

Foreword

CARDINAL JOSEPH RATZINGER, NOW Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, reportedly has said, as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, that the most serious threat to the Christian faith in the twenty-first century is no longer liberation theology, which he thought he had quashed, but religious pluralism. By “religious pluralism” is meant not simply the fact that there are *de facto* different religions in the world but the philosophical and theological claim that these religions constitute, each in its own way, valid paths to God and therefore are divinely-willed “ways of salvation.” The threat has been encapsulated in the cardinal’s celebrated phrase: “the dictatorship of relativism.”

That religions have constantly interacted with each other throughout history in ways now friendly, now hostile, is a trite truism, and Ratzinger has not always opposed interreligious dialogue as a way to achieve better relations among the followers of various religions and to foster mutual understanding and peace. Lately, however, Ratzinger prefers to speak of *intercultural* instead of *interreligious* dialogue. To his mind the latter requires a “bracketing” of one’s religious beliefs and tends to lead to indifferentism, syncretism, relativism, and secularism. Ratzinger did not hide his opposition to the kind of religious gatherings, such as the World Day of Prayer for Peace gathered by Pope (now Saint) John Paul II in Assisi, Italy, in October 1986, in which leaders of different and apparently incompatible religions assemble for prayer, because they risk to blur the question of truth. Because of the dangers posed by interreligious dialogue to the integrity of faith and orthodoxy, Ratzinger proposes intercultural dialogue as an alternative means to bring the followers of different religions and even people of no faith together to work for the common good.

It is well known that Ratzinger as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has not hesitated to deploy all the resources of his

office not only to combat the errors he associates with religious pluralism, but also to silence, remove from teaching positions, and even excommunicate hundreds of theologians who explore the possibility of religions other than Christianity being valid, effective, and divinely-sanctioned “ways of salvation.” Whether these measures are just or not, and whatever emotional stance one takes toward Ratzinger as a person, one must give him the benefit of the doubt and postulate that he was doing his best to fulfill his role of *custos fidei*—guardian of the faith—and not out of lust for power.

But who will be the *custos* of the *custos*, guard of the guard, to make sure that the guard does the job properly? Who will help us understand not only *what* the guardian of the faith says but also *why* he says it? Here comes Ambrose Ih-Ren Mong to our assistance. With painstaking research, impeccable scholarship, penetrating analysis, and exemplary fair-mindedness, Mong digs deep into Ratzinger’s educational, cultural, and religious background to reveal his eurocentric bias, particularly in his ecclesiology, ecumenical theology, and attitude toward religious pluralism with its evil twins of relativism and secularism. It is important to note that Mong’s is not a (cheap) psychological analysis of Ratzinger but a *theological* interpretation of his thought.

Of course, Ambrose Mong is not the first to offer a theological evaluation—positive or negative—of Ratzinger’s theology. But his work is the first analysis and assessment of the Bavarian theologian’s work from the perspective of Asian realities, with which the German cardinal can hardly be said to be familiar. For this reason Mong has chosen to highlight the works of three theologians who have theologized from the Asian perspective and who have incurred Ratzinger’s censure. There are, of course, a host of other Asian theologians who have written far more profound and influential works, certainly more so than I—Aloysius Pieris SJ, of Sri Lanka, Michael Amaladoss SJ, of India, and Kwok Pui-lan of Hong Kong, just to cite a trinity. It is important to point out that Asia requires not only a different theology but also, and first of all, a different *way of doing theology*. This is ultimately the most significant and challenging finding of Mong’s work. Whether or not one agrees with Ambrose Mong’s this-or-that evaluation of Joseph Ratzinger’s theology, there is no gainsaying his assertion that the realities of religious pluralism in Asia require the church to adopt a different approach in its theological formulations and pastoral practices.

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