

# The Dialectic of Faith and Reason in Cornelio Fabro's Reading of Kierkegaard's Theology

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## Abstract

This essay explores the impact of Søren Kierkegaard upon the important Italian Thomist, Cornelio Fabro. Fabro rejected the caricature of Kierkegaard as an “irrationalist” and placed him firmly in the Christian tradition. By highlighting the influence of Kierkegaard upon a Thomist like Fabro, the relevance of Fabro’s own thought is opened up for more contemporary debates in theology regarding the enduring legacies of German idealism, existentialism, and atheism.

## Keywords

atheism, existentialism, Cornelio Fabro, faith, German idealism, Søren Kierkegaard, reason

**W**hat is the relationship between Thomism and (what is typically portrayed as) a radical subjectivist view of faith? Normally, these two worldviews are presented as mutually exclusive. Yet this need not be the case. In this article, I will introduce briefly the impact of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) upon the Italian Thomist, Cornelio Fabro (1911–1995). I present Fabro’s interpretation of Kierkegaard’s writings to elaborate upon how a Thomist might engage Kierkegaard’s writings in a critical and constructive manner. Although Fabro is not well known in the English-speaking world, I intend to make the range of Fabro’s thought more accessible.

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Moreover, I argue that Kierkegaard should not be read as an irrationalist standing outside of the Christian tradition, but rather, with Fabro's hands, Kierkegaard is brought into the mainstream of the long Western tradition of theological reflection upon the relation between faith and reason. According to Fabro, Kierkegaard is an important Christian thinker who appreciates the form and authority of the act of faith—especially as it is ordered toward the truth. Some contemporary Thomists and Kierkegaard scholars might disapprove of Fabro's interpretation, but my aim is to invite these two groups to an intersection that does not often receive proper treatment or discussion.

Often in scholarly accounts of the history of Thomism in the twentieth century, there are (at least) two dominant schools of thought presented.<sup>1</sup> The "Neo-Scholastic" or "Strict-Observance" Thomists are often contrasted against Thomists influenced by Kantian or existentialist thought.<sup>2</sup> The "Neo-Scholastic" Thomists are often known for condemning theological propositions that are not explicitly endorsed in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, whose thought they have distilled into twenty-four theses. The "Transcendental" and "Existential" Thomists are often known for grafting the theological propositions of Thomas on to a post-Cartesian or post-Kantian philosophical project. Both approaches are generally characterized as attempts to build a theological system of thought using Scholastic and modern sources.

Kierkegaard is well known for his stance against totalitarian thought and the way it manifests in society by "leveling" the individual off into a more generic "crowd."<sup>3</sup> In his writings, Kierkegaard's anti-totalitarian stance often targets the "system" of Hegel's philosophy (and the Danish Hegelians who read Hegel). Given these stereotypical portrayals of Thomism and Kierkegaard in contemporary scholarship, should one expect an impasse between Thomists and Kierkegaard scholars on the basis of endorsing or rejecting attempts at intellectual system building? Perhaps this is one reason why Fabro's engagement with Kierkegaard's writings is important to recover, because Fabro's nuanced approach does not map on to these stereotypes.

It is well established that Fabro made a decisive contribution to Thomist metaphysics with his recovery of the notion of participation in the works of Thomas Aquinas.<sup>4</sup> This is a very important strand in Fabro's thought, but Thomas is not the only thinker that had a major influence on Fabro. In fact, I argue that Fabro viewed the writings of Kierkegaard and Thomas in a complementary way that was fruitful for his own intellectual development. Indeed, Fabro himself said that

My encounter with Kierkegaard has been no less decisive than that of St. Thomas. Just as the metaphysics of Thomas forever liberated me from the formalism and emptiness of scholastic

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1. Helen James John, *The Thomist Spectrum* (New York: Fordham University, 1966).
  2. John F. X. Knasas, *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists* (New York: Fordham University, 2003).
  3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age; A Literary Review*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University, 1978), 70–96.
  4. Cornelio Fabro, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo San Tommaso D'aquino* (Roma: EDIVI, 2005).

controversies, so Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism liberated me from an inferiority complex toward thought, or more precisely, toward the pandemonium of systems continuously churned out by modern and contemporary philosophy [helping me to identify] the anti-human background to their anti-Christian stance.<sup>5</sup>

Since there have been several recent articles and books written in English that engage the topic of Fabro's contribution to Thomistic metaphysics,<sup>6</sup> I want to specify instead the ways in which Kierkegaard impacted Fabro's thinking. So the central question that I would like to explore is this: How does Fabro take a controversial thinker like Kierkegaard and interpret his writings in a complementary and fruitful way? To answer this question, one could examine the vast number of Fabro's articles and translations of Kierkegaard. However, since space is limited, I will focus only on Fabro's classic essay, "Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard's Dialectic."<sup>7</sup>

In the first part of this article, I will introduce Fabro briefly for those readers that are unfamiliar with his work. In part two, I will present Fabro's account of Kierkegaard's theology of faith to show how Fabro appropriates it in a pre-conciliar setting—especially Kierkegaard's emphasis upon the existential situation, truth, and authority of faith. Although Fabro originally wrote his famous Kierkegaard essay before the Second Vatican Council, it illuminates his reading of Kierkegaard's theology of faith after the Leonine Revival of Thomas Aquinas. In the third and final part of this article, I will highlight Fabro's account of the dialectical relationship of faith and reason in Kierkegaard's writings that Fabro connects to the broader catholicity of the Christian tradition. Indeed, it was Fabro himself who claimed that "the relation between reason and faith is the center of the work of Kierkegaard and his position in substance attains the formula which leads from Hugh of St. Victor to St. Thomas."<sup>8</sup> More will be said about Fabro's observation here, but the upshot of revisiting Fabro's important essay on

5. Cornelio Fabro, Rosa Goglia, and Elvio Celestino Fontana, *Appunti di un itinerario: versione integrale delle tre stesure con parti inedite* (Roma: EDIVI, 2011), 85.

6. John F. Wippel, "Cornelio Fabro on the Distinction and Composition of Essence and Esse in the Metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas," *The Review of Metaphysics* 68, no. 3 (2015). See also John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2000); John F. Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1984, 2007). Also see Gregory T. Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2008); Jason A. Mitchell, *Being and Participation: The Method and Structure of Metaphysical Reflection according to Cornelio Fabro*, 2 vols. (Roma: Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum, 2012).

