

The Reception of *Einführung in das Christentum* among the Reviewers

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CARDINAL RATZINGER'S BEST-SELLING BOOK sounded a classical tone amidst the dissonance of 1968. While the typical *soixante-huitard* intellectual was interested in Buddhism, Shamanism, Taoism, or varieties of New Age Paganism, in addition to Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and Gurdjieff, in his *Einführung in das Christentum* Ratzinger defended creedal Christianity. As a consequence, reviews of the book quickly appeared in the theology journals in 1969. A common theme was Ratzinger's attempt to navigate his way through a narrow theological strait, avoiding the rocks of history without ontology on the one side (historicism), and ontology without history on the other (varieties of pre-Christian Greek philosophy, partially sound, but without the grace of the Incarnation) on the other. In the journal *Theological Studies*, Patrick J. Burns, SJ, concluded:

[Ratzinger] does his best to explain the Creed's classic categories to a contemporary audience beyond the post-Tridentine catechisms of their childhood and yet bewildered by the *Dutch Catechism*. Above all, he emphasizes the *Positivität* of Christian faith, its historical background in particular events in human history, its scandalous dependence on a particular human person named Jesus of Nazareth.¹

In a 2017 review in the ecumenical journal *Fare Forward*, which markets itself as a quarterly Christian Review of Culture and Ideas for millennials, Joshua Tseng-Tham began by arguing that a proper introduction to Christianity—one that appeals to the entire human psyche (heart, imagination and memory, as well as intellect)—ought to incorporate both intellectual rigor

1. Burns, Review (Shorter Notice) of *Einführung*, 748.

and spiritual depth. He then showcases *Introduction to Christianity* as an example of a work that manages to achieve both of these ends. It offers spiritual wisdom alongside intellectual argument.

Perhaps for this reason, the sales of the book quickly took off after its 1968 release, prompting the German journal *Kritische Katholizismus: Zeitung für Theorie und Praxis in Gesellschaft und Kirche* to offer a review under the banner of a series tilted “Just how progressive are our progressive theologians?” The review of Ratzinger’s book was the first in the case study. The anonymous reviewer for *Kritische Katholizismus* judged the work to be “extremely dangerous”—the statement was “Ratzingers Buch ist ausgesprochen gefährlich.” The bill of indictment included the following: it obscures essential results of contemporary theology, it does not fight openly but secretly taunts the proponents of modern theology such as Bultmann and the contemporary champions of political theology. While Ratzinger’s outward tone is one of humility, beneath the surface he is constantly evaluating, confessing, and judging. There is no provocation to critical thinking. Ratzinger exhaustively draws attention to the dangers and bottlenecks of the historical-critical method. There is little talk of the profit we owe to these methods of theology. Ratzinger suffers from a methodological naïveté which is very obvious in his treatment of the virgin birth. He simply assumes that Our Lady was and remained a virgin. This lack of method consciousness corresponds to a language that uses concepts of the New Testament as directly as if they naturally originate from today’s experience. Sometimes one acquires the impression that Ratzinger cannot follow the post-Kantian critical way of thinking. Moreover, Ratzinger in his ecclesiological statements rightly points out that the church in its structure is an interweaving of the holy and the unholy, but nonetheless he is critical of those who are critical of church structures for not seeing beyond the organization to the church’s presentation of the word and the sacraments. In this context the anonymous author accuses Ratzinger of operating under a Platonic influence according to which the real is not found in the structures (not in the bureaucracy, one might say), but only in the mediation of grace and truth which goes on behind the structures. The reviewer then asserts that, according to the understanding of the prophets (and here it is not clear which particular prophets the reviewer has in mind), tearing down is essential to the existence of a believer and his or her exercise of critical responsibility. He or she laments that there is nothing of this understanding of the importance of demolition work in Ratzinger’s *Introduction*.²

2. Anonymous author, “Wie progressive sind unsere Progressiven?” 9.

Kritischer Katholizismus: Zeitung für Theorie und Praxis in Gesellschaft und Kirche was a German monthly newspaper that operated from 1968–1974. It was founded at the eighty-second German Catholic Congress in 1968. Its writers had been inspired by the social opposition movements in the universities and sought to apply the same principles of political opposition and critique to the hierarchical structures in the Church. They found little in Ratzinger's book to merit him with the appellation of a progressive theologian. On the contrary the work was declared dangerous.

