Among the most important modern Catholic thinkers, Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, fundamentally shaped Christian theology in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. His collaborations and debates with figures such as Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, Jean Daniélou, Hans Küng, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Jürgen Habermas reflect the key role he has played in the development of Christian life and doctrine. The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Ratzinger conveys the depth and breadth of his significant legacy to contemporary Catholic theology and culture. With contributions from an international team of scholars, the volume assesses Ratzinger’s theological synthesis in response to challenges that Christianity faces today. It surveys the major themes and topics that Ratzinger explored and highlights aspects of the ideas that he developed in his engagement with a wide variety of intellectual and religious currents. Collectively, the chapters in this volume demonstrate how Ratzinger’s epochal contributions to Christian thought will reverberate for generations to come.


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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

JOSEPH RATZINGER

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Editors’ Preface

Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI (1927–2022) is without doubt one of the most important religious thinkers of our age. His immense lifework has assured him a place in the theological landscape of the past decades and his influence is acknowledged by scholars of different beliefs and approaches. It is perhaps one of his most remarkable legacies that he does not simply fall into one of the two categories into which authors are typically divided: those who are more analytical and present detailed studies of a few topics and those who are more synthetic and visualize the big picture, offering an overarching explanation of reality. Very few scholars and intellectuals today can fit well into both categories, and Ratzinger is one of them.

On the one hand, Ratzinger has advanced the conversation of virtually every theological discipline throughout his decades of teaching and writing. While his ideas have been received in different ways and at times controversially, it would be intellectually dishonest to ignore them, and we hope that this Companion will occupy an important place in the process of reception of a profound and incisive voice in contemporary theology. Based on this premise, this volume will cover the main areas of the author’s thought. Each contributor provides an overview of Ratzinger’s writings on a specific topic and the context in which his ideas developed.

On the other hand, Ratzinger also offers distinct insights, based on a thorough engagement with history, in search of new ways to make Christian thought intelligible in today’s intellectual and cultural climate. He did not seek to construct a systematic theology but to engage with contemporary questions to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Not unlike the Church Fathers whose writings he studied throughout his long career, especially Augustine of Hippo, Ratzinger confronted theological and philosophical problems that presented themselves in the concrete situations the Church was facing. Characteristically, he elaborated his ideas by considering differing sides in the argument, in search of
a synthesis – an approach that we expect to be reflected in the different contributions to this volume. Thus, each chapter draws attention to the elements of synthesis that can be found in his writings and to perspectives for further research on the respective topics.

Some thinkers mark history and change our lives, whether we think of them or not. For instance, Western philosophy was decisively shaped by Aristotle: the commonly accepted concepts of truth, logic, and ethics have become part of our patrimony. Similarly, the English language today would not be the same without Shakespeare. Many words and sayings from his plays have entered everyday speech and we use them whether or not we are conscious of their origin. In a similar way, Ratzinger has shaped Catholic theology both during his long career as a theologian and during his ministry as bishop and pope. His contribution goes beyond his lucid and engaging ideas about God and the world; his legacy resides in the very categories with which to think about God today. As with Augustine and Thomas Aquinas in their time, so Ratzinger contributes to the architecture of theology in the twenty-first century: not only what we see in the house when we walk in (its colors, furniture, decoration) but the foundations that sustain that house. Or, to use another analogy, Ratzinger has provided necessary principles of the grammar with which we can think about God in today's world.

EDITORIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Most of Ratzinger’s contributions were written for a particular occasion and published in different places. This responds to the demands of his ecclesial ministry and shows, again like in the case of his master Augustine, the fruitful engagement of a theological mind with the real problems and questions of his time. The publication of his collected writings in German began in 2008 and is nearing completion. Regrettably, only the first volume published in the series, Theology of the Liturgy: The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence, has been published in English so far. In this Companion, Ratzinger’s works are cited according to their published English translation, where available. When the German original is referenced, this is

1 Joseph Ratzinger Gesammelte Schriften, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Müller (Freiburg: Herder, 2008–); henceforth cited as JRGS.
usually done according to the edition of his collected writings. We consider it important to contextualize Ratzinger’s writings, which stretch over a period of more than six decades. Hence, a particular contribution’s date of first publication is generally indicated in the footnotes, as an aid to show continuity and change in the evolution of his thought.³

Documents of the magisterium of the Catholic Church, including those of Benedict XVI, are easily accessible, in Latin and in various translations, on the Vatican website [www.vatican.va] and hence they are listed only with title and date.

³ For this purpose, the editors have found an indispensable tool in Joseph Ratzinger/Papst Benedikt XVI., Das Werk: Veröffentlichungen bis zur Papstwahl. Herausgegeben vom Schülerkreis, ed. Vinzenz Pfnür (Augsburg: Sankt Ulrich Verlag, 2009).
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