

For Staunton, Becket remains something of a puzzle: ‘Thomas defies definition, and his true character will always elude us’. Counter-intuitively, this is not on account of a dearth of sources for the multi-layered archbishop; if Thomas defies definition, Staunton concludes, ‘this may be simply because we know too much about him’ (p. 182).

Erudite, and written with pace and clarity, Michael Staunton’s *Thomas Becket* will inform and delight all who are interested in the medieval world. Staunton’s biography, above all, offers us a Thomas who, throughout his life, remained an enigma – perhaps even to himself.

Being Before God: Cornelio Fabro, Thomism, and Søren Kierkegaard’s Theology.

By Joshua Furnal. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2025. Pp. 400. Price \$80.00 (hbk). ISBN 9780268209872.

Reviewed by: Fáinche Ryan, Trinity College Dublin

Being before God: Cornelio Fabro, Thomism, and Søren Kierkegaard’s Theology is a great title. ‘Being before God’ is precisely what links the three interlocutors – Thomas Aquinas, Søren Kierkegaard and Cornelio Fabro. All three ask questions about God, and what it is be created by God, and to be a ‘being’ with Being. The title seems to posit Thomism as a link – ‘Being Before God: Cornelio Fabro, Thomism, and Søren Kierkegaard’. While I don’t think anyone will disagree that Fabro read Aquinas, and that his reading had a strong influence on his thinking . . . there is pause for thought to see the name of Søren Kierkegaard linked to Aquinas. Apparently Kirkegaard makes mention of Aquinas about six times in his writings, and all these in his journals. So, what has Kierkegaard to do with Thomas?

Cornelio Fabro is the key thinker, the linkage figure throughout. While Cornelio Fabro is known in international scholarship for his work on the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas, particularly for his work on participation, Fabro’s studies on Kierkegaard remain to date virtually unknown outside of Italy. This meticulously researched book goes a long way toward addressing that lacuna. Importantly we learn of the great scholarship of translation that Fabro has done by his commitment to translate Kierkegaard’s work from Danish to Italian. In today’s world of AI translation tools, the importance of scholarship in translation is even more acute.

In the opening first chapter we learn:

One night in mid-February, Fabro woke with an insight he received through what he described as a ‘speculative dream’: ‘One night, perhaps shaken by latent restlessness, I awoke with a jolt and was struck by a thought that seemed to me **very simple yet radical**: the ultimate critical formulation of the principle of causality could be nothing other than what St Thomas expresses as the first and radical ‘dependence’ of the creature on the Creator.

Immediately, I got up and ran to the table still in my pajamas; I opened the *Summa Theologica* to *prima pars*, question 44, article 1: ‘Whether it is necessary that every being be created by God?’ And I read the response: ‘it must be said that every being [*ens*] in whatever way it is

existing [*quocumque modo est*], is from God [*a Deo esse*]. For whatever is found in anything by participation [*per participationem*], must be caused in it by that to which it belongs essentially, as iron becomes ignited by fire.' Eureka! It was the text that was written for me. I threw myself into all the other works finding the similar places in the *Commentary on the Sentences* all the way until the later *Quodlibetales* (I, III, XV . . .) and the remarkable unfinished opusculum *De substantiis separatis*, where I discovered that the metaphysical notion of participation always became more explicit and dominant not only for the demonstration of creation, but also for the other forms of radical dependence. (pp. 18, 19)

Anyone who gets up in their pyjamas to read the *Summa* must be worth attending to! And more importantly to find a thinker, a philosophical theologian, or a theological philosopher, whichever term one prefers, who centres matters on God is refreshing. The phrase 'very simple yet radical' is arrestingly profound.

This opening chapter of the book proceeds to give a wonderful exposé of the person, Cornelio Fabro. He was born near Udine, northern Italy in 1911 and died in Rome in 1995. Fabro became a priest of the Stigmatine Order and spent most of his life as an academic philosopher-theologian. He lived through two world wars and experienced much of the academic angst and turmoil many of us are all too familiar with.

Fabro (who interestingly founded an Institute for Higher Studies on Unbelief, Religion and Cultures) is best known for his attention to the concept of 'participation' in Aquinas's metaphysics, born out of his 'speculative dream' described above. He grounded causality metaphysically in Aquinas's notion of participated existence. The reasoning is fundamental. Existence comes from God; God simply is; God's *esse* is God's existence. Creation then is the composite of existing being (*ens*), essence (*essentia*) and participated to-be, *esse per participatum*. For Aquinas, in creation created beings are beings by participation, *esse per participationem*. In this way of thinking he asserts a real radical non-reciprocal dependence on God, *esse per essentiam*. Quite simply God is not an item in the universe. To be God is to be **God's own to-be** (p. 47). God resists categorization.

For Aquinas this is the heart of theology. It is in this participation of radical dependent relation of creation on God, the totally other transcendent Creator, that Fabro situates the theological questions of existence and freedom. The categorizable finite receives its being from the unreceived Infinite. Furnal argues that Fabro's 'Thomistic approach to Kierkegaard' and the Kierkegaardian approach to Thomas 'is of one piece' (p. 53). Kierkegaard was not a scholar of Aquinas, but like Aquinas he sought God, Truth. There are multiple paths toward the one Truth, one destiny for all who seek God.

