



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Aidan Nichols, The Thought of Benedict XVI: An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger

Citation for published version:

Grumett, D 2006, 'Aidan Nichols, The Thought of Benedict XVI: An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger', *Ecclesiology: The Journal for Ministry, Mission and Unity*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 377-379.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/174413660600200313>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/174413660600200313](https://doi.org/10.1177/174413660600200313)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Ecclesiology: The Journal for Ministry, Mission and Unity

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Aidan Nichols, *The Thought of Benedict XVI: An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger* (London and New York: Burns and Oates, 2005), 338 pp. Pbk. £16.99. ISBN 0-86012-407-X.

In his *Introduction to Christianity*, Benedict XVI presents a character called 'Lucky Jack' who possesses a large, heavy gold nugget. This becomes difficult to carry about and has no obvious use, and is consequently exchanged for a rock. The rock is in turn traded for increasingly small and valueless substitutes, until the hero is left with nothing more than a stone for sharpening his knife. He throws that away as well, and is then empty-handed.

This book is a reprint of Aidan Nichols' 1988 study *The Theology of Joseph Ratzinger*. Its coverage extends through Benedict's academic appointments and ministry as Archbishop of Munich and Freising into the initial years of his work as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. A second, revised edition is in progress, though Nichols states that it will not much alter the picture. The book catalogues Benedict's own lifelong effort to prevent the Church's historic faith and doctrine being dissipated like Lucky Jack's chunk of gold.

The first chapter comprises a fascinating if general examination of Benedict's Bavarian roots, emphasizing the state's uniquely strong catholic identity among the *Länder*. It situates his moral theology as part of a determined battle to affirm human dignity in the aftermath of Nazi measures such as the 'euthanasia' of mentally and physically impaired persons. Similar connections are later made between his resistance to the idea of national churches and the divinization of the polis abetted by theologians sympathetic to Nazi ideology.

Benedict reads the history of theology in light of current doctrinal concerns, with Augustine being of central importance. He favours the bishop of Hippo of the *Retractions* over the young student of Platonism contemplating eternal heavenly truth. The later Augustine transforms the spiritual world of the Platonists into the Church of Christ, which is the 'holy community of God's angels, a part of which is journeying on its earthly pilgrimage, awaiting the reunion of the entire household of God' (p. 35). Nichols traces Benedict's later criticism of the application of certain reforms of liturgy and church government to a failure to act on this Augustinian insight that Christ's disciples should be in the world but not of it (p. 50).

Benedict attended the Second Vatican Council as theological advisor to the reforming Cardinal Frings, Archbishop of Cologne, and recorded his approval of various progressive measures: singing of liturgical responses by the entire assembly; restoration of the diaconate as a permanent, married office founded on preaching and proclamation; institution of episcopal conferences as an 'intermediate body of a quasi-synodal kind between the individual bishop and the Pope' (p. 79). Benedict, affirms Nichols, was an advocate not of *aggiornamento* but *ressourcement*, being 'controlled not so much by the imperative of modernisation or adaptation ... but by that of a return to the biblical, patristic and high medieval sources' (p. 97).

The book's sometimes detached style dissolves in the excellent chapter on liturgy. Nichols, a former Anglican, believes profoundly in the beauty of worship and its organic development. He finds these convictions mirrored in Benedict, who possesses a keen sense of the incarnational and transforming qualities of church music, which 'constitutes, by its superb unification of the spiritual and the profane, a kind of aesthetic verification of the Christian doctrine of man and human redemption' (p. 217). Benedict also defends a selection of unfashionable eucharistic practices: presidency by the priest facing east in solidarity with the people; partial silent recitation of the canon to counter an 'inflation of words'; and processions, including on Corpus Christi. A unifying theme is the cosmic context of the eucharist, which comprehends the whole of material creation.

Nichols' assessment of Benedict's transformation of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith during his Prefecture is also highly illuminating. Best known by critics for its censorship of a handful of high-profile dissidents, the Congregation under Benedict in fact pursued a more constructive path than before, publishing its documents and actively promoting theological enquiry.

Benedict's own theology is presented primarily by means of a review of his key works. Nichols is more interested in exposition than defence, outlining a series of positions which the reader may either accept or decline. Various social and political factors, above all the confrontation of German catholicism with Nazism and, much later, Marxism, remain in the background as a discrete *apologia* for a range of conservative theological positions. The current relevance of these factors is, however, unclear. It is perhaps too easy to conjure images from political history to justify standpoints in the present day. Across large swathes of Europe, churches are not so much being suppressed as ignored, with worship supplanted by a widespread spiritual ennui. New times require new responses.

More revealing is the identification of the cultural conflicts of the 1960s, both outside the Church and within it, as the resumption of battles inaugurated by the modernist 'crisis' of the 1900s (p. 197). This judgement is passed over without comment, but needs examining. Modernism was a collection of primarily intellectual currents successfully suppressed in an authoritarian church culture. In Britain and France, where key culprits were located, the catholic church was moreover isolated, for different reasons, from wider society, which might in different circumstances have supported dissenters. The challenges which *Achtundsechziger* student radicalism made to the Church's moral teaching and authority per se were, in contrast, popular and cultural, forming just one dimension of wider social change. It was by then harder to silence dissident voices, and is even more difficult now. Hans Küng has, famously, been able to work effectively as a theologian estranged from his church in ways inconceivable for Baron von Hügel, and has gained yet greater publicity for his work as a result.

The expository style of Nichols' study leaves many questions open, enabling a useful introduction which should encourage further engagement by Christians of all confessions. Critics in the less tangibly ordered churches need to consider how the plurality of doctrine and practice they enjoy could be dependent on more objective formulations elsewhere. The only option worse than holding on to Lucky Jack's weighty gold nugget might just be to lose it altogether.

DAVID GRUMETT
University of Exeter
d.j.grumett@exeter.ac.uk