

There are plenty of homeless, of naked and poor, of sick and lonely, of hungry and thirsty in our country, their number increases daily. Who will speak for them? Christ is King but his subjects are silent? Christ needs hands but who will work for him? Christ needs feet but who will walk for him? If our national greatness is founded on this level of misery it is less than worthless. In our country we have dethroned Christ; greed is king, selfishness and ambition are his ministers, and Christ begs in our streets.

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Twenty-five Years On: A Catholic Commemoration of Karl Barth

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Karl Barth was born in Basle in 1886, the descendant of a long line of Swiss Protestant pastors and burghers, who included in their ranks Jacob Burckhardt, the historian of the Italian Renaissance. His family were patricians and devotees of music and the arts, but they also had a simple devotion to Jesus. In the biography of Barth written, on the basis of his autobiographical essays and letters, by his last academic assistant, Eberhard Busch, we hear that Barth's earliest theological formation came from religious nursery-rhymes in the Basle dialect. His subsequent theological pilgrimage can be seen as a flight from, and then return to, the religious assurance of these children's songs - albeit in an infinitely more sophisticated manner. As he himself wrote, these songs

were the textbook from which I received my first theological instruction in a form which was appropriate for my immature years. What made an indelible impression on me was the homely self-

assurance with which these unpretentious verses spoke of the events of Christmas, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, as though they could have taken place that very morning in Basle or nearby, like any other exciting event. History? Doctrine? Dogma? Myth? No. It was all things actually taking place. You could see everything for yourself, listen to it, and take it to heart by hearing one of these songs sung in the language you were hearing elsewhere and beginning to speak. Holding your mother's hand, you went to the stable in Bethlehem, along the streets of Jerusalem into which the Saviour was making his entry, hailed by children of your own age. You climbed the grim hill of Golgotha and walked in Joseph's garden at daybreak . . . Was it all rather naive? Indeed, it was very naive, but perhaps the deepest wisdom, with its fullest force, lies in naivety, and this kind of wisdom, once gained, can carry a man over whole oceans of historicism and anti-historicism, mysticism and rationalism, orthodoxy, liberalism, and existentialism. He certainly will not be spared trial and temptation, but in the end he will be brought back relatively unscathed to firm ground.¹

In 1904, Barth matriculated in the theology faculty at Berne. His teachers belonged overwhelmingly to the school of Friedrich Schleiermacher, with whom Barth was to have a love-hate relationship for the rest of his life. Schleiermacher's theology was characteristic of the Romantic period in European and especially German thought. It combined a post-Kantian anthropocentrism of the thinking subject with a stress on religious experience and its immediacy. Barth was instructed that the religious consciousness, seen as an empirical fact, was 'the keyhole through which we could peer into the transcendent'. As he later remarked:

In my Berne semester, I was earnestly told, and I learnt all that could be said against the 'old orthodoxy' . . . and that all God's ways begin with Kant and, if possible, must also end there.²

With the considerable financial resources of his family behind him, Barth was fortunate enough to be able to travel a good deal during his student period, and did the Edwardian version of 'accumulating credits' at various German-speaking universities. At Berlin he heard Adolf von Harnack, the formidably erudite liberal historian of dogma; Herman Gunkel, the pioneer of form criticism; and Wilhelm Hermann, a classic liberal systematician who held that Christ's life is only relevant to us insofar as it possesses ethical value. At Tübingen (in the Protestant faculty, of course) he listened to Adolf Schlatter, a more conservative figure who insisted on the grounding of systematic theology in exegesis,

and opposed all Idealist reinterpretations of Christianity. At Marburg, he encountered Rudolf Bultmann, his senior by two years, as well as some of the founding figures of German Christian socialism, whose message, anticipating contemporary liberation theology, was: 'God is meeting men today in socialism'.

