

BOOK REVIEW

Being Before God: Cornelio Fabro, Thomism, and Søren Kierkegaard's Theology by Joshua Furnal (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2025), xiii +361 pp.

Joshua Furnal's extraordinarily interesting and meticulously researched book is at once focused and wide-angled. It is focused insofar as it brings attention to one of the major Thomist philosophers of the twentieth century, Cornelio Fabro, who in the mid-twentieth century not only critically engaged Kierkegaard in his elaboration of a form of Thomism that went beyond the still dominant Neoscholastic variety, but marshalled the Danish philosopher's writings on human existence and freedom not only against the conceptualism and essentialism of the modern age from Descartes to Hegel, but also against atheistic humanism that oftentimes shamelessly invoked his name. The book is wide-angled in that the concern with Fabro is part of a larger project on how Catholic thinkers can both responsibly and productively negotiate with Kierkegaard's thought, in a way that serves their interests of revitalizing Catholic thought and extending the vocabulary of objection against secular modernity, with its inbuilt immanentist and atheistic defaults. The outline of this larger project was laid out in Furnal's first book, *Catholic Theology after Kierkegaard* (2015), where he dealt with a wide range of Catholic thinkers influenced by Kierkegaard. Fabro is one of these Catholic thinkers, with the final chapter of that book exclusively devoted to him. Still, Theodore Haecker (1879-1945), who translated Kierkegaard into German, Jean Wahl (1888-1974), who translated Kierkegaard into French, and major Catholic thinkers of the twentieth century such as Romano Guardini, Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Erich Przywara, and Benedict XVI are discussed, even if perhaps the last word has not been said on any. Still, even in the earlier book it is clear that Fabro is at the very least first among equals. Here in *Being Before God* he is both representative of the larger Catholic conversation with Kierkegaard and entirely unique. If Fabro is representative, it is that he shows that as a committed Christian philosopher he can engage and enlist Kierkegaard for purposes of revitalizing Catholic thought while adhering to the Church's commitment to the compatibility of faith and reason, the truth of doctrine, and the necessity of the Church, while gaining a formidable and rhetorically versatile ally in the battle with secular modernity. Fabro, however, is also unique among the Catholic thinkers in that he is a major scholar and translator of Kierkegaard, and also the one most committed to Aquinas as providing the central philosophical plank of the Catholic tradition. Guardini, de Lubac, and Balthasar are not quite so committed, even if for each Aquinas remains a Catholic ineluctable. The closest comparison in the Catholic fold perhaps would be Przywara, but even with him, however prominent Aquinas is, at the very most he shares equal billing with Augustine and Newman.

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The very first page of a book made up of seven substantive chapters, as well as an introduction and conclusion, makes clear what Furnal believes to be the main task of *Being Before God*, that is, demonstrating how Kierkegaard's existential philosophy counter-intuitively calls for a Thomistic metaphysical frame focused on *creatio ex nihilo* offered by Fabro, while Fabro's enlisting of Kierkegaard's existential philosophy both serves to stave off the essentialism the Italian Thomist sees present in Neoscholastic versions of Aquinas and doubles down on the battle with modern immanentism and atheism. This thesis is argued throughout the remainder of the text with marvelous skill, encyclopedic knowledge of Fabro's work, very little of which has been translated, and a compendious knowledge of Kierkegaard's oeuvre and the commentary tradition. Throughout, Furnal is even-handed in terms of the presentation of the evidence. He acknowledges, while also seeming to support, the two main textual decisions made by Fabro for the purpose of dialogue with Thomism that might be disputed by some mainline scholars of Kierkegaard and almost all of his post-modern appropriators who are far more interested in Kierkegaard's rhetorical virtuosity and his mask: (1) the priority of the non-pseudonymous works over the pseudonymous works in Kierkegaard's corpus; (2) the supporting interpretive conviction that the non-pseudonymous works provide the telos of the pseudonymous works.

In terms of what I take to be the synthetic aim of the text, the first three chapters of *Being Before God* are largely preparatory insofar as they provide, in line with chapter 5 of *Catholic Theology after Kierkegaard*, an account, especially in chapters 2 and 3, of the texts of Kierkegaard—largely the non-pseudonymous texts and the journals (which Fabro translated into Italian)—that were of particular interest to the Italian Thomist, as well as outline major Kierkegaardian themes such as subjectivity, the relation of faith and history, infinite qualitative difference, and paradox, among others. Chapter 1 offers a brief biographical introduction to a Catholic philosopher, fascinated with Kierkegaard, who at the time of Vatican II would have needed no introduction, but whose light now shines far less brightly in the Catholic world. If remembered at all, Fabro is remembered for his pioneering work on Aquinas and analogy wherein, as with Przywara, analogy is an overarching rather than regional category and where analogy is thought of in metaphysical rather than in epistemological or linguistic terms. Given my decision to highlight the more synthetic dimension of *Being Before God*, I will focus my remarks on chapters 4–6.