On p. 48, Furnal introduces a wonderful quote from Fabro's Mercier lectures, a remark which he comments 'brings the history of Thomism to a halt' –

The infinity that in God is called Being and in the creature is called nothing, expresses what Kierkegaard called the 'infinite qualitative difference' between God and the creature: this difference finds its fulfillment in the theoretical expression of the Thomistic distinction between essential and *esse* expressed through the notion of participation, which comports the total dependence of the creature upon God, thanks to the emergence of *esse* on which creation is founded.

This quotation strongly underpins the argument that 'Thomistic participation can be juxtaposed to Kierkegaard's infinite qualitative difference by emphasizing the

metaphysical structure of creaturehood with the distinction of essence and *esse* in the composition of concrete becoming of an existing entity (*ens*), which is reducible to participated being (*esse*) as free creation from nothing' (p. 48).

There are two chapters whose titles were of particular interest to me. Chapter Six, entitled 'Untying knots' where Furnal sought to explore ecumenical aspects of Kierkegaard's theology, and Chapter Seven, named 'Reconsidering Kierkegaard's Relation to Catholicism'.

These two chapters are concerned with Kirkegaard's relationship with Catholicism; Roman Catholicism. Furnal's clearly argued position is that Kierkegaard, while in his thought and writings does indeed draw near to Catholicism in certain matters, is not justly to be judged a 'crypto-Catholic' (p. 221, n. 5). Kirkegaard gave serious attention to matters such as the fundamental question of the relation between faith and reason, and the role of Mary, to questions on discipleship and Christ, to the confusion of ethics and faith, and to ecclesiology. Johann Adam Möhler is identified by Fabro as Kierkegaard's preferred Catholic theologian. We read that 'Fabro highlighted how Kierkegaard relied on Möhler to distinguish the church's deposit of faith and tradition (*überlieferung*) from the speculative discussions of individual theologians'.

On Christian discipleship Furnal notes 'Fabro writes that "in an original way and as never before attempted in modern thought," Kierkegaard presented "the decision of being for or against Christ as the outcome of human freedom in the earthly adventure."' Furnal highlights Fabro's reclaiming by Kierkegaard of Christology for Christian discipleship. While this may seem obvious, in Fabro's time – and Kierkegaard's – and no less so in ours – the story of Christ, and that of freedom, and salvation are subject to many, perhaps too many, speculative discussions that obscure the vital centrality for discipleship. The chapter brings our attention to an article on Mary and Kirkegaard published in *L'Osservatore Romano* (8 Oct 1986). Fabro comments that 'For Kierkegaard, Mary is the paradigmatic model for every Christian disciple in her acceptance of the divine will for her. In this way, Kierkegaard renounces and denounces the central core of Protestant theology of grace and accepted, perhaps without being fully aware of it, the essence of the Catholic doctrine and especially the Thomist view of grace' (p. 195).

In addressing the question 'Was Kierkegaard a Catholic?' Fabro takes the opportunity to highlight an important point: 'The question, one can observe immediately, is entirely inopportune culturally, because to be Catholic meant having a precise position about Christianity that Kierkegaard evidently did not have . . .'. The challenge is to identify this 'precise position'. What does it mean to be Catholic? And thence to engage one's reason to deepen faith, ours and that of others. This is an ongoing challenge.

Kirkegaard is no crypto-Catholic. Fabro is critical of Kierkegaard's ecclesiology. Kierkegaard sees the Church too much as institution, insufficiently attending to the Church as Mystical Body, Communion of Saints. Helpful words for our times. Fabro notes that Kirkegaard needs to remember that the Church is an article of the Creed, and at once divine-charismatic. As Furnal comments: 'When the Church is reduced to the visible institutional defects of Christendom, the promise of Christ's enduring presence in the church as an object of faith becomes less credible' (p. 197).

Continuing on the theme of ecclesiology, attention is drawn to an article by Fabro entitled 'Il problema della Chiesa in Newman e Kirkegaard' (n. 178, 179). Furnal writes:

Fabro highlighted Kierkegaard's critique of liberal Protestant ecclesiology in the writings of Rothe and Schleiermacher. Kierkegaard resisted the view that the Church has only an episodic relevance as a historical artifact that existed prior to the advent of liberal democracy and state-sponsored nongovernmental organization and so can be replaced by ethical and political discourse. On such a view, baptism is merely an initiation into model citizenship in an ethical society'. (p. 201)

This is relevant in today's academic forum when ethics seems to flourish in our theology faculties, and in our Schools of Religion, and in Religious Studies, while classes on model citizenship and well-being compete with time allocations for religious education programmes. Baptism is *not* merely an initiation into model citizenship in an ethical society. Acting responsibly because of God has to have a radically distinct tinge to that of acting responsibly as a model citizen; overlap yes; distinct, radically so. That we continue to struggle with this question helps to mark the importance of continuing to read Fabro, and indeed Kierkegaard, in our time.