In 1908 Barth was ordained as a minister of the Swiss Reformed Church and in 1909 took up his first assistant pastorate, in Geneva. A lecture given in 1910 and entitled 'Der christliche Glaube und die Geschichte' survives from this early period,³ and offers insight into how he understood revelation, faith and dogmatic theology, after his exposure to the liberal masters of Wilhelmine Germany. According to Busch, this lecture contained in a nutshell all the main features of Barth's theology at this time. It is marked by a fierce polemic against the 'orthodox' understanding of faith as the entertaining of certain propositions as true, a view for which he even attacks the Reformers. He defines faith in terms of 'inner experience', an experience which has its ground—but not its object—in the inner life of Jesus of Nazareth. He constantly refers to Kant and Schleiermacher as authorities, and indeed to Goethe and Schiller as such. He treats St Francis of Assisi, Michelangelo and Beethoven as 'sources of revelation' worthy to be placed alongside St Paul. He welcomes the sixteenth century Lutheran Philip Melancthon's exclusive stress on the *beneficia Christi*, the 'benefits of Christ'—not what Christ is in himself, but what he does for us. He sees faith as what he called 'the actualisation of the possibilities of consciousness given in the *a priori* functions'—that is, a specially heightened awareness brought about by the fullest possible development of the basic structure of human subjectivity. In 1911 he became pastor of a small town in Aargau canton where he would remain for ten years. The key words in his sermons of this period are 'life', 'experience', 'sincerity'. In 1935, now famous, he would return to the parish to ask forgiveness of the parishioners for feeding them with such a diet in place of the Gospel of Jesus as Son of God, and as Christ crucified.

In 1912, Barth's father died, and, by his own confession, only after this event could he begin to understand what his father—an orthodox Calvinist of the old school—really stood for. He tells us that in a psycho-analytic conversation with a cousin of C. G. Jung in 1915, 'a splendid father-complex was brought to light'.⁴ More important still in sparking off Barth's disassociation from theological liberalism was the outbreak of the First World War. It was not just that the barbarism of the War called into question the optimistic, developmental, humanist assumptions of late nineteenth-century Christian liberalism. What especially shocked Barth was that on 1 August 1914, namely, the day

war broke out, ninety-three German intellectuals issued a manifesto endorsing it. It turned out that almost all his German teachers had signed, including Harnack and Hermann. Barth was stunned. He drew the conclusion from what he called their 'ethical failure' that their 'exegetical and dogmatic presuppositions could not be in order'. Thus, in his own words:

a whole world of exegesis, ethics, dogmatics and preaching, which I had hitherto held to be essentially trustworthy, was shaken to its foundations, and with it all the other writings of the German theologians.⁵

In November 1914, Barth gave a lecture in Basle entitled 'Wartime and the Kingdom of God'. In it he stressed that the Christian hope derives not from man but from God. His first theological disciple, Eduard Thurneysen, whose correspondence with Barth constitutes one of the best sources for an understanding of his development, suggested to him the phrase that would become the clarion-call of his early theology. What we need, he told Barth, is a 'wholly other theological foundation'. Barth began an intensive study of the Letter to the Romans, always a central New Testament text for theologians in the churches of the Reformation. The message of Romans was that God's Kingdom creates something totally new in this world. It is a divine eruption into history, abruptly changing its direction in an unforeseeable way, overturning the value-systems of the human beings who inhabit history. By contrast, in the theological world of Protestantism of the time:

Everything had always been settled without God. God was always thought to be good enough to put the crowning touch to what men began of their own accord.⁶

In 1919 Barth published the first edition of his commentary on Romans. At Marburg, Adolf Jülicher compared its author to Marcion; Bultmann dismissed the book as 'enthusiastic revivalism', and from Berlin Harnack complained that Barth reminded him of Thomas Münzer, the fanatical Anabaptist preacher whose attempted religious and social revolution led to his execution in 1525 at the end of the Peasants' Revolt.

