

against
RATZINGER

ANONYMOUS

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SEVEN STORIES PRESS
NEW YORK ✦ TORONTO ✦ LONDON ✦ MELBOURNE

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FANCIFUL EPILOGUE IN THE FORM OF A PROLOGUE

And in the end they called a referendum. This epiphany came to a group of Italian intellectuals terrorized by the times they lived in and profoundly convinced, in Heideggerian terms, that nothing short of a god could save them. The idea was simple enough: in order to rescue Europe from modern decadence, it was necessary to establish, through a democratic mechanism, its divine foundation.

The first proposed phrasing of the referendum question (“Does God exist?”), it was soon agreed, was too radical. The manufacturing lobby objected with a resounding argument: if we are to refound a Christian Europe and take on the threats of the world with renewed firmness, then the idea of freedom—an idea that had done so much to help the market prosper—should not be restrained in any way by the fetters and webs of human encumbrance. A number of authoritative personalities signed a statement arguing that if people were allowed to decide whether the heavenly father existed, it would be nothing short of an act of arrogance, and what is worse, it would abet the old atheist theory that humans created God in their own image and likeness, and not the other way around.

After lengthy discussions, a compromise was struck. On a day in May, in a year—any year—in the third millennium, the sovereignty of the people was invoked. They were summoned to step forth and mark with an *X* either yes or no in response to a ques-

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tion as subtle as it was straightforward: “Do you want God to exist?” The yes votes won by a landslide, but everyday life in the newly Christian West went on, by and large, as before.

Certain reforms were instituted. Sunday Mass and all the holy sacraments became mandatory, but in order to streamline matters and save citizens’ time, the various procedures were simplified. In certain cases they could be performed online. Newborn babies were given baptism, first communion, and confirmation in a single ceremony; morning prayer was mandatory in all schools and government offices, and by law vespers were broadcast at the same hour over all networks in the country. Abortion was outlawed but continued to be performed, followed by mandatory postabortion confession. Homosexual couples continued to love one another without benefit of the law, exactly as they do in most states today.

Atheists and agnostics were allowed to entertain doubts in the privacy of their homes, but they were required by law to conform to the wishes of the majority in all public behavior. The 952,276 Muslims living in Italy were allowed to remain Muslims—they could pray toward Mecca and fast during Ramadan—but the enjoyment of their civil rights was linked directly to the performance of their Roman Catholic duties. If they chose to think of Allah while gazing upon the altar, that was their prerogative within the sphere of individual liberty. The referendum question, quite astutely, did not name the god whose existence was desired. The field of medical research received special attention, and the necessary legal loopholes were duly identified. No efficient modern state could prevent the sick from seeking treatment or hypochondriacs from believing that they were ill. In general, the lifestyles of the masses simply took on a new tone of discretion.

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God was a political necessity, guarantor of the restored vigor of a collective way of life. God was a cornerstone recovered from the past upon which, in a fear-ridden present, Italy had decided to found its future. And that is why few dwelled on what seemed like an abstruse technicality—whether God actually existed.

The affirmation of God's existence mattered greatly to the Roman Catholic Church and its most sincere ministers. And yet, in private, a number of priests and cardinals deplored the ulterior motives that underlay the decision of the Italian government and the superficial motives that led the majority of citizens to vote yes. In the face of this national submission, however, any pronouncement that smacked of anything less than ecclesiastical enthusiasm might well have sounded ungrateful. The only concrete suggestion that Joseph Ratzinger extended to nonbelievers had been accepted and legislated as law by the Italian state. The church, struck dumb at its own triumph, could really ask for nothing more.



A crucial event (and one that actually took place) occurred on 13 May 2004, in the twenty-sixth year of the papacy of Karol Wojtyła. In the chapter hall of the cloister in the Piazza della Minerva, in the library of the Italian Senate, Joseph Ratzinger took the floor. Ratzinger was a Bavarian cardinal who, in that year, found himself simultaneously holding the offices of prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, president of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, president of the International Theological Commission, member of the Council of Cardinals and Bishops, member of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, member

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of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, member of the Congregation for Bishops, counselor of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, member of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, member of the Congregation for Catholic Education, member of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, member of the Pontifical Council for Culture, and dean of the College of Cardinals. Exactly one year later he would exchange all these exalted titles for the moniker Benedict XVI with his election to the throne of Saint Peter.

