

Camillo Cardinal Ruini has been President of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) and Vicar General of His Holiness for the Diocese of Rome. Since 2008 he has been appointed Chairman of the Committee for the Cultural Project of the Italian Bishops' Conference.

PRESS

God today. A question that concerns everybody¹

☞ Camillo Ruini

A reflection on the implications of the crucial relationship between God and society today, in view of the international event to be held in Rome on 10-12 December and organised by the Committee for the Cultural Project of the Italian Bishops' Conference.

In his letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church (10 March 2009), Benedict XVI writes: "In our days, when in vast areas of the world the faith is in danger of dying out like a flame which no longer has fuel, the overriding priority is to make God present in this world and to show men and women the way to God. Not just any god, but the God who spoke on Sinai; to that God whose face we recognize in a love which presses "to the end" (cf. *Jn* 13:1) – in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. The real problem at this moment of our history is that God is disappearing from the human horizon, and, with the dimming of the light which comes from God, humanity is losing its bearings, with increasingly evident destructive effects." I have chosen to begin with this long quotation because it clarifies, with great precision and effectiveness, the reasons why the Committee for the Cultural Project of the Italian Bishops' Conference felt the need to hold an international event totally dedicated to the subject of God (*God today. With him or without him nothing is the same*, Rome, 10-12 December 2009). The sense and purpose of this Event is therefore very clearly illustrated.

In our times it may sound too pessimistic to diagnose the disappearance of God from the human horizon, given that so many people are writing – not without good reasons – about the reawakening of religion and the waning of the idea of secularisation as an inevitable outcome of modernity. If, however, we focus our attention on prevailing cultural trends, there is a clear divergence with respect to the growing role of the major religions on the public stage and the actual revival of religious awareness in the Western world. For a long time the cultural landscape has been marked by an increasingly radical tendency to consider God as a product of our own minds: therefore atheism has become deeply embedded and has turned into nihilism, where values and certainties disappear. Moreover, the rising cultural leadership of empirical science is often accompanied, as it were, by an "evolutionary metaphysics" that – despite the absence of any actual scientific justification – reduces everything to nature, that is, to energy-matter, to chance and necessity. So there is no place left either for God or for man as a conscious subject. Still more common is the tendency to identify what is properly "rational" with what can be scientifically known, so that God could not be known through reason.

It is of course true that atheistic and agnostic stances have been met with vigorous responses, although they did not succeed in altering the prevailing mindset. In fact, since the half of the last century these responses seem to have been less frequent and

¹ Translated from Italian: originally published in *Vita e Pensiero* (5/2009), the review of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan. © *Vita e Pensiero* 2009

forthright. It is interesting to observe the way in which theologians have reacted, since their business – by vocation, even as it were by profession – is to present God in their cultural context. With a strong simplification, we may single out two main approaches. The first has long been customary in Catholic thought and is expressed through neo-scholastic theology. This approach has been acutely aware of the radical challenge posed by modern atheism and has reacted with powerful, often far-sighted criticism, but it has some shortcomings. People arguing along these lines underestimate the historical distance which separates St. Thomas and the great thinkers of Scholasticism from the present day, and do not adequately appreciate the major theoretical and practical developments that have taken place over the centuries. Neoscholasticism lost its dominance with the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, which sanctioned with the authority of Magisterium the search for a common ground and a dialogue with modernity. We may add that the attempt to prove the truth of Christian tenets by means of reason “alone” (that is, a reason which is rigorously independent of faith) has to a large extent failed. Indeed the question of God as well as the question of man inevitably concerns and involves our very self, the meaning and direction of our lives: thus, while requiring all the rigour and critical power of our intelligence, it cannot be resolved independently of the choices according to which we lead our lives.

The second approach has established itself mainly among protestants, though has been widely accepted in Catholic theology before and after the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. It is known as “kerygmatic theology” since it aims at the proclamation of the richness and the beauty of the Christian mystery as the mystery of our salvation. On one hand, this approach has led to an important recovery and a fresh appreciation of biblical, patristic and liturgical sources. On the other hand, it has failed to grasp the full scope of the radical critique put forward by modern reason and freedom (as emancipation from whatever constraint) against the very foundations of Christian truth, especially the existence of God himself. For instance Karl Barth regards faith as a pure paradox, arguing that it can subsist only in a way totally independent of reason. His position is easily exposed to the reply that anything that is gratuitously affirmed may as well be gratuitously negated.

