

Elodie Maurot interviews Joseph Moingt S.J., French theologian and writer.

In God who comes to man, you as a theologian examine the modern phenomenon of the disappearance of belief in God. What's at work between man and God in the process of the Enlightenment?

Until the Enlightenment, mankind hadn't doubted God's existence. The affirmation of God as necessary being was a common traditional calling of philosophy and theology before the Enlightenment. Modernity arrived, when the affirmation of God can no longer be insisted upon as a necessity. The first earthquake came from scientific discourse, which doesn't have a need for divine intervention to explain the universe, its order, its laws and its life, the origin of species and the development of life. Philosophy in its turn called for the freedom to think and interpret rationally the Scriptures. But instead of guiding this spirit of freedom, the church itself took fright when this came back against religious authority. It declared philosophers like Descartes and Spinoza to be atheist - who wanted first of all to think for themselves, think about their faith. A distance was forced between science and philosophy, the God of revelation soon became unthinkable, because He didn't allow free thinking. In distancing himself from religion, modern man learned to pass away from God to thinking and living in the absence of God as if He didn't exist. It's in this very concrete historical process that God has, little by little, lost his 'being-there' in the world and for mankind.

How, as a theologian, do you read this story?

The theologian discovers that this disappearance of God has a meaning for faith itself. Man freed from God, from fear of God. He has gained his freedom before God. But this phenomenon of unbelief and atheism hasn't developed only in the Christian world. Thus I believe that it's necessary to recognise that this calling for man's freedom before God is an effect of the Gospel itself. The spirit of the Gospel teaches man this freedom, and allows him to approach God in all freedom. I believe one can read modernity as a return to the Gospel against religion, including Christian religion.

What can one discover from this theological re-interpretation of modernity?

Two things. First is that God wants man to be free. He calls man to become his son. Or, to be 'Sons of God' is synonymous with freedom before God, as one sees clearly with St Paul. Second, is that this allows us to deepen the purpose for which God is revealed on a cross, on the Cross of Jesus. It's, at this time - there - that one starts to lose track of Him, and there that he truly reveals himself to believers. If He disappeared in this way, it's He who wished that man should in this way be free to find him, it's He who has allowed man to free himself from God

What does the Cross of Christ say about God?

That absolutely nothing can make us believe in the God who reveals Himself in the Cross of Jesus. Not even the resurrection of Jesus, which wasn't a public demonstration, nor a tremendous event ... On the Cross, God's revelation is humble in that it isn't even compelling. It's an act of God's gratuity, of poverty. Son the Cross, God doesn't threaten us. It leaves freedom to believe or not to believe. The Cross delivers us from all necessary reasons to believe in God. God is revealed there as a God of love, a God who gives himself, who is 'for us'. A new 'face of God' comes to birth. God doesn't come to overwhelm us, to call for our homage, but to help man towards new ways of being human. The entire Spirit of the Gospel speaks to us of the way of the Cross of Christ : there's no greater love than that a man gives his life for those he loves.

If there are no more necessary reasons to believe in God, what's the point of faith in God?

Love isn't necessary and yet, a man who doesn't love is not truly human. God's quest is the quest of humanity. That's where it's of use. There are ways of being human that teach us 'the humanity of God', according to the Karth Barth's expression. God is the supreme gratuity, and even that gives us the meaning of gratuity, without which there really is no truly human life. To place oneself before God opens up to man an infinite realm of space and freedom. The thought of God opens to us an open humanity, a pole of infinity, provided that one doesn't say that God is 'our God', and not impose of God our manner of conceiving Him.

How is the relationship of the Christian to God transformed by the gratuity of God?