That day, Ratzinger delivered one of his most impressive and darkest speeches. He was clear and concise in his presentation, persuasive in his approach, and exceedingly tough in terms of substance. At that time, there was ongoing debate about whether it would be appropriate to make reference in the text of the European Constitution to the continent's Christian heritage. The prefect prudently held back from the political controversy ("I am not ready to enter into a detailed discussion concerning the future European Constitution") and instead chose to review the history of the European continent, from Herodotus to Arnold Toynbee. He insisted that without such a frame of reference and an awareness of its utility and relevance, westerners would be condemned to lose themselves: the very concept of humanity as a normative reference would be lost.

Without a new appreciation of Christian spirituality, the common fate would be a general return to barbarity. Human rights, democracy, equality, and justice—concepts that, as Ratzinger set forth, could trace their origins through the courteous offices of the Enlightenment right back to Christianity—would all be dashed. The West would soon become a senseless and violent

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stage upon which human greed was deployed without restraint, a land under occupation by an exhausted and feverish culture, wavering between test tubes and chips, variously micro and blue. Money would triumph as the ultimate value. If the continent persisted in moving in this direction—the cardinal implicitly warned—even European well-being would soon vanish.

In addition to this dark specter, the shadow of the Antichrist was also introduced by way of a tough-minded comparison with Islam. “The rebirth of Islam,” said the cardinal, “is not merely a product of the new material wealth of Islamic nations; it is, in fact, also the result of an understanding that Islam can provide a strong spiritual foundation for the everyday lives of its people, a spiritual foundation that seems to elude the grasp of the European old world. And so that world, despite its continuing political and economic power, is increasingly viewed as condemned to decline and fall.” Confronted with this fate, it would seem that the only solution is to re-Christianize Europe once again, perhaps taking a cue from the Muslims’ rediscovery of their historic pride. But the old European continent is faced not only with the threat of an advancing Islamic tide, but also with Asia’s increasing ability to outcompete the West in western terms. Even Asia’s sinking acceptance of the “ideal of a world forged by technology and its ensuing prosperity” appears more vigorous than that in Europe. “In addition, the major religious traditions of Asia, above all its mystical component expressed in Buddhism, are emerging as spiritual powers against a Europe in the process of denying its religious and moral foundations,” declared Ratzinger, pointing meaningfully to the great bugbear of the time: the dizzying economic growth of India, China, and all of Southeast Asia.

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The display of erudition, the radical nature of the positions advocated, the conciliatory, winning tone, and the fact that Ratzinger clearly scored a hit on numerous points all made a lasting impression. His audience, a roomful of plump and distracted senators of the Italian Republic, sat surveying what would soon be a field of smoking rubble, so somnolent from digestion that they entirely failed to notice that the lecture concluded with a loud and well-placed slap.

Instead of calling for the cooperation of politicians and the institutions of the secular Italian state that had invited him there that day, the Vatican theologian chose to direct his appeal solely to Christian believers. In the same quiet tone, softened only slightly by a hoarseness attendant upon his lengthy speech, the soon-to-be pontiff urged, "A society's fate is always dependent upon creative minorities. Faithful Christians should think of themselves as just such a creative minority and work to ensure that Europe once again regains the best of its heritage and thus places itself at the service of humanity at large." While masking any provocative intent, Ratzinger was ruling out even the possibility that any such redeeming creative minority could flourish among nonbelievers.

But Cardinal Ratzinger was not always so unconciliatory. On at least two other occasions, while addressing the same topic—the decadence of Europe—he dispensed a bit of hope. He sketched a path along which, he said, Catholics and nonbelievers could come together, in mutual respect to their universal salvation, without giving up their respective privileges and levels of comfort, and while redeeming the West from its otherwise inevitable decline. In a speech delivered at the Monastery of Saint Scholastica in Subiaco, Australia, on 1 April 2005 (just twenty-

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four hours before the death of Karol Wojtyła), Joseph Ratzinger urged all Christians to always remain amenable to the demands of reason; in exchange, he asked nonbelievers to live “as if God existed,” tossing onto the scrap heap with a few kind words the very cornerstone of the Enlightenment:

In the so-necessary dialogue between secularists and Catholics, we Christians must be very careful to remain faithful to this fundamental line: to live a faith that comes from the “Logos,” from creative reason, and that, because of this, is also open to all that is truly rational. But at this point, in my capacity as believer, I would like to make a proposal to the secularists. In the age of the Enlightenment, the attempt was made to understand and define the essential norms of morality by saying that they would be valid *etsi Deus non daretur*, even if God did not exist.

He explained further:

I would like to express it in a different way: The attempt, carried to the extreme, to manage human affairs disdaining God completely leads us increasingly to the edge of the abyss, to man’s ever-greater isolation from reality. We must, then, reverse the axiom of the Enlightenment and say, even the one who does not succeed in finding the path to accepting the existence of God ought nevertheless to try to live and to direct his life *veluti si Deus daretur*, as

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if God did indeed exist. This is the advice Pascal gave to his nonbelieving friends, and it is the advice I should like to give today to our friends who do not believe. This does not impose limitations on anyone's freedom; it gives support to all our human affairs and supplies a criterion of which human life stands sorely in need.

