There can only be recognition where there is some previous knowledge. How can we recognise the presence, action or revelation of God if we have no previous idea of what God is like ? If a self-revelation of God's mystery does take place, then it will be up to us to decide "this is God". But since we do not know what he is really like, we will never be able to take this decision with complete certainty: in saying "this is God" we will only really be saying "this seems to agree with the image we have formed of God". But this image is probably no more than an idol.

If God does show himself to us, it has to be in a way in which it is not us who have to decide the truth of his revelation, but he himself who tells us "I am God" in a voice so clear and unmistakable and with such persuasive force that we cannot not admit the truth of what he says, unless we have decided in no way to admit that God can reveal himself.



## **2 Faith is an act of freedom**

This implies many things. First it implies that belief in God, although in some way ours, is above all something that God himself has to implant in us. It is not something we can attain solely by our own efforts, as a result of a series of reasonings or reflections, but rather something we must hope for and receive as a gift from God himself. It is not the effort of our reasoning, but the very radiance of God, the unmistakable brilliance of his presence, the undisputable force of his word telling us "Here is God" which guarantees the truth of his self revelation. So, in recognising the mystery of our existence, what we have to do is not so much sharpen our reason as hope and beg the same mystery will reveal itself to us with its unmistakable light and strength: "Show us the light of your face", "Illuminate us with the radiance of your look", as the Old Testament prophets cried out.

There is no other way: belief in God, which already means a step beyond questioning oneself about the mystery behind the world and creation, can only be a gift, a self-gift from God himself: and as such we can only hope for it, beg for it.

The arguments I was putting before you also have other consequences. If we really have to hope he himself will communicate with us, we must be ready to receive his communication as and when it comes: that is, we cannot predict a priori how or when God might communicate with us. God can communicate with us in a way and at a time totally unexpected and unforeseen. For not having put oneself in an attitude of expectation, many have closed themselves to the possibility of God revealing himself.

Most of us believe we already have an adequate image of God: he would be the glorious and allpowerful God ruling everything wonderfully from his throne, or the provident God ready to come to the help of every need, or God the judge who unleashes his hand against all the wicked. But we cannot say a priori up to what point these images really reflect what God is like. And if we are only disposed to recognise God in so far as he shows himself in accordance with one of these prefabricated images of ours, then it is likely that when he does show himself as he really is, we will not be able to recognise him.

## **3 God's face is called Jesus**

As you know, the Judeo-Christian tradition believes that throughout human history God has been revealing to men the profound mysteries of his being and action. It is a long and complex process, both disconcerting and fascinating, whose development it would be impossible to resume in a letter of this nature. But to show at least what we might call the final goal of this long process, God's mystery shows itself in him as a mystery of love, of the desire to give of self, to communicate the life he possesses in himself to other beings who hold their being and life from and by him, thus associating them in the joy of his own being and his own life.

The unknown God, that "mysterium tremendum" producing fear and dizziness in us, shows himself in this process as a "mystery of love", a mystery of sharing, of communion. God did not want to shut himself up in his remote, eternal and self-sufficient solitude. Nor, after

having made us capable of sharing in some way his own being and life, did he want to abandon us to our own terrible worldly solitude, but rather he wanted to be continually with us.

And here we find perhaps the most mysterious part of this loving relationship between God and man: a loving relationship is necessarily a free relationship. A forced or imposed love is not love. But respect for the other's freedom in no way indicates a lack of interest or indifference for the other. The lover cannot impose himself by force on the loved one but neither can he be disinterested or indifferent to him. And here lies the complexity - and also almost the tragedy - of the relationship between God and man, a relationship of love.

#### **4 He is with you**

As you know, Christians believe the culminating point of this relationship between God and humanity is Jesus Christ. Jesus is an unexpected revelation, the unimaginable face of God. Jesus is a human being in whom we find something of God himself and who really and effectively communicates with us through love.

Prepared, announced and promised across the centuries, Jesus is the unveiling, the revelation for humanity of the mystery of the unknown God. And in this revelation, the unknown God shows himself as a Father, as someone who is with us, who loves us and wants to share his own life with us: that is why Jesus's name is "God with us".