The reviews that received even more attention, however, were those published in the *Theologische Revue*, the journal of the Theology Faculty of the University of Münster, Number 3 of 1969. The first was by Hubertus Mynarek (who was then a Professor of Religionswissenschaft at the University of Vienna), and the second by Walter Kasper (who was then teaching dogmatic theology at the University of Münster).³

Mynarek began with the clipped statement: "This work concerns the concrete form of the Christian faith in the guidelines of the so-called Apostolic Creed." He further stated that "Ratzinger sets out with this book a compact and large-scale belief system whose foundation, middle and high point as well as whose continuous explanatory principle seems to me to be love."⁴ Quite simply, the logic of love, provides Ratzinger with the clue to the great Christian truths and mysteries. Mynarek explained:

If love plays a decisive role in the fundamental determination of the act of faith, this applies even more to the content of the faith. In contrast to the essentially self-referential God of philosophy, the God of faith is fundamentally determined by the category of relationship. The highest is not the absolute self-contained self-sufficiency, but . . . relatedness . . . creative power that creates, sustains and loves others. It is connected with the fact that the philosophical God is a self-thinking thought, while the God of faith is love as thought and thought as love. The absolute is the identity of truth and love.⁵

Mynarek went on to argue that love is also the key to understanding the whole of Ratzinger's Christology since the "monstrous union of logos and sarx" or the "philosophical unheard of Incarnation of God" becomes more

3. In 1972 Mynarek wrote an open letter to Pope Paul VI, calling for the lifting of celibacy and the democratization of the Catholic Church. In the same year he left the church and married. According to him, he was the first university professor of German-speaking theology in the twentieth century to leave the Catholic Church.

4. Mynarek, "Das Wesen des Christlichen (A)," 177.

5. Mynarek, "Das Wesen des Christlichen (A)," 178.

comprehensible when one considers that, for the lover, the great is not too heavy and the least not too low. With love, Mynarek suggests, “there is thus a revaluation of all values, a revaluation of maximum and minimum, of greatness and life, which is characteristic of the Christian understanding of the real.”⁶ Mynarek also thought that love is at the centre of Ratzinger’s ecclesiology, since Ratzinger views the Church as a community of love and a communion that is sacred because of the gift of divine love.

Mynarek then suggested that the work could be subjected to criticism from three angles: the perspective of philosophical reason, the perspective of comparative religions, and the perspectives of the leading authorities in the various sub-fields of theology. Specifically he suggested that the first may regard Ratzinger’s account as too ontological, the second may ask why Ratzinger covered polytheism, monotheism, and atheism, but omitted a consideration of pantheism, and the third (he suggested) may be astonished by what he called the “mythological elements” in the treatment of such subjects as the Ascension, the Descent into Hell, and the Virgin-Birth. In other words, the sub-text here is that those for whom the historical-critical method of biblical exegesis is the only valid foundation for theology might be upset by Ratzinger’s approach to biblical exegesis and to fundamental theology which is far less skeptical of the value of tradition.

Overall, Mynarek concluded that, if one wanted to locate Ratzinger in the history of theology, one would have to classify him as a neo-Augustinian along with Max Scheler and Romano Guardini. He also noted that Ratzinger’s literary style was similar to Guardini’s, which he defined as elegant, fluent, and easily understandable. He suggested that just as Guardini was regarded in his time as the “most subtle apologist of Catholic Christianity,” this mantle was now likely to be passed to Ratzinger following the publication of *Einführung in das Christentum*.⁷

One may argue that Mynarek was ‘on the money,’ to use a popular game-show expression. Love is certainly a recurring theme in Ratzinger’s theological counter-point. As Ratzinger wrote in another work: [The] Christian God is not just reason, objective meaning, the geometry of the universe, but he is speech, relation, Word and Love. He is sighted reason, which sees and hears, which can be called upon and has a personal character. The “objective” meaning of the world is a subject, in relation to me.⁸

The notion that God is love is also the central theme of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, first published in 1963, which became

6. Mynarek, “Das Wesen des Christlichen (A),” 178.

7. Mynarek, “Das Wesen des Christlichen (A),” 182.

8. Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching*, 94.

Love Alone is Credible in its English manifestation. It is highly probable that Ratzinger had read this work before writing his own introduction to Christianity. In the preface to *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, Balthasar wrote that never in the history of the Church have Christian thinkers thought it adequate to answer the question of what specifically is Christian about Christianity with reference to a series of mysteries one is required to believe. Instead they have always aimed at a point of unity that would serve to provide a justification for the demand for faith. He further argued that it was only an account of revelation based on the notion that God is love which can provide such a point of unity.