In the course of 1920, Barth re-thought his work, not so much in the light of these criticisms as in conscious opposition to their fountainhead, Schleiermacher. Developing the speculative gift that was increasingly to characterise his thought, Barth proposed that the divine 'Yes' to fallen man and his rationality is hidden dialectically in the form of a 'No'. In

other words, whereas fallen man and post-lapsarian rationality retain elements of good, this can only be seen aright from within the acceptance of divine judgment. In 1922, the second edition of Barth's commentary on Romans appeared. This time, Barth was especially concerned that his message should not be mistaken for a general pessimism about human culture, or, even more trivially, the rebellion of a new generation against their theological mentors. The theological revolution Barth was calling for amounted, rather, to the demand that theology should be concerned with God, and God in his independent sovereignty vis-à-vis man, and especially *homo religiosus*, 'religious man'.⁷ In one of his last books, *The Humanity of God*, Barth would write:

Almost all along the line, at any rate in all its representative figures and trends, [Protestant theology] had become religionist and thus anthropocentric; in this sense it had become humanist. For this theology, to think of God means to think, in a scarcely veiled fashion, about man, and especially about religious man, the Christian religious man. To speak of God means to speak in an exalted tone, but once again—and more than ever!—about this man: his revelations and wonders, his faith and his works. There is no question about it: here man is made great at the cost of God.⁸

In this second edition of *Der Römerbrief*, Barth stressed negative definitions of God and his revelation. The true character of faith, doctrine, worship, the Church, is, he insisted, that of a 'crater formed by an explosion'. In revealing himself, so far from putting the finishing touch to human equilibrium, God throws man into crisis. This book, more coherent, intellectually, than its predecessor, brought into being a school often called that of 'dialectical theology' or the 'theology of crisis'. Barth became immediately famous, and was offered the newly founded Chair of Reformed Theology in the (Lutheran) University of Göttingen, a chair paid for (as it happens) by American Presbyterians.

Barth's task at Göttingen was to lecture on Reformed dogmatics. For the first time, he became aware of himself as a Reformed, that is, a Calvinist, writer. Though he disliked Zwingli, whom he described as 'simply the familiar modern Protestant theology, the very image of it, with a few eggshells from the early Church thrown in',⁹ he was awed and fascinated by the late Scholastic structure of Calvin's *Institutes*, summing up their author by a set of curious metaphors as

a waterfall, a primeval forest, a demonic power, something straight down from the Himalayas, absolutely Chinese.¹⁰

From now on, the principal themes of Reformation soteriology would become increasingly dominant in Barth's work, and above all, that of the justification of the guilty sinner by the sovereign grace of the Word of God, Jesus Christ. Thus in a lecture of 1923 he said:

The true Christian Church is the community of those who have been pardoned in judgment. Its foundation, which must constantly be recognised anew, is not human religious experience, but the divine word of revelation directed to man.¹¹

The monument of this phase of Barth's writing is the 1924 study *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*. In the year following its publication he was made professor of dogmatics at Münster. There Harnack became reconciled with him, advising him that, if he proposed to write a dogmatic theology, it should bear the title 'The life of the children of God'. Though the remark encapsulated much of what Barth disliked about Harnack's theology, he kept the title for the section of his *Summa Theologiae*, the *Church Dogmatics*, where he discusses life in the Holy Spirit as man's Redeemer. Also at Münster, he got to know Catholic theology, since Münster had a Catholic faculty, and was indeed historically a Catholic city. He began work on an evaluation of Protestant theology from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Albrecht Ritschl, in which he intended to settle his debts with the liberal tradition.¹² The section on Schleiermacher is especially important for a grasp of Barth's concept of theology. The Romantic theology was, he concluded:

an attempt to make religion, revelation, and the relations between God and man comprehensible as a predicate of man.¹³

In 1927, Barth published his first sketch for a dogmatics, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, which revealed that the theologian of crisis had now become a Christocentric theologian through and through. He wrote:

I had to change my own learning a second time. I simply could not hold on to the theoretical and practical *diastasis* [distance] between God and man on which I had insisted at the time of *Romans* without sacrificing it . . . I had to understand Jesus Christ and bring him from the periphery of my thought into the centre.¹⁴

This sketch for dogmatics announces by its plan a fundamental feature of the mature Barth's *magnum opus*, the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*.¹⁵ Its prolegomena to theology are totally different from what was

customary. In place of discussing the general presuppositions of Christian belief in terms of the philosophy and psychology of religion, a Protestant version of the Catholic *preambula fidei*, Barth's prolegomena were what he called a 'doctrine of the Word of God'. That is, they set forth certain major principles extracted from the body of dogmatics itself, and did so in a way calculated to illuminate the entire theological enterprise. Barth's theological prolegomena are chiefly composed of his doctrine of the Trinity, which he also regards as a doctrine of the Lordship of God. (In fact, we can say without too much exaggeration that to understand how anyone could regard trinitarian theology as the only possible introduction to theology is to have understood Barth's concept of what theology is.)

