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A Philosopher Reissues the Pope's Wager: To Live as if God Exists

He is the German Robert Spaemann. In a book about the "immortal rumor," always alive, always controversial, of the existence of God. Against the backdrop of the advice given by Benedict XVI "also to our friends who do not believe"

by **Sandro Magister**



ROMA, October 31, 2008 – A truly important book has just been released in Italy, after its publication in Germany. Its author is a prominent Christian philosopher, Robert Spaemann (in the photo). It is entitled "The Immortal Rumor" ("Das unsterbliche Gerücht" in the original German). This is how the author explains the title:

"That there exists a being who in our language is called 'God' is an old rumor that cannot be silenced. This being is not part of that which exists in the world. It must instead be the cause and origin of the universe. It is part of the rumor, however, that there are in the world traces of this origin, and signs that point to it. And this is the only reason why such different statements can be made about God."

The book, published by Catagalli in Italy, is the first in a series entitled, not by accident: "As if God Exists."

Living "as if God exists" – whether one believes in Him or not – is the paradoxical proposal issued by Benedict XVI to the culture and men of today.

Joseph Ratzinger formulated his proposal for the first time, speaking as a philosopher as well as a theologian, in the memorable address that he delivered in Subiaco on April 1, 2005, his last public address before being elected pope.

This is how Ratzinger presented it:

"In the age of the Enlightenment, the attempt was made to define essential moral norms by saying that they would be valid 'etsi Deus non daretur', even if God did not exist. In the mutual opposition of the confessions and the looming crisis of the image of God, the attempt was made to hold on to the essential values of morality beyond the disputes, and seek evidence for them that would make them independent of the multiple divisions and uncertainties of the various philosophies and confessions.

The desire was to ensure the foundation of coexistence, and, more generally, the foundation of humanity. At the time, this seemed possible, in that the great fundamental convictions established by Christianity remained in place to a large extent, and seemed undeniable. But that's no longer the case. The search for this kind of reassuring certainty, which could remain uncontested beyond all the differences, has failed. Not even the effort – as heroic as it was – of Kant was able to create the necessary shared certainty. Kant had denied that it was possible to know God in the domain of pure reason, but at the same time had represented God, freedom, and immortality as postulates of practical reason, without which, for him, moral action did not make sense. Does not the current situation of the world, perhaps, make us again think that he may have been right? I would like to say it in other words: the attempt, taken to the extreme, to mold human affairs by completely ignoring God brings us closer and closer to the edge of the abyss, to the total elimination of man. We should therefore reverse the axiom of the Enlightenment and say: even those who are unable to accept God should in any case seek to live and direct their lives 'veluti si Deus daretur', as if God exists. This is the same advice that Pascal had given to his nonbelieving friends; it is the advice that we would like to give today as well to our friends who do not believe. In this way, no one's freedom is limited, but all of our affairs find support and a criterion that they urgently need."

Read against this backdrop, Spaemann's book is even more persuasive.

Here is a sample of the book, made up of extracts taken from pages 24-42 of the Italian edition:

"Losing the idea of God also means losing that of a real world"

by Robert Spaemann

The history of arguments in favor of the existence of God is enormous. There have always been men who have tried to reassure themselves of the reasonableness of their faith. [...] The classical proofs of the existence of God sought to demonstrate that it is true that God exists. They presupposed that there is truth, that the world possesses comprehensible structures, accessible to thought. These structures find their foundation in the divine origin of the world. They are directly accessible to us, and for this reason they are suited to leading us to this foundation.

This presupposition was disputed beginning with Hume, and especially with Nietzsche. [...] Nietzsche's entire work can be read as a paraphrase of Hume's succinct expression: "We never really advance a step beyond ourselves." [...] Nietzsche writes that "we the enlightened, we free spirits of the nineteenth century, still draw our flame from the Christian faith – which was also the faith of Plato – according to which God is the truth, and the truth is divine." But for Nietzsche, this very thought is self-deception. There is no truth. there are only useful or harmful reactions. "We must not deceive ourselves that the world shows us a recognizable face," say Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty. [...] Losing the idea of God also means losing that of a real world. [...]

