

Book Review

José M. Millás, *La realidad de Dios*, Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana/ Universidad Pontificia Comillas, 2004, 418 pages, 25 Euros.

This book is a study of the philosophy of Zubiri and that of the much younger Javier Monserrat on the topic of the reality of God. The book begins with a comprehensive summary of Zubiri's philosophy, utilizing *Sentient Intelligence* as its basis (about 60 pages). It then goes on to discuss the reality of man in Zubiri's philosophy (25 pages), followed by the reality of God (24 pages) and then man's access to God (30 pages). This summary of Zubiri's thought in 140 pages is quite adequate, though it is just a summary and breaks no new ground. It is not a "critical reading" of Zubiri's texts, but rather an exposition of them. At the very end the author presents a very brief discussion of some points which concern him. He makes two observations:

In the first place, is the reality of God the only possible outline or sketch of an ultimate ground? Might not it be possible to have a sketch that ultimate ground consisting of the very system of the world, resting upon itself? Might not such a sketch be the possible result of the intellectual process of an agnostic or an atheist?¹

In other words, Zubiri's inference about the existence of God as explanation for the power of reality as manifested in relegation might not be the only possible one. Secondly, the author comments on the problem of evil:

It is fitting to ask if, in the intellectual process leading to the affirmation of God, one should not bear in mind the human experience of evil. As I see it, the human experience of evil and the ineffectiveness [inoperancia] of God before it, can have a decisive influence on the processes of intellection and volition which lead to recognizing and affirming the reality of God as ultimate ground.²

We shall return to these points shortly.

The author then gives a lengthy exposition (230 pages) of the philosophy of Javier Monserrat on the subject of the reality of God, followed by some brief commentary. Monserrat has clearly been influenced heavily by Zubiri, and indeed has written several articles about him. In particular, he is in substantial agreement with Zubiri about man's radical insertion in reality, and its critical importance for all of philosophy. Monserrat, however, uses different terminology: *consciousness in reality* rather than *sentient intelligence*. Both philosophers agree on the radical limitations of human reason, and its inability to achieve results with absolute certainty. For Zubiri this is due, as is well known, to the fundamental openness of reality.

With respect to the reality of God, Monserrat's point of departure is the fact of the contingency of the universe and the need to establish the ultimate coherence of reality. For him, there are two possibilities with respect to this

coherence: the existence of God and a world without God. For Monserrat, the second option may appear at first sight to be the most rational, but upon reflection the first option is superior. The decisive point, according to the author, is the paradoxical silence of God in the world:

The existence of God assumes a reasonable character when man can comprehend the silence and hiddenness of God as the opportunity offered to man to realize himself in freedom and accede freely to the affirmation of God's existence. The silence of God takes on the meaning of God's renunciation of imposing His presence.³

At this point the author concludes that rational demonstration cannot establish with absolute certainty the existence of God, but that morality can take up some of the slack:

To be sure human reason cannot achieve absolute certainty about the existence of God, but it can reach a moral certainty sufficient for affirming His existence freely and with meaning.⁴

To finish the task, something additional is needed, namely personal religious experience. But this is, by definition, *personal* and therefore cannot be extended to others as a demonstration:

Consequently, a religious conviction, although it might have led to an absolute personal certitude, can never legitimately have the pretension of imposing itself rationally on others—if one is dealing with an authentic religious conviction. Something similar could be said about the non-religious conviction, which led to the option of a world without God.⁵

According to the author's discussion, the major point of difference between Zubiri and Monserrat is the latter's conviction that a consistent and meaningful world without God is a possibility—one which is excluded by Zubiri's thought.

Now to be sure, Zubiri argues that our most fundamental experience of life is that of religation to the power of the real, a recognition of something beyond us which in some way supplies each person with what he needs to make himself as a person:

Religation is linking to reality *qua* reality in order to be. It is neither a physical linking, nor social pressure, because they refer to *what* things and persons are. Here we are, purely and simply, confronting the *character of reality* of everything. Nor is it an obligation, because obligation is something internal to a person and assumes that the person is already constituted...reality as ultimate, as possibilitating, and as imposing is what constitutes religation.⁶

However, Zubiri recognizes that this is not yet religion, much less a proof of God's existence. In fact, for Zubiri, the intellectual justification of God cannot be a *demonstration* because God is not an object. He explicitly recognizes that for the agnostic, what is finite is completely satisfactory, and for the atheist, a life of self-sufficiency is quite adequate. Thus at some level, at least, Zubiri concedes that a non-theistic worldview is consistent and satisfactory. The question therefore comes down to whether such a worldview is *fully* adequate to explain human experience. For Zubiri, the power of reality itself is not grounded upon another concrete reality because this would give us an infinite

regress. Since reality itself must ground my relatively absolute reality, reality itself has to be an “absolutely absolute” reality. This is the metaphysical essence of God. God is the One who is grounding the power of reality.

Zubiri also accepts in some ways Kant’s argument based on the datum of moral experience, and so is not so far from Monserrat’s position. However, he does not argue on the basis of religious experience for the existence of God—that for him would be putting too much emphasis on intellection at the level of reason, when what is needed is direct personal experience at the level of primordial apprehension, where religation acts.

The questions of evil in the world, and the apparent silence of God about it, such as the Nazi Holocaust and the Soviet Gulags, are not addressed directly by Zubiri. Certainly a study along these lines would be welcome. Such events, unlike the recent Southeast Asia tsunami, are the direct product of human actions. Perhaps Zubiri would say that God has not been silent about them after all, since he has spoken about them through men—men whose lives have been constitutively in God and with God all along.

Thomas B. Fowler

¹ P. 155-156.

² P. 156.

³ P. 397.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ P. 398.

⁶ *El problema filosófico de la historia de las religiones*, p. 40