In recent decades, many theologians have therefore looked for new paths, hopefully more adequate to propose the Christian faith in the varied socio-cultural contexts of our time, which is no longer Eurocentric. Such paths have therefore diversified according to the different circumstances. Some theological proposals, such as Latin American liberation theology and the so-called “theology of religions” with mostly Asian origins, have not regarded as central the subject of the existence of God, since for the present this is not called into question in these cultural contexts as it is in European culture. In Europe and more widely in the Western world, theology has sought in many ways a dialogue with “critical reason” and the search for freedom, in order to open them to faith “from within” and assimilate their values into the Christian faith. However such attempts, while fully justified in their underlying intent, have often been carried out to the detriment of the solid anchorage to faith, without which any Christian theology lacks significance and substance. Thus, even with regard to the question of God, positions have sometimes been weak and confused. Still many positions have settled with the passage of time and God is once again becoming the focus of theological debate: today the dialogue with the critical claims of contemporary culture strives to be serious and sincere without being unduly compliant.

The international Event to be held in December 2009 is part of this process. However it will not be exclusively theological in character: instead it will be definitely interdisciplinary, not only because of the profound synergy between theology and philosophy with regard to the subject of God, even in their reciprocal distinction, but also with the conviction that the question of God is substantially related to the cosmological and

anthropological problems arising from present scientific developments. Moreover, such an approach to God will not be narrow-mindedly rationalistic: ample space will be given to the various expressions of the human spirit, namely art, music, poetry, cinema and television, with a special attention for religions, as historically established forms of the relationship between God and man.

Hence, as it is already clear from the quotation from Benedict XVI with which I have begun this paper, we are going to be involved with the question of God not only in the general sense, but with regard to the personal God, in fact the same God who questions and addresses us. So we are not going to claim a neutrality which would be merely superficial; on the contrary, even if there will be space for many different voices, the Event aims precisely at proposing the God of Jesus Christ in the present context. Great attention will be paid to the crucial significance that the reception of this God has for our lives, as well as for our view of the world – hence the subtitle of the Event: “With him or without him nothing is the same”. But the discussion cannot stop here: it must overcome our cultural bans and directly address the question of the reality of this God, without which any appreciation of his significance for us leaves the matter dangling in the air. This does not mean a return to a rationalistic approach lacking appreciation of mystery, an approach claiming that the solution to the question of the existence of God can be found through “reason alone”: as the former Cardinal Ratzinger wrote, the acceptance of God “requires us to renounce our dominant position and assume the risk of listening with humility” (*L'Europa di Benedetto nella crisi delle culture*, Cantagalli, Rome-Siena 2005, p. 123).

The ways in which God traverses the world of men are certainly infinitely richer, more mysterious and more varied than the paths of high culture. As I have already mentioned, we can find some evidence for this claim in the religious reawakening that is occurring at the present, despite all the difficulties made by the widespread culture in the Western world. However, we cannot believe that the cultural weight of atheism and agnosticism has no consequences for those who live in our society and breathe such a culture: good evidence of the ensuing problems can be found in the actual behaviours of many people. The marginalisation of God in the prevailing culture may also exert a negative influence on those who react to it, leading them to confine themselves within a narrow horizon and to believe – at least implicitly – that the faith in God requires a detachment from their own age.

One further consideration makes even more evident the scope of the cultural discussion about God. The culture which has begun in the Western world is indeed becoming quite universal, at least with regard to scientific and technological rationality, as well as the consequent way of life. Thus it is not unreasonable to presume that in other parts of the world people will face – if they are not already facing – the problems arising from the tendency to extract out of science reasons for atheism or agnosticism, even if such extraction is inappropriate.

Finally, I hope that the international Event on God can illustrate the Church's first and sole interest and also its most profound nature and vocation, its “calling”: to make God present in this world, as Benedict XVI wrote, and to show men and women the way to Him. The basic purpose of the Cultural Project of the Italian Bishops' Conference is to incarnate Christian faith in present culture: this Event will touch its very core, in its most ambitious and demanding sense. We did not conceive this initiative as a challenge or an intellectual provocation: on the contrary, we felt urged by the awareness of a duty that cannot be eluded, which we can face with confidence because we are convinced that God himself wants to be present to men and women.