In the same year, 1927, Barth gave an address to the German Student Federation on 'theology and modern man'. In this biting piece, he spoke polemically of three dangers facing 'modern man' as he looked at that wholly other truth which theology studies. And these dangers were, first, that one might reject that truth directly—the way of atheism; secondly, that one might try to defuse it, which was worse—the way of liberalism; and thirdly, that one might try to control it, the worst reaction of all—the way of Catholicism. (It was to meet such criticisms that *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution of the Second Vatican Council on Divine Revelation, remarks of the Church's teaching authority that 'it is not above the Word of God, but serves it'.¹⁶) At the same time, Barth was increasingly vocal in his opposition to Bultmann and his existentialist concept of theology. For Barth, Bultmann had dissolved dogmatics into ethics, thanks to his use of the crucial category of 'decision'. To Barth's eyes, the subject of theological ethics could only be the Word of God himself, as making claims upon man.

In 1930, Barth succeeded to the chair of systematics at Bonn, replacing Otto Ritschl, the son of Albert, a distinctly Schleiermacherian father whose Christology married historical-critical investigation of a 'phenomenon' to an investigation of the Christian's inner—largely ethical—experience. Barth also visited England and decided (quite correctly) that the English were hopeless Pelagians. At this time, he was writing a study of St Anselm of Canterbury, on which, so he said, he lavished more loving care than on all the rest of his books put together. The Anselm book is important for two reasons.¹⁷ The first is Barth's acceptance of Anselm's definition of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*. As J. D. Godsey commented, by way of summary of the lessons Barth learned from the black monk master:

By the grace of God faithful reason is enabled to penetrate into the object of faith and thus to participate, in a way limited by creatureliness, in God's own mode of being. To be sure, God as the object of faith's quest for knowledge remains unalterably subject, in all incomprehensibility, yet in the gracious gift of himself in Jesus Christ he becomes an 'object' to us. In and through the 'secondary objectivity' of Jesus is mirrored the triune Being of God as he is known to himself alone. Without ceasing to be God, and thus being for us exactly as he is in himself, he makes it possible for the man of obedient faith to know him truly in the form of this particular being.¹⁸

Theology is a highly rational task, for, in prayer and humility, it seeks to think through the Truth of God in the light of that Truth's own self-disclosure. The second discovery Barth made was that between the Fathers and the Reformers were other theological doctors with whom he could identify. Barth's generous use of Latin mediaeval theology in the *Church Dogmatics* would draw on him the accusation of crypto-Catholicism, despite his severe criticisms of the understanding of created nature, of justification and of the ecclesiastical magisterium, found in the Church of Rome.

Part One of the *Church Dogmatics* saw the light of day in 1932. Barth wrote of it that he wanted to re-say everything which he had said hitherto by re-expressing it as a theology of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. His swing into line with the Reformation in the 1920's had not brought him to a finally satisfactory position. Though he continued to regard the Reformers as doctors of the Church, on a par with the Fathers and the mediaeval schoolmen, he could no longer rest content with simply rehearsing their theology. In his own words:

I soon saw it that it was also necessary to continue it, to arrange the relationship of law and Gospel, nature and grace, election and Christology, and even between philosophy and theology, more exactly, and thus differently, from the patterns which I found in the sixteenth century. Since I could not become an orthodox 'Calvinist', I had even less desire to support a Lutheran confessionalism.¹⁹

Despite the intricately systematic character of the nine thousand pages of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Barth himself refused to call it a work of 'systematic' theology. He said:

There is a very problematical tradition behind the combination of this noun and this adjective. . . . A 'system' is a pattern of thought

constructed on the basis of a number of concepts chosen in accordance with the criteria of a particular philosophy and developed in accordance with a method appropriate to it. But theology cannot be done within the confines, and under the pressure, of such a strait-jacket. The subject of theology is the history of the dealings of God with man and of man with God . . . which are expressed in the testimony of the Old and New Testaments and in which the message of the Christian Church has its origin and content. Understood in this sense, the subject of theology is the 'Word of God'. Theology is the research and teaching which knows that, in the choice of its approaches, in its questions and answers, its concepts and its language, its aims and its limits, it is responsible to the living command of the Word of God—and to no other human authority in heaven or on earth. To this extent, theology is free—because it is grounded in the sovereign freedom of the Word of God and the discipline which is governed by it. For that very reason it is not 'systematic theology'.