7. Cornelio Fabro, "Foi et raison dans l'oeuvre de Kierkegaard", *Revue de sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 32 (1948):169–206; expanded and revised in Italian as "Fede e ragione nella dialettica di Kierkegaard," in *Dall'essere All'esistente* (1957; Brescia: Morcelliana, 1965), chap. 3. Republished in English as "Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard's Dialectic" in *A Kierkegaard Critique: An International Selection of Essays Interpreting Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard A. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 156–206. All translations are my own.

8. Cornelio Fabro, review of *L'itinerario filosofico di Leone Sestón*, by F. Déchet, *The Modern Schoolman* 43, no. 4 (1966), 414.

Kierkegaard is to better understand why a Thomist like Fabro gravitated toward Kierkegaard in the first place. Yet it also indicates that the English reception of Fabro's thought should not be limited to the history of Neo-Thomism and its varieties. By highlighting the influence of Kierkegaard upon a Thomist like Fabro, the relevance of Fabro's own thought is opened up for more contemporary debates in theology regarding the enduring legacies of German idealism, existentialism, and atheism.

## A Brief Introduction to Cornelio Fabro

Cornelio Fabro (1911–1995) was born in Udine and he died in Rome. One of the most authoritative interpreters of Aquinas in the twentieth century, he was also a priest of the Stigmatine Order.<sup>9</sup> Although Fabro is virtually unknown in the English-speaking world,<sup>10</sup> Fabro's critique of what he called "the principle of immanence," his involvement as an expert during the Second Vatican Council,<sup>11</sup> his highly influential contributions to recovering the notion of participation in the metaphysics of Aquinas,<sup>12</sup> and his translations of Kierkegaard's writings, all point to the fact that the relevance of Fabro's writings endure despite the fact that they are not yet properly appreciated in wider debates. One key aspect that is often neglected is how Fabro engaged fully with other philosophical schools of thought like German idealism, existentialism, and atheism—evidenced by his numerous books and articles engaging the writings of continental philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Fichte, and Feuerbach. For Fabro, the bridge between the worlds of Thomism and continental philosophy was found in the writings of Kierkegaard. On the face of it, this seems counterintuitive; but one might ask how did Fabro come around to adopt this approach?

After earning his first doctorate in philosophy from the Pontifical Lateran University in 1931 with a thesis on David Hume and the principle of causality, Fabro studied zoology, biology, and psychology in Italy until 1938. In 1937, Fabro received his second doctorate in theology from the Angelicum for his groundbreaking work entitled, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo San Tommaso d'Aquino*, subsequently published in 1939. Fabro then went on to teach biology and psychology at Urbaniana

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9. For more biographical info, see "Life / Biographical Sketch," *Cornelio Fabro Cultural Project*, <http://www.corneliofabro.org/en/documento.asp?ID=3>.

10. There are a few introductions to Fabro's work available in English. For more, see Elvio C. Fontana, *Introduction to Cornelio Fabro* (Chillum: IVE Press, 2016). See also John, *The Thomist Spectrum*, chap. 6. For a more exhaustive list of Fabro's works, see "Progetto Culturale / Catalogo Opere Complete," *Cornelio Fabro Cultural Project*, <http://www.corneliofabro.org/catalogo.asp>.

11. For a fuller account, see Joshua Furnal, *Catholic Theology after Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2016), esp. chap. 5. Also see, Joshua Furnal, "Kierkegaard's Catholic Reception and the Legacy of Vatican II," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 32 (2016): 17–23, <https://doi.org/10.3138/tjt.3704>.

12. A recent volume in English has been published that includes an assortment of articles on this topic; see Cornelio Fabro, *Selected Articles on Metaphysics and Participation*, vol. 1 (Chillum: IVE Press, 2016).

University in Rome. During this fruitful period, Fabro focused on the role of perception in empirical analysis, publishing *La fenomenologia della percezione* (1941) and *Percezione e pensiero* (1941). It was around 1940 that Fabro first encountered existentialism, particularly the writings of Kierkegaard—an author that would lead Fabro to learn Danish and spend the rest of his life translating him into Italian.

In 1947, Fabro became the dean of the Urbaniana, and in 1948 taught theoretical philosophy at the University of Rome. In 1954, he gave the Cardinal Mercier lectures in Louvain, which were subsequently published as *Participation et causalité*.<sup>13</sup> As a result, Fabro received a gold medallion from the Philosophical Society of Louvain. From 1957 to 1958, he worked as a professor at the Catholic University of Milan and he was appointed as a consultant to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In 1959, he established the Institute for the Study of Atheism at the Urbaniana (the first of its kind in Europe).<sup>14</sup> In 1960, he became a member of the preparatory commission and *peritus* during the Second Vatican Council. In 1964, he was given a gold medallion by the President of Italy for his contributions in education, culture, and the arts.

In 1965, Fabro toured the UK and USA giving lectures on atheism and contemporary philosophy at St. Olaf's College (home of the Hong Kierkegaard Library) and at the University of St. Thomas (Houston). He was also a visiting professor at the University of Notre Dame. In this same year, Fabro served as the Italian representative at the UNESCO conference in Oxford for the revision of the Declaration of Human Rights. From 1965 to 1981, he taught at the University of Perugia, first as professor of philosophy and head of the teaching faculty, then as professor of theoretical philosophy in the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy. During this period, Fabro was appointed as a consultant to the Congregation for Catholic Education and to the Secretariat for Non-Believers. In 1974, he received the Aquinas Medal from the American Catholic Philosophical Association. In total, he was a member of over ten academies, including the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Pontifical Academy of Theology (Rome), the Academy of the Italian Philosophical Society, the Kierkegaard *Selskabet* in Copenhagen, the Academy of *Société philosophique de Louvain*, and Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre at the University of Osaka (Japan).

Broadly speaking, Fabro's intellectual itinerary can be divided into four parts:

- Fabro's early Thomist phase regarding the metaphysics of participation (1935–1941);
- Fabro's engagement with phenomenology, atheism, German idealism, and existentialism (1941–1969; 1983);

13. Cornelio Fabro, *Participation et causalité selon S. Thomas D'aquin, Chaire Cardinal Mercier, 1954* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1961).

14. For more on the reception of Fabro's work on atheism, see Joshua Furnal, "'God in Exile' in the USA," in *Cornelio Fabro e Franz Brentano: per un Nuovo Realismo*, ed. Antonio Russo (Roma: Studium, 2013), 245–52.