In Furnal's reading – 'For Kierkegaard, grace makes ethics irremediably difficult and relates us not to the crowd's social ethic but instead to an ecclesial existence in Christ by imitation, which is a lifelong task between Pentecost and the Final Judgement for spiritual communion with God and the saints' (p. 202). A point worth pondering.

In the chapter entitled 'Untying Knots' are found questions of death, of clericalism, of freedom, . . . and of truth, 'the dialectic of grace and freedom' before God, the imitation of Christ (p. 210). Truth is identified by Fabro as a theme running through Kierkegaard's writings – 'embodying the truth' . . . by an act of faith in free response (p. 213); existential freedom (p. 215); by works of mercy and witness to the universal availability of grace (p. 213). Kierkegaard's Christianity is dramatic and not tragic. It is an invitation to friendship with God that the Lord is calling us to. There is a clear echo of Aquinas here; yet at the same time Furnal alerts us to Kierkegaard's superficial yet explicit dismissal of Aquinas (p. 197).

In Chapter Seven, where Furnal continues to address 'Kierkegaard's Relation to Catholicism', he develops his argument that Fabro's work on Kierkegaard is not to be read as 'another catholicizing distortion of Kierkegaard'. Rather it is to be read ecumenically to further deepen understanding of Kierkegaard's view of faith. Significant differences remain between Kierkegaard and 'some precise positions about Christianity', one such being his predominantly voluntaristic view of faith as a leap of decision (p. 224).

In other overlapping thematic areas, and to speak of just one, the monastic life, Kierkegaard spoke strongly for the ongoing need for monasteries as a response to the worldliness of the world. Indeed, he argued that this monasticism, this ascetic life might be lived in the public square: 'One single ascetic walking among us preaches in a manner entirely different from 20 such speakers' transforming "Christianity from an existential communication into a doctrine." Furthermore, 'For Kierkegaard, the difficulty of willingly embracing the risk of credibility to one's character is the existential proof of authority that picks out a truth-making difference – "when the voluntary has absolutely vanished, Christianity is really abolished"' (p. 225).

Fabro convincingly argues that Kierkegaard was not an irrational fideist (a Danish Hegelian), and that his remarks on faith and reason anticipated key features of *Dei Filius*

(Vatican I, 1870). Faith is distinguished from reason, yet positively related to reason. Fabro, we read, ‘sought to situate Kierkegaard’s theology of divine revelation alongside the retrieval of doctrinal development in Vincent of Lerins and John Henry Newman and contrast Kierkegaard’s view with Schleiermacher’s nonconceptual object or Lessing’s rationalistic dissolution’. In his considerations Fabro notes that ‘Exactly like St Thomas, Kierkegaard speaks here of reason and faith as two distinct lights and distinct moments each collaborating for the same truth’ (p. 233). In this line of thinking, Kierkegaard is no fideist, no voluntarist, but is moving close to Aquinas’s position on faith and reason; as Kierkegaard wrote, the task of reason regarding the object of faith is to ‘comprehend that one cannot comprehend’.

In these ways Kierkegaard seems clearly ‘Catholic orientated’. It is astounding to discover that Kierkegaard had ‘read enthusiastically the golden compendium of medieval Christianity and the works of Tauler and St Alfonso de Liguori’. These are some of his Catholic sources on the road toward truth, in a world which Fabro sees as a ‘decisive source for a sure orientation toward the truth amid the confusion of languages that we see condemned today by the Babel of philosophies and secular messianisms’.

The search for truth is a good place to complete a review of this fine work. *Being before God* draws upon rare archival material, including many heretofore not yet translated into English, as it addresses themes of Fabro’s Thomistic approach to Kierkegaard, the Kierkegaardian aspects of Fabro’s Thomism and Kierkegaard’s relationship to Catholic theology. Furnal is successful in presenting Fabro as one of the most important European interpreters of Kierkegaard in the twentieth century. While his work on Kierkegaard remains virtually unknown outside of Italy, this meticulously researched book goes a long way toward addressing that lacuna. Joshua Furnal carefully guides the reader, chapter by chapter, with clear introductions and conclusions, along the pathway of thought of Cornelio Fabro on the works of Kierkegaard.

Desecularizing the Christian Past. By Enrico Beltramini. London: Routledge, 2025. Pp. 244. Price £45.99 (pbk). ISBN 9781041178019.

Reviewed by: John Sullivan, *Liverpool Hope University*

This is a deeply intriguing, yet also a rather frustrating book. Despite the challenges posed by some complex sentences, a tendency to be repetitive, sloppy proofreading (see below) and a few questionable claims, I found reading it has been a highly rewarding and thought-provoking experience. It provides a strong contribution to historiography, prompting careful reflection on the relationship between secular and sacred in human affairs. Sub-titled ‘Beyond R.A. Markus and the Religious-Secular Divide’, the book also offers a serious and in-depth engagement with the work of Catholic historian Robert Markus, regarding his interpretation of Augustine.

The author, who teaches at Notre Dame de Namur University, California, is well qualified in theology, history and social theory. His interdisciplinary perspective is a strength of the book, although he points out that, ‘In this book, I speak as a historian’ (p.