Conceding to the West (made soft by its by own prosperity) the right to continue to enjoy in moderation the juridical, scientific, and economic benefits it has inherited from the Enlightenment and from science, Ratzinger was offering the world a "low-calorie" return to the spiritual glories of the Holy Roman Empire.



Let us now abandon this factual prologue to our story and return to the narrative of our imaginary referendum on the desire for the existence of God and the ensuing consequences. The sermon preached, as we have recalled, had its impact and bore its fruit. After the electoral triumph, Italy became a republic founded upon God. In the months that followed, there was an infectious, almost universal, fervor. People felt safe; terror lowered its head. Anchored by law to the eternal and the immutable, people felt insulated from the lurking danger of sudden change. On subways, in commuter trains, in streetcars, and aboard city buses, commuters wore relaxed expressions. For all but a few, the once-ubiquitous specter of the suicide bomber dissipated.

Spurred on by this initial surge of optimism, the economy

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began to thrive, factories hummed, goods were sold, and money circulated again. It was this factor, more than any other, that led to the propagation throughout the West of the Italian experiment. Technology played its role. Skype, the program that made it possible to make international phone calls free of charge, was a major facilitator. Immigrants told their friends and relatives back home about the remarkable period of prosperity and happiness that Italy was experiencing. Within a few months, the governments of Ecuador, Peru, and the Philippines legislated comparable Christian reforms of the state. In Europe, the first country to follow Italy's example was the most Catholic nation of Croatia.

A momentous step in the direction toward ecumenism and a new universal Christianization came when His Beatitude Teoctist, patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church and of Bucharest, spoke out in favor of that peaceful theocratic revolution. In the days that followed, Alexei II, patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, and Christodoulos, archbishop of Athens and all Greece, both emulated his example. Romanian, Russian, and Greek politicians all fell promptly into step. The populace voiced its approval. The Holy Father expressed his respectful bewilderment when Bartholomew I of Istanbul joined the chorus. But within a few months, the reform had passed even in Turkey, which, thanks to an intentionally ambiguous formulation of terminology, finally succeeded in obtaining admission to Europe. More than 550 years after the fall of Constantinople, nearly a thousand years after the tree of Christianity first bifurcated, the schism between East and West was healed over, the sister churches were finally siblings in more than name, and European Christianity was again monolithic, united, and mighty.

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In the United States a new president was elected on a platform that harked back directly to the colonist Puritans. Much as George W. Bush had done years before to justify his decision to declare war on Iraq, the newly elected U.S. president set forth his proposals and explained that he had discussed them thoroughly in a one-on-one conversation with Him. The Democrats, an opposition party as long as anyone could remember, suffered political paralysis and decided that it was best to focus its activities on looking as devout as possible.

The rising tide of neo-Christianity showed no signs of subsiding. In Spain, however, the reform ran into some economic obstacles. Ever since Prime Minister Luis Zapatero made gay marriage legal, the land of García Lorca had become a destination for and the residence of hundreds of thousands of homosexual couples. Constituting a substantial share of Spain's gross domestic product, they were a group politicians could not risk angering. But even this obstacle would be overcome. A loophole was found in the form of an additional clause to the text of the referendum question: “¿Queréis vosotros que Dios exista, pero que no dañe la prosperidad de la nación?” (“Do you want God to exist, provided that he in no way harms national prosperity?”) Thus, another great European Catholic nation took its place in the ranks of advanced theocracies.

A few months later, the German chancellor (a Christian Democrat and, like the pope, a Bavarian) declared his conviction that it was time to refound Germany on a religious basis. The wind of history was blowing in favor of Christian reunification, and it seemed that nothing could stand in its way. On the day after the historic vote, the most authoritative editorialist of the German paper *Frankfurter Allgemeine* wrote, “Today an ancient

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truth is being affirmed throughout the world, a truth that has been obstinately silenced for far too long. In 1517 at Wittenberg, Martin Luther started an ordinary family squabble. Today, however, the Christian family is finally at peace.”

There remained two great nations without which the process would not be truly complete. In the United Kingdom things went very smoothly. The eternal Catholic premier Tony Blair and the archbishop of Canterbury chose to have a public meeting in Canterbury cathedral, and before the viewing public of the entire world, they joined in a tearful embrace. The *Sun* published a front-page photograph of a fetching buxom brunette *en déshabillé*, meant to represent Anne Boleyn, with a banner headline: “Henry VIII, You Were a Pig.” Once again, God had saved the queen, whose current *annus horribilis* revolved around Charles’s untimely conversion to Scientology.