- Fabro's later Thomist phase (1960–1961; 1969; 1983), and his polemic with Karl Rahner (1974–79);
- Fabro's various spiritual writings on freedom (1980–1995).

As one can begin to see, Fabro wrote during a time when the emergence of existentialist thought in Italy continued despite Pope Pius X's previous condemnation of Modernism in *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907). Yet, Fabro sought to uphold the fundamental principles of Thomism and still engage the pressing issues of modernity in dialogue with wider European thought. This conviction led Fabro to write many books and articles about the shared concerns of philosophical and theological thought in the twentieth century. Fabro's central, yet prescient contribution was to provide a new model of religious understanding that accounts for how an immanent view of reality participates in transcendence.

## Fabro on Kierkegaard's Theology of Faith

In 1957, Cornelio Fabro published the proceedings of a symposium on Kierkegaard that he organized two years earlier that celebrated the centenary of Kierkegaard's death.<sup>15</sup> Among the staggering number of publications in that year, Fabro also published a compendium of essays entitled *Dall'essere all'esistente*, which included an essay entitled "Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard's Dialectic" that was later translated into English. In the early twentieth century, most of the exegetical work done by Kierkegaard scholars overlooked or refused to appreciate what Fabro called the "theological and philosophical consistency that Kierkegaard accords to faith."<sup>16</sup> If scholars tended to mention faith in relation to Kierkegaard, it was only to focus upon a flight from reason. Fabro observes that this misconception is often motivated by Kierkegaard's claim that "truth is subjectivity."<sup>17</sup> So scholars would then equate Kierkegaard with Karl Barth's rejection of natural theology. To resist this trend, Fabro places Kierkegaard on an intellectual spectrum between Friedrich Nietzsche and John Henry Newman, describing Kierkegaard's writings as "the most remarkable among the religious works of the [nineteenth] century."<sup>18</sup> But Fabro is quick to indicate that Kierkegaard's dialectical relation between faith and reason actually distances him from Barth's negative portrayal. As a consequence, Fabro says that current scholarship fails to appreciate Kierkegaard's constructive project by emphasizing all too often this misconception. Although Kierkegaard himself may continue to evade classification as Catholic or Protestant, what is important for Fabro is the way in which

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15. Cornelio Fabro, ed., *Studi Kierkegaardiani* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1957).

16. Fabro, "Fede e ragione," 128.

17. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings* 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 189.

18. Fabro, "Fede e ragione," 129.

Kierkegaard repeats one thousand times that he does not intend to establish a new school of thought or to make a system, but only wants to be the voice of a reawakening that shakes up a lazy, misguided and sleepy Christianity ... and the problem of faith that it presents constitutes in its essential moment a return to the authentic Christian position and, if you wish, even to the Catholic and Thomist position, at least on certain points.<sup>19</sup>

Now, this may seem just as counterintuitive today as it did in Fabro's era. However, Fabro insists that what seems counterintuitive about his claim only reflects the enduring uncritical acceptance of preconceptions that pervaded the Kierkegaard Renaissance during the early twentieth century, which became the normative interpretation of Kierkegaard's writings.<sup>20</sup> In the next section, I will emphasize the way in which Fabro sought to correct these preconceptions, by rehabilitating the theological underpinnings of Kierkegaard's notion of "truth as subjectivity."

### The Existential Situation of Faith

The first aspect of Kierkegaard's thought that Fabro appreciates is the way in which Kierkegaard emphasized the importance of human subjectivity for faith. During this time period, one of the central insights from Kierkegaard that held Fabro's attention was how the problem of faith and the problem of existence were inseparable. Kierkegaard argues, "in order to have faith, there must first be existence, an existential qualification."<sup>21</sup> Famously, Kierkegaard addresses the role of human subjectivity for the truth of Christianity in part two of his pseudonymous *Postscript* (1846). In reading the *Postscript*, scholars tend to interpret the subjectivity or the "how" of faith (part two) as mutually exclusive to the objectivity or the "what" of faith (part one). Yet, Fabro argues that Kierkegaard himself never explicitly endorses this interpretation. In fact, Fabro points to an often neglected passage in Kierkegaard's *Journals* where he says that "when the *How* is scrupulously rendered, the *What* is also given; and this is the *How* of 'faith.'"<sup>22</sup> Fabro says that when Kierkegaard speaks of the "how" of faith, the subjectivity he portrays is not in a "phenomenological, empiricist, or transcendental sense" or merely as the creativity and self-reflection of the subject. Instead, subjectivity is presented as the subjectivity of *existing*—which Fabro describes as "the

19. *Ibid.*, 130.

20. For more on the Kierkegaard Renaissance, see Furnal, *Catholic Theology after Kierkegaard*, chap. 2. There is a striking parallel between Fabro's critique of the Kierkegaard Renaissance and Fabro's response to Rudolf Eucken's Neo-Kantian dismissal of Thomism in Cornelio Fabro, *Introduzione a San Tommaso: la metafisica Tomista & il pensiero moderno*, 2nd ed., *Ragione & Fede* (Milano: Edizioni Ares, 1983), chap. 9.

21. X<sup>4</sup> A 114 / NB 23:111 (1851). When possible, citations from Kierkegaard's *Journals* reflect both styles of reference used in Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1970) and Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, ed. Bruce H. Kirmmse and Niels Jørgen Cappelørn (Princeton: Princeton University, 2014).

22. X<sup>2</sup> A 299 / NB 14:121.

resolution or decision of freedom to break the circle of immanence by the assent to transcendental Truth, accompanied by the proposal to conform oneself to it in the life of time."<sup>23</sup>

Fabro notes that in *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), Kierkegaard comments on Enlightenment thinker Gotthold Lessing's problem with deriving an eternal happiness from a historical perspective. He indicates here a convergence between Thomas and Kierkegaard regarding the object of faith. Fabro asks, "How can someone consider as true that which cannot be understood? And how can one retain as absolute and divine truth precisely that which finds itself in the most acute contrast to the evidence of reason?"<sup>24</sup> Lessing's conclusion was that this requires a *salto mortale* for human reason. However, Fabro interprets Kierkegaard's response as indicating that the "act of faith is a 'leap' that faith alone can make, thanks to the 'choice' of freedom."<sup>25</sup> In other words, the "leap" is not conceptual but existential. Fabro explains Kierkegaard's position in this way:

It is by the paradox as such that the believer is brought to believe and not by logical evidence. If he were not convinced of the absolute transcendence of the object of faith and of the break with the sphere of reason that this involves, he would not believe but rather he would begin to search for some kind of evidence in the sphere of reason, or at least for some kind of probability, some likelihood, etc. Hence one can say that one believes precisely because the object of belief manifests itself as paradox, as absurd, as contrary to reason.<sup>26</sup>

By portraying Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity in this existential rather than exclusively conceptual light, readers that are used to reading Kierkegaard in a non-ecumenical manner may get worked up by his remark that works are necessary for faith. But instead of pushing Kierkegaard closer to Luther's rejection of the necessity of works, Fabro draws upon an entry from 1849 in Kierkegaard's *Journals* to appreciate the constructive dialectic of subjectivity at work in Kierkegaard's theology of faith. Kierkegaard says that normally in matters of faith, objectivity is often emphasized in order to ward off any possibility of the efficaciousness of merit. Kierkegaard says that "to constrain subjectivity, we are quite properly taught that no one is saved by works, but by grace—and corresponding to that—by faith."

But then, Kierkegaard asks, does this mean that subjectivity has no role to play in conversion? *Either* we must remove subjectivity from the process of salvation altogether and we are left with a "fatalistic election by grace," *or* "we must make a little concession" for subjectivity. For Kierkegaard, the problem is that either way, "subjectivity is always under suspicion" because even "when it is established that we are saved by faith" we are still inclined to worry that "too much has already been conceded." But the irony that Kierkegaard uncovers in this perspective is that "no one can

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23. Fabro, "Fede e ragione," 134.

24. *Ibid.*, 142.

25. *Ibid.*, 143.

26. *Ibid.*, 145.

give himself faith; it is a gift of God that *I* must pray for.” So then we must say that praying, or praying for faith is also a gift from God that no one can give to himself. However, for Kierkegaard there must be “one point or another where there is a halt at subjectivity” if one wants to avoid substituting a religious fatalism for grace, by introducing a regress of subjectivity that turns faith into a dead decision.<sup>27</sup>

Fabro also draws attention to a passage in this same period in Kierkegaard’s *Journals* where he discusses the societal impact of Luther’s doctrine of faith at length. For Kierkegaard, Luther was someone that brought about a more mature view of faith—one that fully recognized the impossibility of Pelagianism. Moreover, Kierkegaard argues that in his more positive moments, Luther’s view of faith rightly emphasized the sheer gift of salvation. However, Kierkegaard is fully aware of the pitfalls that Luther’s position opens up for the picture of salvation in Kierkegaard’s own society. In 1849, Kierkegaard writes,

The error in the religiousness of our time is that people have made faith into inwardness to such a degree that it has actually disappeared; that life is given permission ... to behave in sheer worldly fashion, and that an assurance about faith has been substituted for faith.<sup>28</sup>

In this passage, Kierkegaard argues that fetishizing objectivity in the form of an assurance of faith is often a way to substitute that assurance for faith itself, which still involves human subjectivity, but in a negative way. By citing this passage in his article, Fabro highlights Kierkegaard’s insistence upon works of love for genuine subjectivity since “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (Jas 2:17, NRSV throughout). For Luther, good works come from faith; but for Kierkegaard, works is something that we begin with and faith has an object that we are striving to aim at. On Fabro’s reading, Kierkegaard does not resist the Catholic doctrine of merit in his theology of faith, and his emphasis upon “works of love” belongs “to the most genuine Christian and Thomist spirituality.”<sup>29</sup> The linking of subjectivity and works in the act of faith is for Fabro what is precisely at issue in Kierkegaard’s theology, and this is what Fabro also wishes to recover for his purposes in his own intellectual context.

However, Kierkegaard’s emphasis upon subjectivity in matters of faith is motivated not because he wants to distance himself from Luther—although he does this from time to time. Instead, for Fabro, Kierkegaard’s insight into the necessity of human subjectivity for faith provides a key into Kierkegaard’s wider theological commitments regarding the existential implications of the truth and authority of faith. In the next two sections, I will examine how Fabro interprets Kierkegaard’s account of the truth and authority of faith in a way that accords with Fabro’s own perspective. Once human subjectivity and the works of faith are brought more into view, Fabro circles back around to discuss how Kierkegaard speaks of faith as saving *truth* that is grounded in the authority and person of Christ.

27. X<sup>2</sup> A 301 / SKS NB 14: 123.

28. X<sup>2</sup> A 207 / NB 14: 41.

29. *Ibid.*, 147.

## The Truth of Faith

The second aspect of Kierkegaard's thought that Fabro appreciated was the way Kierkegaard emphasized the object of faith as saving truth—or to use a remark by Romanus Cessario, "Only the Truth has Grace."<sup>30</sup> In Fabro's view, Kierkegaard at once dialectically reclaims the subjectivity of the act of faith and affirms "the supernatural character of the act of faith, whose ground and principle are in God alone" yet the "'conviction' of the believer is not the work of nature but a gift of grace."<sup>31</sup> For Fabro, Kierkegaard says that in faith there is a "turning of subjectivity" in such a way that inwardness can be shown to be objectivity. In this way, Fabro says that for Kierkegaard subjectivity requires "personal effort" and that "it is the necessity of works so that faith may really be the living existence of such truth."<sup>32</sup>

To support his interpretation, Fabro points to Kierkegaard's dialectic between what he calls "theological faith" and "reasoning reason." Fabro says that for Kierkegaard, the one "who wants to be saved must in faith be elevated above reason."<sup>33</sup> Following the logic employed in the letters of John, "Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts" (1 John 5:10), Fabro says that for Kierkegaard, "Reasons do not establish convictions, but rather convictions establish reasons."<sup>34</sup> Kierkegaard articulates his point in this way:

If human scholarship and science refuse to acknowledge that there is something it cannot understand, or, more accurately, something which it can clearly understand that it does not understand, then everything is confused. It is specifically the task of human knowing to understand that there is something that it cannot understand and to understand what that is.<sup>35</sup>

Fabro observes that by endorsing this position, Kierkegaard is not alone in the Christian tradition.<sup>36</sup> In fact, by illuminating the broader catholicity of Kierkegaard's

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30. Romanus Cessario, *Theology and Sanctity*, ed. Cajetan Cuddy (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2014).