You might say all this is too beautiful or too strange and unbelievable to be true. You might ask me to prove and guarantee that it is so. But I have already told you that God's presence, when it occurs, is not something that can be demonstrated, proved or identified by purely human reasoning. God's presence shines of itself, imposes itself with its own strength on those disposed to receive it. In this way Jesus imposed himself as God's presence on those disposed to welcome him, the simple, those not bound by their own conceptions of God.

In fact when God makes himself present among men, he debunks all the concepts of the divine they have. God shows himself as He who loves all human beings to such a degree that he identifies himself madly with any of them, in all their weaknesses, precariousness, in all their sufferings, and even in their vulnerability before the absurd forces that can lead them to death.... and who, in spite of all, doesn't cease to be God, the foundation of all being and life, over whom death has no power, rather who after dying lives for ever and is capable bringing to life and giving life forever to those he loves. Jesus dead and resurrected is the definitive revelation to mankind of God's love and power.

#### **5 We find God meeting and loving him in those who suffer**

When one has begun to understand the need for ultimate meaning and put oneself on the path to search for God, then (perhaps to purify that search) it seems that God almost disassociates himself and says: If you are looking for me, look for that which I love most; if you want to love me, love that which has always been the object of my love. Perhaps the most sublime words of Jesus are those in which he says that, when God comes with his angels to judge mankind, he will not ask whether we have had lofty and correct ideas about himself, but

rather if we have loved him in those of his brethren needing love. You know the text: "Come, you whom my Father has blessed....for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, lacking clothes and you clothed me...". And to the astonishment of those who believe they had never met God, and still less a hungry, thirsty or naked God, God himself will reveal to them: "In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Mt 25, 31ss). In the light of this, perhaps it needs to be said that it is not so important to search for God with reasonings but to try and find him in those who are his living images (for the Bible says that man has been made "in the image and likeness of God", Gn 1,26).

The first christian communities used to repeat a phrase attributed to Jesus though it does not appear in the gospels: "You have seen your brother, you have seen God". Obviously this means, not the mere physical fact of seeing your brother, but recognising him as such and acting in accordance. If every person is made in God's image, every person merits full respect and full love. Furthermore, to inflict, promote or tolerate in any way any harm to God's image is to offend God. And even when a person does wrong and doesn't behave like God's image, God still loves this disfigured image of himself, and wants it to be respected and to recover its original features. This is what Jesus came to teach us with his words, but above all with his actions in favour of the poor, sinners, the sick... To those who understood nothing of this God whose chief interest was centered in the poor and the outcasts of society, Jesus had to explain that he had come on behalf of God "to seek out and save what was lost" (Lk 19,10).

We come back to something I think I've already insinuated: it is not so much a question of reasoning about the existence or not of a God Creator, but rather of loving God's creation. And in that creation, to love in a very special way the poor who so often, through the evil deeds of men and against God's wishes, are victims of injustice, of exploitation, of misery and marginalisation.

You will have heard that this was the "new" commandment, peculiar and very specific to Jesus: "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15,12). Because "whoever does not love his brother whom he can see, cannot love God whom he has not seen (1Jn 4,20). What really illuminates a person's heart is not to look at oneself and lose oneself in one's own reasonings, but to go out of oneself and look outwards towards others.

The first who followed Jesus believed in him because of the irresistible attraction he radiated, for what they saw, felt and experienced of him. And those who in the course of centuries have continued to believe in him, have done so through the same inherent attraction he radiates, by the strength of the Spirit of Jesus which is a living reality and not merely a dead memory.

At another time perhaps I will try to explain to you in greater detail what the mystery of "God with us" means and how it was announced and revealed during the long centuries of human history until it reached its final revelation in Jesus of Nazareth. For the moment, it remains for me to invite you to endeavour never to close your heart to the possible revelation of God, even though this may be in the most unexpected manner, quite incongruent with what you yourself might have thought of him.

And above all, don't cease to beg the Spirit of Jesus to give you that light and irresistible attraction which led the Apostles to believe, beyond all reasoning and all doubt, that Jesus is

God's revelation for us, a revelation in which that unattainable and "tremendous" mystery shows itself to be the mystery of giving unconditional love, being capable of identifying oneself in suffering and even death with those who are loved, and which has the power to give them life and enable them to share in the life he has in himself and that nothing can take away.

This is what I beg for you, as for myself.

With my best wishes

*Josep Vives SJ.*