By now, France was politically surrounded and isolated. The fact that the nation’s cities were struggling with daily episodes of violence in the derelict (and, above all, Islamic) *banlieues* did little or nothing to help France’s politicians keep the nation securely on a secular course. The French Christian parties enjoyed gains in the elections, and the sexual predilections of the Gallic male veered firmly toward Joan of Arc. In the end, even the French government was forced to submit, but it did so with imagination and its customary grandeur. The referendum question submitted to *les citoyens* was reversed: “*Est-ce que vous voulez que Dieu n’existe pas?*” (“Do you want God not to exist?”) The noes had it.



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As the world was Christianizing, in Italy the years were simply passing. Then the first cracks in the structure began to appear. The initial religious fervor was being undermined by an increasingly hypocritical materialism that focused on appearances; at times it almost appeared to be stronger than it had been during the age of rampant moral relativism. Finally freed of a bimillennial sense of collective guilt and now solidly entrenched in the active, collective, and individual presence of the divine, the Italians indulged en masse in unrestrained joy, though appearances were kept up with a façade of sobriety. Men went on shopping binges, buying salmon cashmere sweaters, while for women collections of flimsy thongs expressed the zeitgeist. Even among those who had done their best to live soberly during the era of state relativism—as if God really did exist—behavioral excesses began to crop up in a reaction against that pacified conformism. After the preliminary reordering of society, the inherent entropy sliding toward pleasure—the last remnant of happiness that God left us in this vale of tears—was once again gaining the upper hand.

By now, Benedict XVI was old and tired. He no longer had the energy to write, talk, or even get dressed; he was eating less and enjoying it less. He looked out at the spectacle of Christianity, and it saddened him. Even Monsignor Georg, his faithful longtime assistant, appeared less radiant, less handsome; Georg, too, bore the marks of passing time and accumulating body fat. God had won on all fronts. The West had once again embraced Christ, though now that embrace was threatening to suffocate him. And still no happiness had appeared on the horizon.

The population at large was still crazy about reality shows; little boys continued to imitate the most popular athletes of the day.

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Moreover—and the elderly Benedict was well aware of it—tensions with Islam were growing day by day, but in the West, in contrast with the Muslim world, no one was willing to die. Christianity, just as soft and pleasure loving as before, had become cunning and sly. It nibbled cautiously at its sins, careful not to lose the Vatican imprimatur.

There were those within the Vatican walls who muttered in discontent. With no more enemies to bring the faithful together in righteous disapproval (the one sure way to build that sense of belonging that is the foundation of every human community), deprived for all time of the luxury of indignation and the joy of raising a bony finger high in the air, bishops, cardinals, and priests no longer knew how to spend their days. “Things were better when things were worse,” they sighed. They had imagined a shower of vocations to the priesthood, long lines of eager seminarians and aspiring novitiates knocking at their doors with the enthusiasm of those auditioning for a television program; instead, the altars were even emptier than before, young priests and nuns increasingly scarce on the ground. And the few remaining priests were greeted with the most terrifying reaction of them all: the indifferent yawn of the flock of God. As seen from the altar, the faithful attended services like cattle watching a train go by.

People lived as if God really existed—the pope himself had suggested it—but, nevertheless, for the Roman Catholic Church the nightmare had just begun. Joseph Ratzinger spent his days sprawled on St. Peter’s throne, and as he sprawled, he thought. He thought back to his Bavarian childhood during the Nazi years. He cast his mind back to the debates and meetings during the Second Vatican Council, back to the days when Rome first opened its doors to him.

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Benedict thought back to his years of teaching and the elderly Hans Küng, the theologian who had encouraged him back at Tübingen and with whom he had clashed during his climb to the top. He thought back over the twenty-three years in which he, in his position as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, had admonished, notified, corrected, and excommunicated dozens and dozens of individuals at the pace of a Detroit assembly line. He recalled their faces, their awkward gestures, their expressions—a mixture of wrath and obedience.

They called him the Grand Inquisitor back then. And in those days, the nickname had made him smile. Now he recited in his mind, as if they were a rosary, those words that the Grand Inquisitor spoke to Jesus Christ, returned to earth fifteen hundred years after his crucifixion, in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. "Thou lookest meekly at me and deignest not even to be wroth with me. But let me tell Thee that now, to-day, people are more persuaded than ever that they have perfect freedom, yet they have brought their freedom to us and laid it humbly at our feet. But that has been our doing. Was this what Thou didst? Was this Thy freedom?"