Oh, God!

June 1, 2002 By Nina Herzog

Questioning Faith

(HBO, June 27, 6:30 p.m. ET/PT)

A young Muslim feels the presence of angels while her mother undergoes risky brain surgery. A Buddhist college student chants her way back to life after her father loses his. An octogenarian survivor of the Russian Revolution proclaims that there is no God. A doorman who survived the Holocaust, his body grief-bent, says, “I was feeling like God had forgotten us. When you see hundreds of thousands of people being slaughtered like cows, sometimes you wonder.”

These real-life characters people *Questioning Faith: Confessions of a Seminarian*, the stirring second documentary of Emmy nominee, Sundance Award winner, openly gay Christian minister and filmmaker Macky Alston. As *Questioning Faith* opens, Alston narrates, “God is everywhere down South,” as images of Christian billboards with a homespun sense of humor play out onscreen: “Hell is truth seen too late.” “Don’t make me come down there.” For millions, God is as real as Coke. But does God exist? Alston needs the answer, especially as a young minister after the AIDS death of his best friend at seminary, Alan Smith. Alston’s crisis of faith leads him to question -- and film -- people from all walks of belief. The result is a documentary of quiet, at-times-shattering emotional power.

Born in Alabama, Alston is the son of three generations of ministers. “My father was a great man made better by his theology, which called him to fight for justice,” Alston says. “In North Carolina, we were run out of town by the KKK because of his stance on the pulpit.” Alston’s AIDS activism led him to seek a career as a minister and spiritual advisor. But as the film lays bare, he wasn’t there for his own friend Smith’s final days. *Questioning Faith* is a kind of love letter, a last goodbye spoken with remorse and the need for reckoning. “I feel like I’m with him now,” Alston says.

The film’s meditation on absence and presence, suffering and faith, drawn from a wide palate of beliefs, seems a fortuitously timed gift, even to Alston, who viewed the film in its entirety for the first time on September 12, 2001. “I was crying,” he says. “The people I had come to love and know were speaking back to me, saying, ’Here’s what’s in my heart.’”

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