However, Barth insisted that theology should always be 'dogmatic'. He wrote:

As 'dogmatics', theology takes its bearing from the witness of the Old Testament and the New. It is concerned to demonstrate the truth of the message which has always been proclaimed by the Christian Church and has to be proclaimed again today. It tests what has been recognised as this truth in accordance with public and individual testimony from past and present, namely, dogmas. And today, as at any other time, it again seeks the truth from which the proclamation of the Christian Church derives, which illumines that Church and by which the Church is measured: theology seeks *the* dogma.²⁰

Barth did not finish the *Church Dogmatics* in Germany. In 1933, with Adolf Hitler's accession to the German Chancellorship, there began a remorseless pressure on the Christian churches to come into line with the policies of the Third Reich. In July of that year, Hitler concluded a concordat with the Catholic Church whereby (in effect) the internal liberty of the Church was secured in return for her acquiescence in the destruction of German Catholicism's outer expression, the Catholic Centre Party. In the same month, the German Evangelical Church accepted a new constitution in which its leading bishop received the new, and ominous, title *Reichsbischof*: 'Bishop for the Reich'. In October, Barth went to Berlin and denounced the so-called German-Christian or patriotic movement as 'the last, most vital, most consummate form of the great neo-Protestant infidelity to the

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Reformation'. Throughout 1934 he organised opposition to Hitler's influence within the Protestant community, a movement of resistance which culminated in the Barmen Declaration of May 1934, the charter of a 'Confessing Church' over against the *Reichskirche* of the German-Christians. On 7 November he publicly refused the prescribed oath to the Führer which all academics were obliged to take. On 20 December he was dismissed and returned to Basle where he would live for the rest of his life. There in a more tranquil situation, but still a controversial figure, he would bring the *Church Dogmatics* to its conclusion.

One major task remained to Barth, however, before the great reaper scythed him down on 10 December, 1968 —and that was his contribution to the Second Vatican Council. More precisely, it was his contribution to the *reception*, of that Council: the alerting of Catholic churchmen to possible imbalances and dangers, as well as the encouragement to persevere in all that was truly healthful, salutary, in the conciliar reform. As Barth explains in his memoir, *Ad limina apostolorum*, he was too ill to accept the invitation, at the Council's opening, to attend its sessions as an official 'observer'.²¹ But in May 1966, in the Council's aftermath, he asked if he might go to Rome nevertheless, in order to discuss what he had missed the opportunity to hear. He spent the summer studying the sixteen conciliar documents (in the Latin originals), and on 22 September set out on his mission.

In Rome, Barth met the representatives of the principal conciliar *Tendenzen*: both curialists like Ottaviani and Parente (of the Holy Office) and Bea (of the Secretariat for Christian Unity), and theological *periti* such as Rahner and Ratzinger. Received by Pope Paul, he noted in discreet, respectful, yet touchingly fraternal terms the apparent joylessness to which his consciousness of the burden of the primatial office, in a time of Church crisis, had reduced him.

