

# Ratzinger on the Faith: A Criticism of the Critics

John M. Rist

*Editorial note:*

*Our special June issue 'Ratzinger on the Faith: A British Theological Response' has been remarkably well received, and has just been reprinted for the third time. We have received a lot of correspondence about it. Regrettably, we do not have the space for a conventional correspondence column (although from now onwards we are occasionally going to print extended comments—'responses'—on articles from readers).*

*Cardinal Ratzinger's own personal observation on the number was that, bearing in mind that 'fuller treatment and expression' of his thought were to be found in the book-length version of the interview, Rapporto sulla fede, 'one might ask if the authors would not have done better to await that publication before formulating their response'. We were, indeed, sorry ourselves that publication of that book was so long delayed (it did not appear in Italian until May and only now is in English, published in the U.K. by Fowler Wright Books at £7.95 under the title *The Ratzinger Report*); nevertheless, we think that the book confirms the reliability in all essentials of the approved abridgement which the authors had reacted to.*

*We thank all who have written to us about that number. Professor Rist's article, which we print here, makes several criticisms which we have also had from other readers.*

*J.O.M.*

An essential feature of a serious debate is the ability to understand or read an opponent sympathetically, to try to grasp the main thrust of his argument without allowing oneself to be seduced into castigating his weak points of expression, his overstatements, or even his errors of fact when they are peripheral and do not affect the substance of his case. It is not always clear that those who have discussed Ratzinger on the faith in the special June issue of *New Blackfriars* have paid sufficient attention to such considerations in their responses. Instead of grappling with Ratzinger's pessimistic assessment in its specific details, they have often raised other issues and preferred to commend other aspects of the contemporary Church. Thus, while attempting to paint a more optimistic picture, they have evaded replying to

Ratzinger's real anxieties. At times they seem like a doctor telling a patient with suspected cancer of the liver that he has perfect vision. And in areas where the discussants do face Ratzinger's challenge, they seem to underestimate the seriousness of his concerns.

But let me first remark on the format in which *New Blackfriars* has chosen to present Ratzinger's writings. It is very difficult to understand his arguments and do them justice on the basis of the selections provided. In addition, the very small type acts as a disincentive to any but the most determined reader. The unfortunate impression produced is that the Ratzinger-fragments are there merely to provide a kind of punch-bag, already judged to be of little intrinsic interest.

Ratzinger's perhaps most important claim was that a crisis of belief is apparent in the diminished notion of God (p. 267), in the tendency to see religion *only* in terms of salvation-history, without adequate reference to God the Creator. From a historical perspective this is a most interesting charge, for, if true, it would represent a repetition of much of the thought of Luther and other Protestant Reformers, and we would have another instance of a phenomenon recognizable also in biblical studies: Catholics repeating Protestant excesses at the moment when Protestants begin to repent of them. Yet only one discussant has much to say about Ratzinger on this matter (Kerr, p. 304), and he has allowed himself to be misled into the side issue of Ratzinger's concern with various Protestant oddities rather than with the serious and central point of the loss of the *metaphysical* sense of God. (If one compares Luther's concept of God with that of Aquinas, as, for example, Otto Pesch has done, the point becomes clearer.)

A second major theme of Ratzinger is that theology (especially moral theology in North America) is too concerned to 'make a deal' with the world. And there is no need to take Ratzinger, as does Duffy (pp. 274—5), as meaning that we should neglect the world around us; rather, he is urging us to seek ways (derived from some City of God?) of bringing new life, new hope and new vision to it. Moreover, on the theme of American moral theology (witness the writings of R. McCormick, B. Schuller and others) Ratzinger is surely right. On issues like abortion there does appear to be a hope that the Church can make a pact with the world—in this case to allow numerous abortions. And it is not only on currently acceptable moral issues (like the Third World and the handicapped) that Christians have to speak out; there will be major areas where Ratzinger's 'tertiary educated bourgeoisie' and Christianity will come into conflict—and this conflict will be uncomfortable for the Christians. It was ever thus; Catherine of Siena—to pick a Dominican example—knew it well enough. But note the ambiguity of the reply to Ratzinger: moral theology is to play an

*intermediary* role between Gospel values and modern culture (Mahoney, p. 293).

