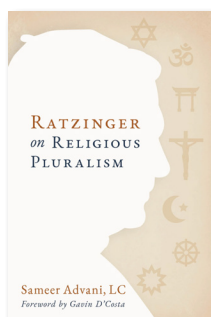


BOOK REVIEW

Ratzinger on Religious Pluralism

By Sameer Advani, LC. Emmaus Academic, 2024. xviii + 493 pp. ISBN: 978-1-64585-423-4. \$49.95 (hardcover); \$49.95 (e-book).



Optimism that most of humanity will be saved, the possibility of formally recognized groups of Catholics incorporating their Muslim and Buddhist heritages, belief that Neo-Scholasticism is too abstract and impersonal: these may not be what one would expect to find in a book about the views of “God’s rottweiler,” especially one written by a priest of the highly traditional Legion of Christ (349). But then, as Pope Francis said, Catholics believe in “the God of surprises.”¹

This book is adapted from the doctoral dissertation of Fr. Sameer Advani, who teaches theology at the Legion’s university in Rome. Religious diversity is a lifelong interest for Advani, who was raised in Dubai by a Catholic mother and a father who converted to the faith from Hinduism. Advani surveys half a century of Joseph Ratzinger’s (Pope Benedict XVI’s) writings on religious difference, ranging from published scholarship and missives to public addresses and German-language archival materials. He organizes his findings into two parts, the first on modern realities and Christian varieties of religious pluralism, the second detailing Ratzinger’s thoughts on non-Christian religions. Each of these parts is divided into three sections, respectively taking stock of Ratzinger’s phenomenology, philosophy, and theology. Advani also sets out his own reflections under separate headings.

1 Francis, “God of Surprises,” morning meditation, Vatican website, May 8, 2017, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2017/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20170508_god-of-surprises.html

Advani's research and sense of organization are praiseworthy—Part I ends *exactly* halfway through the book. The book shows how Ratzinger earned his reputation as a theological titan; he deftly analyzed thinkers ranging from Radhakrishnan to Immanuel Kant to Karl Barth. In doing so, Advani says Ratzinger arrived at two attitudes. Ratzinger rejected “vertical” pluralism that takes different religions as equally valid paths to salvation, but he embraced a “horizontal” one that appreciates diversity as forming greater unity (14). Vertical pluralism was unacceptable because it conflicts with the Church's particular role in salvation history and its divine mandate to evangelize the world. Horizontal pluralism was necessary because God's love reaches every person and people.

Ratzinger wrestled, then, with the dual evils of religious indifference and religious arrogance. His middle way defended the Church's claims to a privileged position while also saying interreligious dialogue could reshape it. For instance, he credited dialogue with East Asian religions for Catholics' renewed emphasis on interiority and silence. He believed that slowly, lovingly accompanying other religions through history would lead the Church to accept into itself the goodness found in them and so become more truly “catholic.”

This cosmopolitan portrait of Ratzinger may be unfamiliar. After all, in addition to the canine nickname mentioned above, critics called him the “Grand Inquisitor” and even the (nakedly ethnically derogatory) “Panzerkardinal” (17). That says more about the critics than about him. A certain strand of theological liberalism believes itself to be the only acceptable way to navigate human difference, insisting that unless all religions are believed to be equally valid and essentially identical, imperialism and violence will follow. Of course reactionary attitudes exist, in the Catholic Church as elsewhere. But the reduction of every conservative view to rigid narrowness flattens intellectual landscapes. It also does misinformed violence to the reputations of people like Ratzinger, who aimed to synthesize contemporary insights with longer-standing religious commitments.

There are several noteworthy limitations to Advani's book. To address substantive matters first, this study is concerned entirely with Ratzinger. Neither Pope John Paul II nor Pope Francis appears in any detail. Advani relies almost entirely on Ratzinger's glosses in describing other thinkers. While that is a testament to Ratzinger's learning and does keep the focus on how he received others' ideas, it also prevents Advani from doing more than just pointing out where Ratzinger oversimplified others. Advani leaves for future work the ways Ratzinger's thought developed internally over time, placing passages from the 1960s alongside ones up through the

2010s. Advani also believes Ratzinger's thoughts on Judaism and Christian ecumenism require too much separate study to include them.

Most glaringly, Advani restricts himself to the world of words. Pope Benedict XVI delivered an address at the University of Regensburg where he quoted a Byzantine emperor's critique of Islam. Death threats, church burnings, two murders, and many protests followed. The episode receives only brief references here—that is not nearly enough attention.

Stylistically, this book could have used more of a post-dissertation tune-up. Many thinkers are referenced only by last name. The book's title is questionable, given that Advani gives multiple definitions of pluralism, some of which Ratzinger rejects in favor of "plurality." Advani also has some literary oddities, like often calling Ratzinger "the German" and translating terms too obliquely. And surely even a celibate cleric could render *autoerotisme spirituel* as something more ... suggestive than "narcissism" (62).

What Advani does render well is his thesis: Ratzinger defended core Catholic convictions while appreciating religious plurality. Surprising though it may be, Advani recovers Ratzinger as an important resource for Catholic engagement with religious diversity.

Matthew P. Cavedon
Center for the Study of Law and Religion
Emory University



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