

Book Reviews

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Fr William Massie on Cardinal Ratzinger's last book, a study of religious relativism and defence of religious truth; Marisa March on an anatomist whose science brought him closer to the Creator and into the Catholic Church; Cyprian Blamires on the restoration of Our Lady's shrines in England and the growth of Marian devotion.

Truth and Tolerance. Christian Belief and World Religions

by **Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger**, Ignatius Press, 284pp, \$ 10.95

"We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognise anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires". Words of Cardinal Ratzinger, not from Truth and Tolerance but from that by now famous homily preached at the pre-Conclave Mass on 18 April 2005. To find out just what Benedict XVI means by "a dictatorship of relativism" read Truth and Tolerance.

This is Joseph Ratzinger's last major publication before his election as pope. It is a collection of his writings, the first written in 1964, the remainder in the 1990s, either first delivered as public lectures or contributions to journals like *Communio*. For this reason it is not a systematic work. Ideas appear and reappear in more detail so the book requires careful reading and in full to draw together all the insights on a particular theme. Truth and Tolerance is a study of relativism in religion, its origins, its common forms, its contradictions. And it offers a robust demonstration of how we can and must speak still of the 'truth' of Christianity. Many people today would say that all religions are more or less the same. Ratzinger adopts an historical and phenomenological approach to show that they are not. There was a radical novelty in Christianity's claim to be a religion of personal encounter with God in history rather than a mystical identification with God which has always been a characteristic of eastern religions. The alternatives to Christianity are not interlocking pieces of the relativist's jigsaw but independent, different and often contradictory. The consequences are real and practical for everyday living. For example, Christianity confers a high dignity on the human person as unique and immortal, called into an eternal communion with God. Two alternatives of repeated incarnations or being dissolved into the All-One are surely less attractive. Still less attractive is the Marxist willingness to sacrifice the individual for the sake of the longterm cause of equality or the Aztec rituals of human sacrifice to "feed" the gods and in order to keep the world going.

Ratzinger traces the origins of relativism to the Enlightenment. If Kant was correct in saying that we can never reach reality but mere appearances, then all is mediated through the finite categories of the mind. The infinite God is unknowable. The claim of any religion to be 'true' is unacceptable. It can only accept equal status with all others. In any event, it now belongs in the box marked 'irrational', for some 'unscientific' and for those who still feel drawn towards it, in the realm of private 'experience' or 'feeling'. But Ratzinger shows just how alien these attempts to enfeeble the Christian claim to truth are to the history of Christian evangelisation. A recurring theme throughout the book (and indeed in another important work, Ratzinger's *Introduction to Christianity*) is that the God of Christianity was embraced not only by Jews as the fulfilment of the 'hope of Israel' but by the pious gentiles as the genuine rejection of a lesser, insufficient religion of irrational, mythical gods, and by Greek philosophers as the Wisdom that explained the rational universe. And from this lesson in history, Ratzinger offers a way forward. Judeo-Christianity was enlightenment for the ancient mythical religions and the philosophers searching for truth because it offered a synthesis of the search for the divine and the power of rational explanation. And the Christian faith can still provide that synthesis of faith for reason and reason within faith. "The longing for the infinite is alive and unquenchable in man" (p.137). The rationalist critique does not satisfy the human mind or heart and while often not sufficiently confident to turn to religious claims of absolute truth, people turn to superstition: "We embrace rationality while clutching a rabbit's foot", as Matthew Syed confessed in *The Times* recently. Of great interest to FAITH readers will be Ratzinger's insistence that faith must enter into dialogue with and "inculturate itself" into technical, scientific culture. For example, the Christian synthesis of reason and faith will only be convincing when we respond to the claim of scientific positivists that evolution is sufficient explanation to vanish metaphysics and render superfluous the "hypothesis of God". Ratzinger calls for openness on "both" sides: people of faith not to cast doubt on the evidence for evolution and people of science to consider the claim of Christianity that their rational universe is not the chance by-product of what is irrational but proceeds from the intelligent Verbum of God.