Related to this is Ratzinger's concern (p. 264) about the adverse effects on missionary activity of over-optimistic descriptions of non-Christian religions. Here again my point is similar. Traditional Christianity has always thought it had a mission to preach. Do present-day Catholics want to say that this was mistaken, or that we have outgrown it? If Ratzinger is right that missionary efforts are being hampered by theology, surely it is legitimate rather to question the theology which produces this unprecedented effect.

It is particularly deplorable to smear Ratzinger with rhetorical evocations of curial 'triumphalists' of the past (Duffy, 272f.) or to toss around phrases like 'practical manichaeism' (p. 274). A parallel might be the labelling of Marxists as Commies or Reds. Nor is it helpful to attempt to justify one's own standpoint by a dubious and unsubstantiated use of the word 'biblical', as when Mahoney claims that a reply to Ratzinger could be couched in 'more balanced and biblical terms' (p. 289). Nor is it helpful in this context to point out (as Kerr does, p. 302) that *British* Catholics have more of a social conscience than they had in the past. Nor indeed should we waste time on Ratzinger's own over-optimistic account of how much that is good has already been learned by Catholics from the outside 'world' (p. 265; Duffy, p. 275). Ratzinger's substantive position remains untouched by all such skirmishes on the flanks.

As a philosophy professor associated with the North American Catholic institution mentioned on p. 272 (and appreciative of the work of the painter Kuralek on its walls, described by Duffy) I can assure the readers of *New Blackfriars* that there is much evidence that Ratzinger, in an impressionistic way, has lit upon issues that cannot easily be swept under the rug: the decline in a metaphysical understanding of God (p. 267); the use of moral theology as a mediator between traditional belief and the fashionable morality. Nor does an easy invocation of Lonergan's distinction between 'classical' and 'modern' attitudes help (Lash, p. 279ff.). 'Classical' Catholic thinking, even in its Thomist variety, does not fit easily into this oversimplified, post-Reformation schema. Nor, especially, does Patristic Christianity (as many great exegetes have seen) fit either of Lonergan's categories: dependent as it is on a Christian concept of a transcendent God, it is too 'open-ended' to be 'classical', insufficiently subjective in its metaphysical underpinnings to be 'modern'. It is therefore seriously misleading to dismiss Christian tradition as 'classical' in such a way. Nor is it easy to believe that the central tenets of Christian faith are quite so difficult to rescue from cultural conditioning as Professor Lash suggests when he speaks of 'no set of ideal standards' (p. 282): propositions such as 'God is' or

'Christ is God', if true or meaningful at all, must be of universal validity.

In brief, then, we need understanding, not mere rebuttal. The issues are important and Ratzinger's case deserves more serious consideration. The suggestion (Kerr, p. 299) that the obscure writings of theologians have little effect anyway is disingenuous. Obscure and difficult writers (even theologians) sometimes influence prodigiously: Marx, Luther, Paul, Aquinas. If they were all uninfluential, it would be pointless for *New Blackfriars* to propagate the views of this particular 'British group of Catholic theologians'.

## Dante and Two Friars: Paradiso XI — XII

Kenelm Foster OP

*Based on a lecture given in Italy on the 800th anniversary  
of the birth of St Francis\**

A contemporary of Dante's, opening the *Divine Comedy* for the first time, would probably have expected to find St. Francis among *le beate genti*, or at least to hear his praises sung by them, and that independently of any particular interest in the Franciscan Order, such was the esteem in which 'il santo d'Assisi' was held. St. Dominic, on the other hand, an incomparably less popular figure, is unlikely even to have crossed the mind of such a reader except, perhaps, in connection with the well-known confraternity he founded. For the average Catholic of those times, Dominic had already become what he has remained, one of those holy 'founders' about whom one knows or cares little, well-nigh obscured as they are by the universally accepted and venerated institutes which they founded. Even the Dominicans themselves seem, on the whole, not to have fully appreciated the extraordinary character of the man to whom they owed so much. Apart from the biographical sketch in the *Libellus* of Jordan of