31. Fabro, "Fede e ragione," 147.

32. *Ibid.*, 135. In support of his position, Fabro cites this passage from Kierkegaard: "Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith. If I want to keep myself in faith, I must continually see to it that I hold fast the objective uncertainty. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 204.

33. *Ibid.*, 155.

34. *Ibid.*, 153.

35. VIII<sup>1</sup> A 11 / NB: 125 (1847).

36. *Ibid.*, 155. Fabro says, "Defenders of Christianity like Tertullian, St. Augustine, St. Peter Damian, St. Bernard, Pascal, the medieval Franciscan mystics, and the Protestant pietist mystics, all have seen in reason and its infinite artifices a betrayal and a permanent danger for faith." Only recently have Kierkegaard scholars begun to appreciate the depth and relevance of Fabro's observation. For more, see Lee C. Barrett, *Eros and Self-Emptying*:

theological position, Fabro can situate Kierkegaard in the wider Christian tradition, offering an alternative to irrationalist readings of Kierkegaard. For Fabro, Kierkegaard is alive to the way in which philosophies of immanence have reduced faith to something within the horizon of conceptual thinking, or reflection. Instead, Fabro portrays Kierkegaard in terms of an apologist for “the absolute transcendence of Christianity against the invasion of an Enlightenment and Idealist understanding of reason,” which is deployed by right-wing Hegelians.<sup>37</sup> The consequence is that faith no longer moves the world from outside this conceptual world since reflection is retrospective; thus faith must be seen as absurd from the perspective of reflection. This is why Kierkegaard speaks of faith not as something to move beyond, as one could think beyond immediacy to reflection; rather it is a disengaged and disembodied form of reflection that we are meant to move beyond if faith is to be found.

For Kierkegaard, faith operates in the realm of personal conviction in concrete situations that have a bearing upon the course of one’s life. From the perspective of the armchair, faith pertains to the objective uncertainty of the absurd and can be distinguished from the personal conviction of a lifestyle choice. But for Fabro, Kierkegaard conducts his argument about faith “on a rigorously metaphysical level, faithful to the Thomist principle of the specification of acts by means of objects.”<sup>38</sup> Just as one does not see the horizon until one shifts one’s focus away from everything within that horizon, so faith emerges as the light by which one sees—or using Kierkegaard’s turn of phrase, “the point outside the world” that is able to move the whole world. Kierkegaard’s positive view of the role of human subjectivity for the truth of faith is a kind of *ressourcement* of true subjectivity that fosters humble striving—what Kierkegaard elsewhere calls “existing before God.”<sup>39</sup>

Importantly, Kierkegaard does not reserve the truth of faith for only the intellectual elite, but famously distinguishes between the genius and the apostle in order to

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*The Intersections of Augustine and Kierkegaard* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013). See also, Christopher B. Barnett, *Kierkegaard, Pietism and Holiness* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011). Also see Jon Stewart, ed., *Kierkegaard and the Patristic and Medieval Traditions*, *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, and Resources* 4 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

37. *Ibid.*, 156.

38. *Ibid.*, 142.

39. Fabro cites this passage from Kierkegaard’s *Journals* in support of his view: “As with the individual human being, so does the entire race need repetitions, or tutors who recapitulate the lesson, in order to preserve continuity. Geniuses are recapitulators of this sort. They are developed much more slowly than other people; they actually run through the basic forms of existence that world history has undergone. It is precisely here that their significance as correctives is to be found. Although geniuses prophetically display what is to come, they do so precisely by means of a more profound memory of what has been gone through. All development is indeed not a retreat, but a going-back, and this is primitivity. The earnestness of youth is immediately to begin *bona fide* to want to resemble the ideal. The earnestness of the older person is to situate faith in between, as the expression of respect for the qualitative difference between all his striving and the ideal. Modernity is humbug, assisted by the transformation of faith into fictitious inwardness” (X<sup>2</sup> A 207 / NB 14: 41).

highlight not just a conceptual truth that faith seeks to understand, but also to indicate the authority to which faith responds.<sup>40</sup> I have discussed the way Fabro highlights the role of human subjectivity in Kierkegaard's theology of faith as saving truth. In the next section, I would like to consider the way in which Fabro highlights Kierkegaard's emphasis on Christ's authority in his theology of faith. In this way, we can get a better picture of how Fabro is impacted by Kierkegaard for his own intellectual development.

## The Authority of Faith

The third aspect of Kierkegaard's thought that Fabro appreciates is that the existential situation and truth of faith is grounded in Christ's authority. It is well known that Kierkegaard deploys pseudonyms or fictive authors in his writings. Indeed, one of Kierkegaard's books is entitled *Without Authority*, which reflects his literary strategy of self-abnegation that actively disavows the authority of his own authorial status. Yet, Kierkegaard's stance toward "authority" is informed by the words of Jesus to his disciples about true greatness: "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves" (Luke 22:25–26). For example, in *Two Ages* Kierkegaard's scriptural position can be detected in his exposition of societal "leveling":

Servants of leveling are the servants of the power of evil, for leveling itself is not of God, and every good man will have times when he could weep over its hopelessness, but God permits it and wants to cooperate with individuals, that is, with each one individually, and draw the highest out of it. The unrecognizables recognize the servants of leveling but dare not use power or authority against them, for then there would be a regression, because it would be instantly obvious to a third party that the unrecognizable one was an authority, and then the third party would be hindered from attaining the highest. Only through a *suffering* act will the unrecognizable one dare contribute to leveling and by the same suffering act will pass judgment on the instrument. He does not dare to defeat leveling outright—he would be dismissed for that, since it would be acting with authority—but in suffering he will defeat it and thereby experience in turn the law of his existence, which is not to rule, to guide, to lead, but in suffering to serve, to help indirectly. Those who have not made the leap will interpret the suffering act of the unrecognizable one as his defeat, and those who have made the leap will have a vague idea that it was his victory.<sup>41</sup>

Kierkegaard continues his scriptural reflection on "authority" in *Book on Adler* where he praises the patience and attunement of the Virgin Mary toward divine revelation. Kierkegaard characterizes this stance towards authority in light of how Mary "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). Paul J. Griffiths has written an outstanding essay on this aspect of Kierkegaard's emphasis

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40. See n. 45.

41. Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 109.

upon divine revelation as an authoritatively given call that is inwardly realized through a response which does not first require deliberation.<sup>42</sup> Hence, Fabro can describe Kierkegaard as endorsing the view that “faith refers to the authority of the one who speaks, so it is established on the person, and faith is a relation of one person to another rather than the theoretical evidence of a demonstration.”<sup>43</sup> In his article, Fabro does not illuminate this point through an exposition of *Book on Adler* but rather turns to Kierkegaard’s unpublished response to Theophilus Nicolaus (a pen name used by the Icelandic theologian Magnus Eiriksson), a rationalist who objected to Kierkegaard’s portrayal of faith and the absurd in *Fear and Trembling* (1843).<sup>44</sup>

For Kierkegaard, the connection between faith and authority is reflected in the difference between a genius and apostle—that is, between a natural yet extraordinary intellectual endowment and divine authority.<sup>45</sup> The apostle is an apostle not because he is a genius but because of his relation to Christ. One important difference between a genius and an apostle is that the apostle does and says what Christ has instructed him to do and say. A genius may dedicate their entire life to becoming an expert or solving a very important problem, but this is not what an apostle does. The apostle is sent on the authority of Christ to announce the good news of the Lord’s life, death, and resurrection. The difference is that when the time comes, the genius and apostle defend their life’s work for different reasons; and the apostle is prepared to safeguard the truth of faith with his own life.

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42. Paul J. Griffiths, “Kierkegaard and Apostolic Authority: A Countercultural Perspective?” (lecture, Baylor Symposium on Faith and Culture, Baylor University, November 2, 2013), available online at <https://vimeo.com/130474798>. Griffiths’s approach to this issue resembles Fabro’s approach in many ways—especially regarding a comparison to John Henry Newman. Fabro was fascinated by Kierkegaard’s *Book on Adler* and his Italian translation of it contains his book-length introduction. S. Kierkegaard, *Dell’ autorità e della rivelazione: libro su Adler*, ed. Cornelio Fabro (Rome: Gregoriana Editrice, 1976). Moreover, five years before Fabro’s death, he published an introduction and Italian translation of Adolf Peter Adler, *Optegnelser fra en reise* (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel, 1849). Adolph Peter Adler and Cornelio Fabro, *Viaggio in Italia* (Potenza: Ermes, 1990). Further analysis of the relevance of this engagement would require an additional article.

43. Fabro, “Fede e ragione,” 139.

44. For more, see Gerhard Schreiber, “Magnus Eiriksson: An Opponent of Martensen and an Unwelcome Ally of Kierkegaard,” in *Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries*, vol. 2, *Theology*, ed. Jon Stewart, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, and Resources 7 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 49–94. See also Robert L. Perkins, *Christian Discourses and the Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress* (Macon: Mercer University, 2007), chap. 2. Also see Vilhjálmur Árnason, “‘Neglect and Misunderstanding’: The Reception of Kierkegaard in Iceland,” in *Kierkegaard’s International Reception*, vol. 1, *Northern and Western Europe*, ed. Jon Stewart, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, and Resources 8 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), chap. 5.

45. For Kierkegaard’s elaborate discussion, see Kierkegaard, “The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle,” in *The Book on Adler*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University, 1998), 173–88.

Now, Fabro construes Kierkegaard's recovery of the Christian faith in modernity not merely as a form of speculation about a doctrine, but rather as an emphasis upon self-abnegation before a trustworthy authority and person. On one hand, Christ is the person to whom faith is directed and the object of faith itself; on the other hand, in order to step out in theological faith, Fabro says that "all the points of support from finitude" and "the predominance of reasoning reason" must be renounced or subordinated "to the authority of the One in whom is believed."<sup>46</sup> So for Kierkegaard, a paradoxical element arises in Christian discipleship when the contemporary follower of Christ is led to imitate Christ unto death, renouncing their own life in martyrdom.

Fabro takes this opportunity to illustrate how Kierkegaard's position contrasts with Luther's—who viewed authority only in terms of the words of Scripture that were detached from the person uttering them. Fabro points to a *Journal* entry from 1850 where Kierkegaard says that the scandal of the Christian faith is related dialectically to the person and authority of Christ.<sup>47</sup> In other words, those who are scandalized by the Christian faith indicate that they are not under the authority of Christ (1 Cor 1:23). But what is the nature of this offence? Fabro says that for Kierkegaard, "it belongs to the essence of Christianity that reason cannot provide for itself the intrinsic ground of revealed truth."<sup>48</sup> In saying this, one might think that Fabro portrays Kierkegaard as denying the possibility of apologetics, but this is not Fabro's interpretation. Instead, Fabro notes that Kierkegaard's position actually resists the claim that faith rests *solely* upon a speculative science, but instead grounds faith in the authority of Jesus.<sup>49</sup> In his own words, Kierkegaard says, "The *divine* paradox is that [Christ] is noticed if in no other way than by being crucified, that he performs miracles, etc., which means that he is still recognizable by his divine authority even if it requires faith to solve the paradox."<sup>50</sup> For Fabro, this is another instance where Kierkegaard's view of faith is inseparable from the divine authority of Christ. However, this is not the only place where authority is at issue for Kierkegaard. One year before his death, Kierkegaard writes in

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46. Fabro, "Fede e ragione," 140.

47. Fabro cites this passage from Kierkegaard's *Journals* to support his view: "Christ cries woe to those who give offense, to those by whom offense comes—and yet the possibility of offense is inseparable from any definition of what is Christian, and Christ repeats often enough 'blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.' The difference is [that] the divine truth is 'the truth,' but in such a way that the world takes offense at it. It cannot be otherwise. But one cannot say for that reason that it gives offense. Giving offense is something quite different, it is, e.g., a desire to intentionally wrench faith from the believer. For when one points to the possibility of offense in order to strengthen faith, that is the authentic Christian proclamation of Christianity" (X<sup>3</sup> A 333 / NB 20: 73).

48. *Ibid.*, 157.

49. Elsewhere, Fabro has more to say about Kierkegaard's theology of faith and authority; see Cornelio Fabro, "La Critica Di Kierkegaard Alla Dialettica Hegeliana Nel *Libro Su Adler*," *Giornale critico della filosofia Italiana* 9 (1978): 1–32. Also see, Cornelio Fabro, "L'attività oratoria, dottrinale e pastorale di un vescovo luterano dell'ottocento: J. P. Mynster," *Ricerche di storia sociale e religiosa* 3 (1973): 41–108.