Those who consent to the overtures of love, choose to exist with God, don't relinquish anything of their realm of freedom. They don't discover straight away the face of God in total truth. They need to take time to rid themselves of worldly images of God, that is to say, utilitarian, buried in religiosity and natural reason. They need much effort to resist the security of the servile condition. They will always need to return to the Cross to take their freedom before God, its risks and dangers, to learn, according to the celebrated expression of Deitrich Boenhoffer to 'live before God and with God, without God', without seeking a contribution, without taking him hostage The Christian is led back to the Gospel and its way of thinking of God in a new way, called to leave utilitarian cult behind - I give to you so that you give to me ... The Gospel teaches us that God has left behind this kind of relationship and has called man to let go of it. Modern man needs to unlearn a certain form of religious spirit, made from submission, calculation, expressions of material needs and fears ... - to enter into another type of relationship with God. God asks us to enter into a relationship with Him by developing relationships of brotherhood, of freedom of friendship, one with another.

How does the progress of freedom manifest itself before God?

We progress in the freedom of God when we no longer feel the same need of legal or ritual guarantees. Theologian Eberhart Jungel says, 'faith refuses guarantees, while religion gives them'. The latter attracts even a believer by guaranteeing him salvation. Christians should be able to move on the type of guarantee transmitted by tradition, atavism and a certain symbolism. The more they advance in freedom, the more they advance in true spiritual joy. Freedom isn't contrary to humility before God, nor obedience to his Spirit. The more a man takes his freedom, the more he is able to discover God in his greatness. The sense of God's grandeur is linked to the freedom with which we approach him.

People were invited by God to seek freedom in faith, however much they sought freedom outside of faith. How do you explain this paradox?

In the West, the answer to this question belongs in the trial of religion and the church. It's a subject on which the Church must reflect much in the future. In the 19th century, in reaction to modernity, the church complained much about the loss of belief, attributing it to pride of the human spirit, to the bad faith of man. The church hasn't seen how much she has left western man behind, by an excess of authoritarianism, in putting religious externals between man and God. The Church should one day examine its conscience and understand what it is to a certain extent responsible for in this loss of belief by modern man.

Happily today, the Church no longer condemns freedom to think. Especially at Vatican II in the Constitution 'Gaudium et Spes, the Church as shown a clear willingness to to be reconciled with the modern world. But I think it has not learned all the lessons that can be learned from this episode, it which it has seen its influence diminish if not disappear over several centuries, and belief in God largely vanish in the West. The Church needs to concern itself with this double phenomenon. And maybe thus it will end by discovering, through modernity and the Enlightenment, that something of

Christian tradition has passed away. The Church has re-centred itself on its religious tradition, but cultural and philosophical tradition is also a way by which the spirit of the Gospel is spread. This is my intimate conviction.

What happens to the non-believer who doesn't succeed in recognising God in the God of the Cross?

To think about this difficult question, we are obliged to take the Gospel as the basis for seeing what salvation depends on. And one finds again the criteria of the Cross. 'there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for a friend'. To sacrifice oneself is the measure of being able to love freely. Those who choose to live without God, don't deprive themselves of freedom, any more than of God's love. They take the freedom they see in others. They receive the love of God in the love they give to others.

And what is there to say about believers in other religions?

I think the encounter between religions shouldn't be a 'holy alliance' of religions wanting to get together because they feel themselves stifled in a secular world. Religions have done much evil to men, and that makes interreligious dialogue very important, so order that members of different religions disengage themselves from combat and become peacemakers. I also believe that the development of friendly and fraternal relationships between people of other cultural traditions is important, for today we have to live together in a society which has become multi-ethnic. But I wouldn't want dialogue with other religions to lead to Christians quitting society. Christians cannot be Christian solely in the religious realm. This is because of the Incarnation. Christianity is first of all a practice of the Gospel concerning everyday life in society. I believe more in a return to the Gospel, than a return to religion or religions.

How can we speak again of God to people today?

It's from the gratuity of God, of a God who wants people to be free, that dialogue can be tied into truth and that man can feel himself engaged with as a free person, responsible, grown up. Without doubt it's necessary that man should learn for himself this sense of gratuity in order to yield to the gratuity of God, that he should learn that the world is not uniquely made up of mercantile relationships, production, utility. Personal relationships and art are marked by gratuity. Man first needs to enter therein, and from there let himself be questioned by the call of God emanating from the Cross.