Throughout Truth and Tolerance the strongest argument against accepting religious relativism is based on a demonstration that human beings (and culture) show a consistent and dynamic openness to the transcendent. This is nothing less than the yearning for the "revelation of God... [to be] written into them" (p. 195). Indeed Ratzinger proclaims the universal primacy of Christ across time and culture which is the only motive for true mission and conversion. Here he also finds the basis for optimism when considering the salvation of non-Christians: "We are all part of a single history that is in many different

fashions on the way to God", (p.44) and the agreement in essentials across cultures far removed from each other "can only be explained by the hidden way our souls have been touched by truth" (p.65). But he is realistic about the need for discernment of genuinely "darker elements" in other religions. Jacques Dupuis SJ, who wrote on Christianity and the world's religions, was asked by the CDF several years ago to clarify his explanation of Christ as unique and only Saviour. He was of the opinion that "it can and must be said" that the world's religious traditions are ways or routes of salvation for their followers. Ratzinger maintains the cautious balance of attitudes: of "acceptance as preparation for Christ" and "rejection as false religion" we find throughout the Bible. In the end, he urges that we respect the mystery of God's activity rather than "invent theories" about how God might save people, for it is "a question of God's judgement, not ours (p.18) – language that echoes *Gaudium et Spes*' confident but humble acknowledgement that these ways are "known only to God" (article 22). Joseph's Ratzinger's *Truth and Tolerance* is a demanding but very important and useful book. It offers an overview of ideas that have shaped the worldview of religion and of the Christian faith in particular. And it offers a way forward that is authentic: in keeping with the initial Christian evangelisation because rooted in the conviction that the Logos, the Truth, the Divine Person through whom and for whom all was made, has broken into the world in the Incarnation to fulfil all, restore all and purify all

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Niels Stensen, The Scientist who was Beatified

by **Hans Kermit**, Gracewing, 179pp, £ 12.99 This book outlines the inspiring story of a young Danish scientist, and his journey from the public dissection theatres of Copenhagen to the Bishopric of Titiopolis. It is the story of a journey in faith and the quest for truth, both religious and scientific. On first reading the title of the book, it is tempting for the reader to think that the book will be an account of an atheistic scientist who becomes Christian, however, this is not the case at all. Indeed the young scientist Stensen was a very devout Christian, albeit of the Lutheran Church (it may come as a surprise to some to learn that there was a time when it was actually considered to be quite normal and quite acceptable to be both religious and scientific – even as late as the 17th century!). Hans Kermit tells the tale of how Stensen was led from the Lutheran Church to embrace the fullness of the Catholic Faith, through his studies in natural science.

Born in Copenhagen in 1638, Stensen studied medicine at the university there, before going on to study anatomy and dissection in Amsterdam. Stensen was clearly a very able scientist and made several important contributions to the progress of medical science, not least of which was the discovery of a duct now known as the Ductus Stenonianus, named in his honour, which he identified through the dissection of the heads of sheep and dogs. (This book, dear reader, is neither for the squeamish nor the faint hearted!).

Stensen also got caught up in one of the greatest philosophical debates of the time, namely question of how the mind is connected to the body. The famous philosopher Rene Descartes had proposed the idea that the mind and body, were connected together through a little gland in the brain known as the Pineal Gland. Stensen spent a good deal of time and effort trying either to prove or disprove this idea, and after dissecting many animal heads (again, this book is not for those of a squeamish disposition), Stensen was able to disprove Descartes theory. Hans Kermit goes on to describe Stensen's many other valuable contributions to natural science, in the fields of biology, geology and palaeontology. One of the real strengths of this book is that it contains many of Stensen's original drawings, beautifully and intricately and detailed, showing the findings of his anatomical investigations, as well as copies of the title pages of his books, and many other photographs and engravings of interest. As fascinating as Stensen's scientific work was, it is raised to a much higher level when we learn that it was through his scientific investigations that Stensen drew closer to God. Stensen explains that the purpose of anatomy is 'to lift the observer from the singularly brilliant construction of the body, to the dignity of the soul and from thence to acknowledge and love for its creator'. For Stensen, faith and reason were eminently compatible, with science at the service of religion, he believed that 'the role of science was to provide insight into the beauty of the Creator's work and to generate love for Him' (p.63) Stensen, a rational man, needed a rational explanation for religion. He eventually reached the point when he decided that 'either religion is a binding injunction which mankind concocted in order to show its Creator the adoration they owe him..... or else religion is prescribed by God Himself and so there can only be one which must exist unbroken from the world's beginning to its end.' (p.51) Thus Stensen struggled with the trial of conversion and the ultimate Ecumenical question: Is any one religion more true than the others? If so which one? And why am I not following it? The final outcome of this intellectual and spiritual struggle was that Stensen was received into the Catholic Church, making great sacrifices in the process, as Catholicism was viewed with great disdain and suspicion in Stensen's very Lutheran home country. Stensen went on to be ordained and later became a bishop, renowned for his austerity and simple way of life, before dying a holy death in 1686. Hans Kermit's account of Niels Stensen is more about his scientific life than about his spiritual life (though really the two are inseparable), and is more biographical than hagiographical, but it is nonetheless an inspiring story and a very readable book which I would

