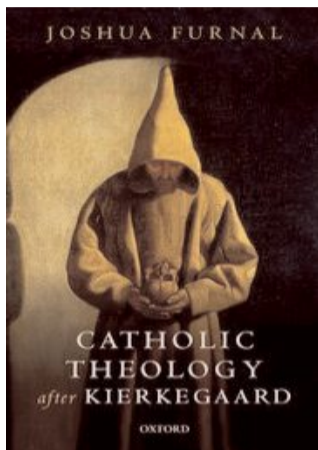


# The development of theology



**Catholic Theology After Kierkegaard**  
Joshua Furnal  
OUP, hb,  
£60.00

Kierkegaard is usually described as a major influence on Protestant theology and on existentialist philosophy. Karl Barth, Martin Heidegger and

Karl Jaspers are among those said to have been influenced by the Danish Lutheran. In fact Dr Furnal claims in this well-researched and closely argued book that Barth's enthusiasm for Kierkegaard did not last and he quotes anecdotal evidence of the Swiss theologian remarking that if he followed Kierkegaard he might as well go over to Rome.

It took time for Kierkegaard to attract notice outside his native land but from the earliest years of the wider reception of his work, Catholics were at the forefront. Alexander Dru, who translated his work into English and the Italian translator, Cornelio Fabro, were both Catholics; the German translator Theodor Haecker became a Catholic.

It is one thing to point to Catholic interest in Kierkegaard, it is another to show he was an important influence on Catholic theology but this is the claim Furnal makes in this important study. He sets about his task in two ways.

First of all he seeks to demonstrate that Kierkegaard's thought was not so far removed from a Catholic understanding on certain issues as many think.

Secondly, he traces Kierkegaard's influence, positive and negative, on a number of theologians but especially on Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Cornelio Fabro, an Italian theologian little known in the English-speaking world.

Furnal argues that although Kierkegaard had little knowledge of Thomas Aquinas his approach to theological anthropology and the doctrine of grace was not far removed from that of the Angelic Doctor. Kierkegaard speaks of a journey of redemption from a 'first self' to a 'deeper self', which is not another self but which can be seen as a perfecting of the original self. Although this understanding may not spring from a direct acquaintance with Aquinas, Kierkegaard had read such medieval Catholic mystics as Johannes Tauler.

Furnal also claims that Kierkegaard endorsed a reintegration of faith and history in the modern age, something that the ressourcement theologians who included Joseph Ratzinger and Jean Danielou as well as de Lubac also tried to achieve. Furnal maintains that the agenda of the ressourcement theologians has been widely misunderstood as just a return to the fathers, the early church and scripture. In fact it also involved an engagement with modern philosophers and thinkers and one of those people was Kierkegaard.

Furnal's reading of Kierkegaard will be challenged by some. He is critical of Daphne Hampson's interpretation at various points but is able to call on the Anglican theologian George Pattison and the Oxford philosopher Stephen Mulhall in his support.

His treatment of von Balthasar will also prove controversial for he argues that this giant of modern Catholic theology actually misunderstood Kierkegaard on both anxiety and aesthetics and could have benefitted from a correct reading of his work.

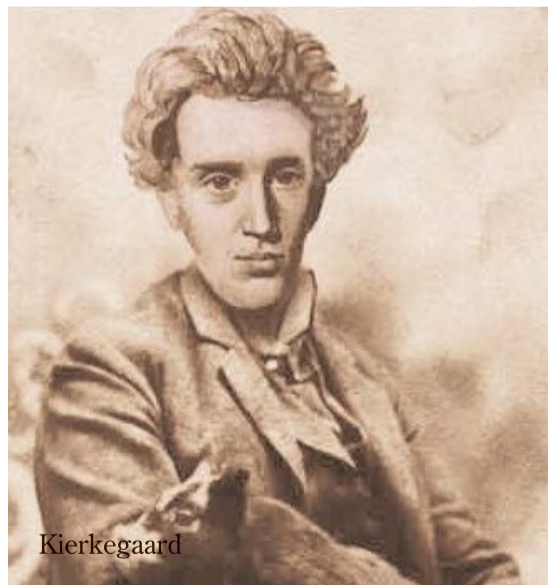
To my mind Furnal is right on both points. As far as anxiety is concerned Balthasar wanted to claim it was the result of sin rather than, as Kierkegaard saw it, part of the human condition that can lead us to faith. Knowingly or unknowingly the Roman Missal appears to side with Kierkegaard for, as Furnal reminds us in a footnote, Catholics now pray in the Eucharist to be relieved of all distress, not of anxiety.