If I, on my part, had opportunity to wish him something, it would be a greater measure of 'cheerful confidence' (*parrhesia*) in relation to those inner tensions in his Church which in part made the Council necessary and in part are the result of the Council.²²

Of the seven general questions Barth put to his hosts, no less than five centre on one preoccupation: the menace of an overtaking of the Church by the world. With the clarity which sympathetic distance provides, Barth identified the temptation of the hour. In reaction against a 'fortress Church', its face set against the 'godless' character of modern civilisation, Catholics might exchange the Church's bearing of the Gospel for a mere benign accompanying of those movements in culture

and society which seem (or seemed) most hopeful for natural flourishing. Thus Barth asked: 'What does *aggiornamento* mean? Accommodation to what? (Question 3); 'Was the main concern [of the Council] a renewal of the Church's theoretical and practical understanding of itself in the light of the revelation on which it is founded — or a renewal of her thinking, speaking, and acting today in the light of the modern world? (Question 4); 'If [the answer to the last question is] both, in the interests of the pastoral task, which was it *primarily*?' (Question 5); 'On which of these two types of renewal will the stress be placed in the period after the Council?' (Question 6); 'Are the adherents of the "progressive" majority of the Council who opt for the latter [i.e. accommodation to what appears the best of the modern world, and its characteristic thought processes] aware of the danger that this might result in an undesired repetition of the errors committed in modern Protestantism?' (Question 7). Though many of Barth's more particularised comments on the conciliar texts are predictable, coming from one who remained by and large committed to Reformation doctrine, he returns again and again to this more personal, and vividly expressed, anxiety that the 'spiritual movement taking place in Rome', which he did not hesitate to acclaim as 'a reorganization around the Gospel', might be jeopardised by a secret canker at its heart. So, for instance, of *Gaudium et Spes* he asked, with academic dryness:

Does the thorough optimism of the Constitution over the possibilities of the development of the world correspond to the emphases of the Synoptic Gospels and the Letters of Paul?

Or, in plainer speech:

Is it so certain that dialogue with the world is to be placed ahead of proclamation to the world?²³

Were these questions seeds which sprouted in the fertile theological brain of a young Bavarian theologian, Joseph Ratzinger? If so, the ground was already well prepared, for these are the very themes of his own critique of the Council's final session, published in the year of Barth's visit.²⁴ But who could suppose that this dawning conviction that priorities had somehow got displaced was not confirmed by that meeting with an old man—the octogenarian who had taken on, and seen off, not only the academically entrenched forces of theological liberalism, but also, in Hitler, the most potent threat this century to the Church of the West from a culture at once atheistic and Promethean, where the only God is man? A 'Catholic commemoration' of Karl Barth may be more

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apposite to *Catholic* history than we might think.

- 1 E. Busch, *Karl Barth. His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (London 1976), pp. 8–9. Cited as ‘Busch’.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 3 In *Schweizer Theologische Zeitschrift* (1912), pp. 70–72.
- 4 Cited Busch, p. 68.
- 5 Cited *ibid.*, p. 81.
- 6 Cited *ibid.*, p. 99.
- 7 E. C. Hoskyns (tr.), *Karl Barth. The Epistle to the Romans* (London 1933).
- 8 *The Humanity of God* (Et. London 1956), p. 42.
- 9 Cited Busch, p. 142.
- 10 Cited *ibid.*, p. 138.
- 11 Cited *ibid.*, p. 150.
- 12 *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert. Ihre Vorgeschichte und ihre Geschichte (Zollikon 1947); Et Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century. Its Background and History* (London 1972).
- 13 Cited Busch, p. 169.
- 14 A remark made in an autobiographical fragment, the 1964 *Selbstdarstellung*, preserved in the Barth Archives in Basle.
- 15 *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* (1932–1967); Et. *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh 1936–1981).
- 16 *Dei Verbum*, 10.
- 17 *Fides quaerens intellectum. Anselms Beweis der Existenz Gottes* (Munich 1931); Et. *Anselm. Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (Richmond, Virginia 1961).
- 18 J. D. Godsey, ‘God-Talk in Neo-Orthodoxy’, *American Ecclesiastical Review* 167. 7 (1973), p. 494.
- 19 From *Selbstdarstellung* (see n. 14 above).
- 20 From an unpublished (German) draft of a preface to the English edition of *Dogmatik im Grundriss* of 1947.
- 21 *Ad limina apostolorum* (Et. Edinburgh 1969), p. 9.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 24 J. Ratzinger, *Die letzte Sitzungsperiode des Konzils* (Cologne 1966); cf. A. Nichols, OP., *The Theology of Joseph Ratzinger. An Introductory Study* (Edinburgh 1988), pp. 99–103.