In chapter 4, “Fabro's Thomistic Approach to Kierkegaard's Fundamental Theology,” Furnal presents an argument as to why Fabro is attracted to Kierkegaard's existential Christian thought and even more deliberately how Kierkegaard's existential Christian thought is sufficiently hospitable to the broad Thomist tradition not only to be seen to support the Catholic view of the compatibility of faith and reason, but also to admit of being assimilated by a Thomistic grammar of creation from nothing and finite participation, enriching and developing this Thomistic grammar in a dynamic, existential key. In order, however, to get a conversation going beyond these different—apparently even antithetical thinkers—two shibboleths concerning the interpretation of Kierkegaard have to be addressed and dispatched. The first is that Kierkegaard's thought is through and through fideistic. Throughout chapter 4 Furnal demonstrates that while Fabro underscores Kierkegaard's anti-rationalism, he refuses the attribution of fideism (84). Rather, for Fabro, Kierkegaard supports a

dialectical relation between faith and reason in which faith is not so much the contrary of reason as above it. Fabro finds a basis for refuting the charge of fideism in what superficially would appear to be its strongest link, that is, Kierkegaard's commitment to "Truth is Subjectivity" as a fundamental principle (123-25). Everything hangs on how this proposition is interpreted. While doubtless in the history of its interpretation in general, and not simply in existentialist circles, the proposition has been understood to support the individual's construction of meaning and intelligibility, Fabro is convinced that this is just the opposite of the true meaning of the proposition, which is that truth appropriates or expropriates the subject and constitutes it in reference to it. The subject is correlative to truth rather than truth correlative to the subject.

The second shibboleth to be overcome is that Kierkegaard's thought is devoid of metaphysical inclination. According to Furnal, Fabro adduces as evidence to the contrary Kierkegaard's enthusiasm for Aristotle (111-15) which, if most transparent in pseudonymous works such as *Philosophical Fragments* (1846) and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1847), nonetheless point forward to the non-pseudonymous texts that begin to appear as early as 1847. From Aristotle, according to Fabro, Kierkegaard inherited a metaphysical realism that provided the base for his dynamic existential Christianity, though it goes without saying that Kierkegaard's Christianity decisively recalibrated it (120). Furnal further specifies each of Fabro's two main points of connection between Kierkegaard and Aquinas. Fabro bolsters his argument that at a fundamental level Kierkegaard remains open to reason, despite granting functional priority to faith, by pointing to Kierkegaard's sympathetic reading of Adolph Helfferich's two-volume anthology of Christian mysticism, especially the large section by Hugh of Saint Victor devoted to the relation between faith and reason (100-01). In addition, on the basis of establishing a metaphysical minimum in Kierkegaard, Fabro is convinced that he has added an important ally in his Thomistic critique of Hegel's speculative monism and skepticism's elevation of point of view, and, perhaps just as importantly, demonstrated that Kierkegaard's existential Christian thought both can and should be assimilated by a form of Thomism anxious to avoid the debilitating abstraction and functional essentialism of Neo-Scholasticism.

Chapter 5, "The Passion of Devotion: Juxtaposing Kierkegaard's Theology of Creation and Faith," is pivotal for Furnal's account of Fabro's argument for the principled compatibility of Aquinas and Kierkegaard. Its basic thesis is stated clearly at the outset: "My wider point is that Fabro unearthed a structural feature in Kierkegaard's theological approach to free creation from nothing, human subjectivity, suffering, and freedom that mapped on to Fabro's philosophical theology of participation" (130). This thesis is specified further when it is noted that Aquinas's participative grammar concerns infinite and finite freedom, as well as infinite and finite existence (135; also 259). Crucially, whether the register is that of existence or freedom, the relationship between the creator and created is one of asymmetrical dependence. To properly understand this point is to grasp the entailment that the relationship between creator and created is intrinsically non-competitive. Indeed, only a God who is absolutely omnipotent (and good) could release into existence a finite being whose independence is precisely a function of her dependence. While the mapping between Kierkegaard and Aquinas works reasonably well in the case of the pseudonymous works, Furnal reiterates a point he made as early as the Introduction about

Fabro's reading of Kierkegaard, that is, that the mapping works best when we consider Kierkegaard's non-pseudonymous works and his journals (132-33; 135). Now, on Furnal's account, it is crucial to Fabro that there is a genuine mutuality between Aquinas's philosophical theology and Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism that assists in elevating both. Aquinas helps Kierkegaard by providing a more comprehensive metaphysical staging area than Aristotle, who makes the link possible in the first instance, and correlatively, Kierkegaard enriches Aquinas's metaphysical scheme in and through his anthropology whose telos is the scandal of the incarnation (140).