It is not hard to detect the influence of Kierkegaard on de Lubac, especially in *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* and *The Discovery of God* but Furnal also sees evidence of Kierkegaard's shaping de Lubac's understanding of grace and his great work *The Mystery of the Supernatural*. After warnings from Rome, de Lubac had to be careful about dropping the name of the Danish Protestant theologian in his work.

At the end of his chapter on de Lubac, Furnal has a fascinating section on Kierkegaard's views about the Eucharist. A theme that runs through the book is that although Kierkegaard was critical of the Danish state church he did not deny the importance of the church in the Christian life. It might have been helpful if this theme had been enlarged.

Little is said about Kierkegaard's dispute with Grundtvig and in a book that is amazingly comprehensive in its sources Donald Allchin's study of Grundtvig is not mentioned. On the other hand, perhaps too much is said about Fabro who, for all Furnal's enthusiasm, remains a minor figure. But these are minor criticisms of a book that will prove a landmark in both the study of Kierkegaard and of modern Catholic theology.

Paul Richardson



Kierkegaard

## SUNDAY SERVICE

3rd Sunday of Lent - Sunday 28 February 2016  
Isaiah 55:1-9  
1 Corinthians 10:1-13  
Luke 13:1-9

This week's readings remind us of how ignorant we are when we think and act as if the gracious call of God was not always accompanied by a demand for a decisive break with sin.

Isaiah 55 calls us to enjoy free, unmerited covenant blessings that alone can deeply satisfy. Because of the work of the suffering servant who has paid every necessary cost for his people, a lavish feast is spread before us - without money and without price. We could never afford it, and given the corruption of our desires would not (unaided and unbidden) choose something so good and truly delightful.

Yet free as it is at the point of need, this grace is not, says Isaiah, unconditional. To appropriate it we must seek the Lord at the opportune moment - he will not always be close at hand. To grasp his goodness we must forsake our wickedness and turn to him; his righteousness and ours cannot stand together or be held onto simultaneously. Yet with nothing in our hands but sin, we will find pardon lies with him. Because he doesn't work like we do, repaying like for like. His thoughts are higher and his ways more graciously exalted.

The apostle Paul also warns us not to forget the call to repentance that always rides along with grace. He does not want the Corinthians to be ignorant or unaware, he says, that those who enjoy the sacraments of grace may still be struck down by God's displeasure.

As the Old Testament narrative amply illustrates, great spiritual privilege does not necessarily make one great spiritually. All those Paul alludes to fell in the desert because of their evil desires, despite experiencing some of the most earth-shattering moments in redemptive history.

The Corinthians too were not lacking in spiritual gifts; but our participation in the immense blessings of the covenant do not put us a cut above the rest in some spiritual premier league, though we may sometimes speak and act as though they did. None of us are invulnerable to the typical temptations faced by saints and sinners of old. The devil has no new tricks, because he doesn't need any new tricks; we're quite content, it seems, to keep falling into the same old traps of idolatry, ingratitude, and immorality.

There is nothing unusual about our temptations. But there is also no such thing as an irresistible urge, for those who are in Christ. This side of the promised land he does not promise to remove our temptations, or the fallen inclinations on which they prey. 1 Corinthians 10:13 doesn't even promise he will strengthen us to withstand, though often that may be wonderfully true.

What we are assured of here is something slightly different: he will temper the power of our adversary, and guarantees to provide us an escape hatch. In temptation, make for the exit. Flee to the ark of safety he unerringly provides.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus intimates that there is a radical equality between us all. The Galileans who suffered at Pilate's hand, and those upon whom the tower of Siloam fell, were no better or worse than the wilderness generation, the Corinthians, or us. All alike must repent or perish, says Jesus. He is patient with us, persistently looking for the fruit of penitence and giving us every assistance. But his patience will not last forever.

So let us not be content with external asceticism this Lent, but ask for the gift of repentance which, as the old Puritan John Owen defined it, is "Godly sorrow for every known sin committed against God, with a firm purpose of heart to cleave unto him for the future, in the killing of sin, the quickening of all graces, to walk before him in newness of life."

Dr Lee Gatiss is the Director of Church Society ([www.churchsociety.org](http://www.churchsociety.org)) and editor of *Positively Anglican: Building on the Foundations and Transforming the Church*.

## HYMN SELECTION

O church, arise  
Seek ye the Lord all ye people  
Rock of ages  
Repent! 'tis the voice of Jesus  
All I once held dear

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