commend to all.

Shrines of Our Lady in England

by **Anne Vail**, Gracewing, 246pp, £9.99

On a beautiful May day in 1982 I stood in the sun in Coventry Airport in the midst of a vast crowd to greet the Holy Father, John Paul II, on his visit to the Midlands . On that glorious day, four hundred years of estrangement between the British people and the Holy See seemed to evaporate overnight. A papal visit that would have been unthinkable just fifty years earlier now seemed perfectly natural and normal.

Reading Anne Vail's fine survey of the Shrines of Our Lady in England made me realise that huge changes of attitude with regard to the Catholic Church in this country had been taking place over many years, and I couldn't help concluding that the ease and naturalness of the papal visit owed much to the preparation of minds that had been taking place for decades beforehand. Anne Vail's book is the story of how so many Marian shrines destroyed at the Reformation and neglected or forgotten for centuries have been restored or renewed in modern times. Veneration for Our Lady in this country is no longer a topic for the history books but a widespread living ecumenical reality. There are a number of features of this book which make it particularly important. First, there is great attention to the work of modern artists and sculptors who have helped to beautify the restored shrines covered in the text. Second, the writer lovingly conveys what it feels like to visit each one, drawing a pen picture of the approaches and surroundings of the various shrines. The pen pictures are supplemented by pencil sketches. (Though these are competently executed I personally think I would have preferred photographs, but then that is a matter of taste.) Third, there is also a very practical dimension to the presentation of the topic, for the author provides a traveller's guide to each shrine including directions and listings of local Catholic Church addresses and Mass times as well as suggestions for accommodation. This book is not simply a presentation, it is also an invitation. Each reader will have his favourite story or anecdote from the rich historical collection contained in this book. I was fascinated by Our Lady of the Portal in Truro , of whom I had never heard, and the extraordinary global connections revealed by the author. The name echoes the title of an ancient icon in Rome known as the Madonna del Portico – 'Our Lady of the Gate'. I was very moved to read that James Edward Stuart, son of King James II, prayed continually in front of this icon during his final exile in Rome , and he prayed for the return of the Catholic faith to England . But the contemporary importance of the subject is aptly illustrated by the reminder that the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham was taken to Wembley Stadium for Pope John Paul II's Mass there in 1982. For me personally it is the artistic dimension to the restoration of these shrines that is most powerful. This is not because I am artistically inclined – far from it. It is because of an experience I had that helped me on my way into the Catholic Church. In the parish church where I was an Anglican curate back in the 1970s there was a side-chapel with a wooden statue of Our Lady which had been brought over from Austria by a very Catholic-minded incumbent of earlier times. Feeling the pull of the Catholic faith, I used to kneel before this statue in a state of considerable perplexity. The statue was not in any way artistically special, but to me it had a flowing grace that I somehow knew could not have been created by the culture to which I was accustomed. I sensed that it was the product of a certain faith, a certain belief and habit of mind from which I knew I was excluded at that time by virtue of the place I had chosen to be. It was as though 'Our Lady was saying to me: 'I am here to call you to the place where I am truly honoured'.

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