In addition, there is what might be called the argument of mutual apologetic augmentation: as critical resources against secular modernity, metaphysical Thomism and the existential philosophy of Kierkegaard are far more powerful together than considered on their own. This is especially the case when dealing with Hegel's powerful and noxious form of speculative rationalism. For Fabro, their joining of critical forces bears fruit especially when it comes to standing up both to Hegelian theodicy (143) and collectivism (152), which are regarded respectively as synecdoches for the sidelining of the religious believer who lives in hope rather than knowledge and the dissolution of the singularity of the religious subject that can neither be resolved in the dialectical process of history nor by an abstruse—if not obtuse—dialectical logic that refuses to observe the law of contradiction. As with the previous chapter, Furnal draws our further attention to the felt need in Fabro to challenge misconceptions of Kierkegaard that would inhibit—if not make impossible—seeing what Kierkegaard has in common with Aquinas and what he has to offer a Catholicism that critically engages the modern world. The shibboleth that has to be removed in this case is less the generic determination of Kierkegaard's thought as subjectivist, than his construction as a voluntarist. On Furnal's account, Fabro readily admits the importance of will in Kierkegaard's elaboration of faith, but insists that in the final analysis, insight and reason also play a role in faith as the response of the whole person (152) to a divine reality that is itself irredeemably personal.

The third and final synthetic chapter on which I wish to comment is chapter 6. If in one sense it lives up to its title of "Untying Knots" insofar as part of its agenda is re-buffing connections between Kierkegaard and other Protestant religious thinkers with whom Kierkegaard is often compared, in another sense the chapter could equally be called "Tying Knots" insofar as Furnal draws attention to Fabro making textual and thematic connections between Kierkegaard and a variety of Catholic thinkers. In terms of dissociation, Furnal highlights how Fabro wishes to dissociate Kierkegaard's thought in particular from what he takes to be the subjectivism of Friedrich Schleiermacher (175). What separates the two is Kierkegaard's resolute emphasis on the objective nature of the Christ event that shatters and reorients finite existence and finite freedom (203-05). It is important for Fabro also to separate Kierkegaard from Barth who, as is well-known, makes much of his debt to the Danish Christian thinker (189-90). Appearances to the contrary, Fabro thinks that Kierkegaard and Barth are two different thinkers. Not only is Kierkegaard's work not typified by the anti-Catholic animus of Barth, nor by Barth's hostility to Catholic ecclesiology, foundationally Kierkegaard is an analogical thinker in that reason and faith under certain circumstances can have a positive relation with each other. Arguably, Furnal is at his best when he lays out Fabro's linking Kierkegaard with Catholic sources. Two connections in particular stand out, one that Kierkegaard himself made and another that Fabro suggests as a possible development, given the overall similarity between the philosophical missions of Aquinas and Kierkegaard. Furnal does well

to illustrate how for Fabro Kierkegaard's hospitality to the Catholic Tübingen School is indicative of a separation from the Protestant establishment (165-77). He supports Johann Adam Möhler's insistence on the normative status of the great Christian symbols of incarnation and Trinity over the objections of the great Protestant theologian, F. C. Baur, though the ultimate aim of all formulation of doctrine is existential appropriation and not mere profession. Furnal also points suggestively to how Fabro drew connections between Kierkegaard's ecclesiology and that of John Henry Newman (189), even if it remains true that Kierkegaard's ecclesiology is significantly underdeveloped. The most interesting discussion in the chapter concerns Fabro's exploration of Kierkegaard's unusually positive reading of Mary in a variety of aspects. One of these aspects is dogmatic, that is, the theological concession from a Protestant thinker that Mary is the *theotokos* (181); the other is more devotional and concerns Kierkegaard's sympathetic readings of Catholic figures in his later years concerning Mary as the exemplary human and a model for Christians, even if not a rival for Christ who always remains the Model.

Read in terms of its stated goals *Being Before God* is a success. Its ambition is understated, but real, and its intellectual range far more extensive than it at first seems. Still, at the same time, *Being Before God* is a cautious text and his subject, Cornelio Fabro, a careful thinker who understands the nature of his claim on behalf of the compatibility of Aquinas and Kierkegaard. It is Furnal's view that Fabro demonstrates that Kierkegaard is not the archly Protestant thinker he is often represented as being, neither is he the crypto-Catholic that Theodor Haecker and other Catholic enthusiasts would have us believe. But Furnal is convinced that this great Catholic thinker of analogy in Aquinas read Kierkegaard aright in seeing how Kierkegaard responded far more positively to Catholicism than most Protestants in the nineteenth century and that, looked at non-superficially, there in fact exists a surprising elective affinity between them that bolsters each and serves them well in their common critique of secular modernity. Given that *Being Before God* is Furnal's second book on the topic of Catholic readings of Kierkegaard, it might be thought that this brings his exploration of Catholic readings of Kierkegaard to a close. Nonetheless, perhaps there is still work to be done. As Furnal comments on Fabro's pointing to Kierkegaard's sympathy for Catholic religious writers, it raises the question as to why Kierkegaard was so hostile to Martensen's promotion of German mystics such as Eckhart and Boehme early in his career. In addition, there is the interesting question as to which major Catholic thinker takes second place to Fabro in the encounter with Kierkegaard. Is it Erich Przywara, another analogical thinker like Fabro who articulates a dynamic and existential form of analogy in his own calling out of the ontological and epistemic monism of Hegel and the ontological and epistemic difference of Heidegger?

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