50. IV A 103 / JJ : 111 (1843).

a *Journal* entry from 1854 about the place of authority in Christianity. Kierkegaard cites Augustine as the one who helped him better appreciate the hypostatic paradox of Christ's divine authority.<sup>51</sup>

This is the way that Christianity came into the world: it was substantiated by authority, its divine authority; consequently, the authority is higher. Now for a long time the relationship has been reversed: men seek on rational grounds to demonstrate, to substantiate the authority. And yet this is supposed to be the same religion. This is the way it was when Christianity came into the world: for a long time, humankind had despaired of making anything out of this existence (*Tilvaereslse*), despaired of finding the truth—then came Christianity with divine authority. Augustine, for example, always turns the whole matter in such a way that the perfection in Christianity is precisely the authority, that Christianity has truth in its most perfect form, the authority, that if one could have the same truth without authority it would be less perfect, for it is precisely the authority which is the perfection.<sup>52</sup>

By citing passages like these from Kierkegaard's *Journals*, Fabro astutely provides an interpretation that suggests Kierkegaard's apologetics is still carried out on the basis of revelation and divine authority—a common argumentative strategy in pre-conciliar fundamental theology. We must remember that Fabro is writing before Vatican II and places Kierkegaard in the preconciliar tradition which claims, "we believe to be true what He has revealed, not because we perceive its intrinsic truth by the natural light of reason, but because of the authority of God himself, who makes the revelation and can neither deceive nor be deceived."<sup>53</sup>

Some readers of Kierkegaard might raise objections with Fabro's interpretation here on the grounds that Kierkegaard is more of a dialectical thinker, which would put him at odds with magisterial teaching. However, Fabro does not bleach out Kierkegaard's dialectic to place him within this interpretive tradition. In fact, Fabro points to Kierkegaard's own words in a *Journal* entry from 1844 where he says:

When one says that faith relies on authority and thus thinks that the dialectical has been excluded, this isn't so; for the dialectical begins with asking how it is that one submits to this authority, whether or not one can understand for oneself why one has chosen it, whether it is a contingency; for in that case, the authority is not authority, not even for the believer when he himself is aware that it is a contingency.<sup>54</sup>

For both Fabro and Kierkegaard, believing the apostolic witness integrates the truth of faith with revealed authority. Although this provides an *intelligible* position regarding the relation of faith and reason, it does not make the invitation to faith any less

51. Fabro, "Fede e ragione," 158.

52. XI<sup>1</sup> A 436 / NB 11: 136.

53. Heinrich Joseph Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (St. Louis: Herder, 1957), DS 3008/1789. (hereafter cited as DS).

54. V A 32 / JJ : 225.

*dialectical*. So the implication of Kierkegaard's distinction here for Fabro is that "the work of reason then is not excluded from the object of faith as such, certainly not to *explain it*, but to prepare and invite the person in some way to accept it."<sup>55</sup> In short, after highlighting Kierkegaard's view of the truth and authority of faith, Fabro emphasizes Kierkegaard's dialectical relationship between faith and reason.

## The Dialectical Relation of Faith and Reason

Now that Fabro has gathered together Kierkegaard's emphasis on human subjectivity along with his emphasis on the truth and authority of faith, Fabro argues that Kierkegaard puts reason and faith into a dialectical relationship. During the twentieth century, Kierkegaard was often mistakenly interpreted as advocating a form of irrationalism. Yet by reading Kierkegaard's *Journals*, Fabro became dissatisfied with this caricature. The contribution that Fabro offered at the time was to put forward an account of the *dialectical* relation of faith and reason, and to do so in a way that placed Kierkegaard in the wider Catholic tradition. For instance, Fabro notes how Kierkegaard's view is expressed in an 1848 journal entry where he reflects on Christ's remark, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe" (John 4:48) as an indication that faith must have its own proper dimension if an invitation is to be intelligibly accepted.

Quasi-faith thinks it believes—but it cannot swallow miracles and the like; it believes, as it is said, in God and Christ but questions miracles. But Christ reverses the relationship: first comes the faith which believes miracles, believes because it sees miracles, and then next, the faith which believes although no miracles happen. These two qualifications are the qualifications of faith, and the marks of offense and the absurd are there. First of all, to believe that God will permit something to happen which completely cuts across the grain of our reason and understanding—this is absurd. And when one has believed this, that it will occur, then to believe even though it does not occur. But if one takes away the first qualification of faith—believing because one sees signs and wonders—the spheres are confused, for then knowledge and the highest form of faith come to resemble one another. For knowledge, when it gains permission to call itself faith, requires no miracle; it would rather be free from miracles, simply because miracles are an offense. But the highest form of faith is indeed to believe without seeing signs and miracles. Here we see an example of how everything is confused if we do not take care to make faith a sphere by itself.<sup>56</sup>

Fabro relates Kierkegaard's position here to that of Thomas, who said that "nothing can be known and believed at the same time."<sup>57</sup> Like Thomas, Fabro argues that Kierkegaard also distinguishes between faith and reason, but not in a mutually

55. Fabro, "Fede e ragione," 160.

56. VIII<sup>1</sup> A 672 / Papir 408.

57. *De Veritate* q. 14 art. 9, <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/QDdeVer14.htm#9>.

exclusive manner such that reason is unable to recognize the transcendence of faith “through a certain *knowledge of cause*.”<sup>58</sup> In his own words, Kierkegaard says:

Speculation can present the problems, can know that every single problem is a problem that exists for faith, is characterized and compounded in such a way that it exists [as a problem] for faith—and then ask: Will you believe or not[?] Furthermore, speculation can audit faith—i.e., that which at a given moment is believed or is the content of faith—in order to see whether faith contains an admixture of nonsensical categories that are not the objects of faith but, e.g., of speculation. All this is a very complicated task. Speculation sees—but only to the extent that it says: Here it is. Then it is blind. Then comes the faith that believes; it is the one who sees in relation to the object of faith.<sup>59</sup>

Kierkegaard continues to contrast blindness and sight throughout his *Journals*, especially regarding dialectical relation between faith and reason. This subtlety is not lost on Fabro and he uses this contrast in fruitful ways regarding Kierkegaard’s notion of “the absurd.” This is why Kierkegaard speaks of the absurd in his *Journals* as a “negative criterion” of our relation to God that illuminates the convex side of faith.<sup>60</sup>

Importantly, Kierkegaard says later that the absurd is seen as absurd from the third-person perspective which does not inhabit the “I–You” relation of faith.<sup>61</sup> Kierkegaard illustrates this with an analogy between faith and love:

Take an analogy: Love makes one blind. Yes, but it is nevertheless a cursed thing to become blind—well, then, you can just diminish the blindness a little so that one does not become entirely blind. But take care—for when you diminish the blindness, you also diminish the love, because true love makes one entirely blind. And true faith breathes healthfully and blessedly in the absurd. The weaker faith must peer and speculate, just like the weaker love,

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58. Ibid.