Mynarek was also on target in his comparison of Ratzinger with Guardini, not only in terms of their literary style, but also their fundamental theology. Although *Einführung in das Christentum* is often treated as an attempt to do for the generation of '68 what Karl Adam had attempted to do for the post-World War I generation in his *Das Wesen des Katholizismus* published in 1924, there is an even stronger comparison to be made with Romano Guardini's essay *Das Wesen des Christentums* published in the magazine *Die Schildgenossen* in 1929. In that essay, Guardini argued that the core essence of Christianity is not a doctrine of truth nor an interpretation of life, but rather Jesus of Nazareth in his concrete existence. Guardini's imprint on Ratzinger is clearly evident in Ratzinger's *Einführung in das Christentum*, especially in what Patrick J. Burns, SJ, called its emphasis on the positivism of the Catholic faith. Echoes of Guardini and Balthasar are not only evident in this landmark 1968 work, but reach the level of a fugue in Ratzinger's papal triptych on the theological virtues. In *Lumen Fidei*, drafted by Ratzinger/Benedict but published under the name of Francis, truth and love are said to be inseparable.⁹

It is therefore fair to say that all the reviewers so far covered were generally accurate in their judgments. Burns was right about Ratzinger trying to avoid a warmed-up Tridentine theology on the one side and the musings of Dutch theologians, spellbound by the *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s, on the other. The anonymous contributor to *Kritische Katholizismus* was right to judge the book "very dangerous" from the point of view of those who want to abolish the hierarchy and turn the Church into an international network of communities for social activists for whom beliefs like the virgin birth are mere mythology. Tseng-Tham could explain the book's best-seller popularity by the fact that it simultaneously offers spiritual consolation alongside intellectual content, and Mynarek had accurately discerned the importance of the Johannine motif of love for Ratzinger. Mynarek was also right to make the

9. See especially §27.

judgment that people who do not accept anything as an element of revelation and/or Christian tradition unless it can withstand the solvency test of the historico-critical method would be dismissive of some of Ratzinger's claims. The only questionable note in these reviews was the suggestion by the anonymous reviewer that Ratzinger's ecclesiology is Platonic. To do justice to the complexity of Ratzinger's ecclesiology one would have to carefully analyse his 1953 dissertation on "The People and the House of God in St. Augustine's Doctrine of the Church," and this was not done.

However, the Platonic criticism reappears in the review by Walter Kasper.¹⁰ Kasper begins his contribution by noting how different Ratzinger's *Einführung in das Christentum* is from Karl Adam's 1924 work *Das Wesen des Katholizismus*. Whereas Adam's was ecclesio-centric and the problem was the alternative Protestant form of Christianity, Ratzinger's work was anthropocentric and the problem is not Protestantism but atheism. Kasper also acknowledged that Ratzinger was correct to see an affinity between his own work and Kierkegaard's "Practice in Christianity." Just as Kierkegaard was concerned with the mediation of existence, Ratzinger was also concerned with communication, not mere information. Kasper then offered a paragraph-long encomium:

Many of Ratzinger's interpretations have an almost liberating effect; one agrees to them all the more readily because they do not lead to a shallow liberalism, but rather to profound theological depths and are thereby enriching in a Christian as well as theological sense. This applies, above all, to the two Christological chapters and their attempt—principally oriented towards K. Barth—to mediate functional and ontological Christology (163, 182ff.). It is here that Ratzinger succeeds in a valid new interpretation of the Christological dogmas of the ancient Church. The same goes for the interpretation of the notions of atonement and redemption (186ff., 230ff.) and the accentuation of the significance of the dynamic of the theology of the cross, as compared with a one-sided and static theology of the incarnation (184ff.), as well as the connection between Pneumatology and Ecclesiology (277). Thus J. Ratzinger's *Einführung in das Christentum* represents a courageous effort and a notable achievement.¹¹

10. The author is indebted to Sebastian Condon for the English translations of the reviews of Walter Kasper and responses from Joseph Ratzinger. The translation of the review of Hubertus Mynarek and that of the anonymous reviewer are her own.

11. Kasper, "Das Wesen des Christlichen (B)," 183–84.