The neopragmatist Rorty replaces knowledge with hope in a better world, where it cannot even be said in what this hope should consist. [...] It only follows logically that Rorty does not even see it as an accusation if he is said to speak in an unclear and contradictory way. In fact, in the context of a thought that no longer feels itself obligated to the truth, but to success, it can no longer even be said clearly in what success is supposed to consist. Obscure thoughts can be more effective than clear thoughts. The new situation is characterized by the fact that we decide "uno actu," on the basis of pure will, whether to accept an absolute, whether to think of this absolute as God, whether to recognize something as a truth that is not relative to us; and finally, whether to consider ourselves authorized to maintain that we ourselves are beings capable of truth, or persons. [...]

In Nietzsche, the "modern way" comes to completion and to complete self-awareness, as nominalism. [...] In this situation, arguments for conceiving of the absolute as God can only be "ad hominem" arguments. [...] If we do not want to accept it, there is no argument that can convince us of the existence of God. [...]

With the loss of the idea of truth comes the loss of the idea of reality. Our speaking and thinking that which is, is structured in an inevitably temporal form. We cannot think of something as real without thinking of it in the present, meaning that it is real "now." Anything that has been only in the past, or will be only in the future, has never been and never will be. That which is now, at one time was in the future and will be in the past. The "futurum exactum," the future perfect, is inseparable from the present. Saying that a present event will no longer have been in the future means that in reality it does not exist even now. In this sense, everything real is eternal. There cannot be a moment in which it will no longer be true that someone has felt a suffering or joy that he is feeling now. And this past reality is absolutely independent of the fact that we remember it.

But what is the ontological status of this becoming past if all of the traces will be wiped out, if the universe will no longer exist? The past is always the past of the present; what will happen to the past if there is no longer any present? The inevitability of the "futurum exactum" therefore implies the inevitability of thinking of a "place" where everything that happens is preserved forever. Otherwise we would have to accept the absurd idea that that which is now, one day will no longer have been; and in consequence is not real even now: this is an idea that only Buddhism tends to uphold. The consequence of Buddhism is the denial of life.

Nietzsche reflected, as no one else before him, on the consequences of atheism, with the intention of traveling the path not of denying life, but of affirming life. [...] To him, the most disastrous consequence seemed to be that man should lose that which tends to his self-transcendence. In fact, Nietzsche thought that the greatest accomplishment of Christianity was that it taught love of man for the sake of loving God: "the highest and most noble sentiment attained by man so far." The superman and the idea of an eternal return had to replace the idea of God. In fact, Nietzsche clearly saw who would have determined the future shape of the world otherwise: the "last men," who believe that they invented happiness and make a mockery of "love," of "creation," of "longing," of the "star." Concerned only with manipulating their desires, they maintain that any dissident who takes anything seriously, like the "truth," is insane.

The heroic nihilism of Nietzsche has been shown, as he himself feared, to be powerless in the face of the "last men." [...] The banal nihilism of the last man is promoted today by, among others, Richard Rorty. The man who, together with the idea of God, has also shoved aside the truth, now knows nothing but his own subjective condition. His relationship with reality is not representative, but only causal. He wants to see himself as a clever beast. A beast of this kind does not trouble itself about God. [...]

But if we want to think of the real as real, we must think of God. "I am afraid that we will not be able to free ourselves from God as long as we believe in grammar," Nietzsche wrote. He might have added: "... as long as we continue to think of ourselves as real." An "ad hominem" argument.

The book:

Robert Spaemann, "La diceria immortale", Cantagalli, Siena, 2008, pp. 200, euro 20,00.

The complete text of the conference delivered by Joseph Ratzinger in Subiaco on April 1, 2005:

> L'Europa nella crisi delle culture

English translation by **Matthew Sherry**, Saint Louis, Missouri, U.S.A.

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