59. X<sup>2</sup> A 432 / NB 15: 97 (1850).

60. “The absurd is not the absurd or absurdities without any distinction ... The absurd is a category, and the most developed thought is required to define the Christian absurd accurately and with conceptual correctness. The absurd is a category, the negative criterion, of the divine or of the relationship to the divine. When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd—faith transforms it, but in every weak moment it is again more or less absurd to him. The passion of faith is the only thing which masters the absurd—if not, then faith is not faith in the strictest sense, but a kind of knowledge. The absurd terminates negatively before the sphere of faith, which is a sphere by itself. ... The absurd and faith are inseparables, which is necessary if there is to be friendship and if this friendship is to be maintained between two qualities so unlike as God and man. Therefore, rightly understood, there is nothing at all frightening in the category of the absurd—no, it is the very category of courage and enthusiasm” (X<sup>6</sup> B 79 [1850]).

61. Kierkegaard explains this by pointing to Johannes de Silentio: “To a third person, the believer relates himself by virtue of the absurd; so must a third person judge, for a third person does not have the passion of faith. Johannes de Silentio has never claimed to be a believer; just the opposite, as he explained that he is not a believer—in order to illuminate faith negatively” (X<sup>6</sup> B 79 [1850]).

which does not have the courage to become entirely blind, and for that very reason remains a weaker love, or, because it is a weaker love, it does not become entirely blind.<sup>62</sup>

Not only does Fabro detect an affinity to a remark by Thomas about faith being more than an opinion and less than scientific knowledge,<sup>63</sup> but Fabro situates this affinity in a shared indebtedness to Hugh of St. Victor—the second Augustine. Fabro also notices how this shift in Kierkegaard's later writings moves him toward recognizing a more positive role for a theological speculation subordinated to faith. Fabro dates this later development in Kierkegaard's thought to around 1850 when Kierkegaard read Adolph Helfferich's two-volume anthology on Christian mysticism,<sup>64</sup> which contained, among other things, a large section about Hugh of St. Victor's view of the positive relation of faith and reason. The influence of this volume is evident in a *Journal* entry from 1850 where Kierkegaard explicitly cites a passage from Hugh of St. Victor that he discovered in Helfferich's anthology:<sup>65</sup>

Faith is aided by reason and reason is perfected by faith, since the things are believed are according to reason. If reason does not comprehend the truth of these things, it does not contradict faith in them. In things which are above reason, faith is not aided by any reason; since reason does not grasp what faith believes, and yet there is something by which reason is admonished to respect the faith which it does not comprehend. What was said, therefore, and was according to reason, was probable to reason, and it freely gave assent to them. But what was above reason was made known by divine revelation, and reason did not operate in these, but yet it was restrained lest it contend against them.<sup>66</sup>

It would seem that Kierkegaard's emphasis upon "the absurd" would place him farther away from Thomas, but Fabro is able to point to similar passages in the writings of Thomas.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, Fabro interprets Kierkegaard's remarks about "the

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62. X<sup>6</sup> B 79 (1850).

63. Cf. "Faith is a certainty of the mind about things absent which is more than opinion, but less than scientific knowledge." Aquinas, *De Veritate* q.14, a.2 reply; a. 3; a. 8. <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/QDdeVer14.htm#2>.

64. Adolph Helfferich, *Die Christliche Mystik: In Ihrer Entwicklung Und Ihren Denkmalen*, 2 vols. (Gotha: F. Perthes, 1842). Helfferich's book allowed Kierkegaard to gain access to both the theology of Hugh and Richard of St. Victor (along with that of Denys the Aeropagite, Duns Scotus, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Johannes Tauler among others).

65. Cf. NB 15:21–25 (1850). Although no one has elaborated on Fabro's observation at length, Kierkegaard mentions Hugh of St. Victor several times as an influence on his own theological views on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, faith and reason, and divine providence—themes that surface throughout Kierkegaard's works time and again in significant ways. It is interesting that around the time of Fabro's publication, T. H. Croxall makes the same observation, see Thomas Henry Croxall, *Kierkegaard Commentary* (New York: Harper, 1956), 29.

66. Hugh of St. Victor, *De Sacramentis* 1, 3, chap. 30 (Migne, *PL* 176.232).

67. For example: "Sensible things, from which the human reason takes the origin of its knowledge, retain within themselves some sort of trace of a likeness to God. This is so imperfect,

absurd” in the direction of Hugh of St. Victor. Fabro says that the reason Kierkegaard preferred Hugh’s presentation of faith was because “it hit at the heart” of Hegel’s philosophy of religion and Enlightenment rationalism more generally.<sup>68</sup> Fabro concludes that in his critique of right-wing Hegelianism, Kierkegaard

draws near to Catholic ideas about the function of traditional theology, whose *munus* is certainly not that of *demonstrating* dogma, but of establishing that it is revealed truth from God and of rejecting the attacks of heresy and unbelief as *non probantes*.<sup>69</sup>

In passing, Fabro also notes how in *Sickness unto Death* (1850), Kierkegaard distinguishes the difference between ignorance and sin to illuminate the limits of the ethical, using Paul’s claim that “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). It is interesting how this coheres with the role of theological virtues in Thomas, who also relies upon this same passage from Scripture when he distinguishes between infused and acquired virtues, and expands *habitus* to include both potency and act.<sup>70</sup>

In his *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*, Fabro argues that despite the false turns of neo-Scholasticism and neo-Thomism that remain susceptible to Heidegger’s criticisms,<sup>71</sup> it would be more fruitful “to conduct a comparative study regarding the

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however, that it is absolutely inadequate to manifest the substance of God” (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1, chap. 8); “Those things which come under faith can be considered in two ways. First, in particular; and thus they cannot be seen and believed at the same time, as shown above. Secondly, in general, that is, under the common aspect of credibility; and in this way they are seen by the believer. For he would not believe unless, on the evidence of signs, or of something similar, he saw that they ought to be believed” (*ST* 2-2, q. 1, a. 4, ad 2); “The light of faith makes us see what we believe. For just as, by the habits of the other virtues, man sees what is becoming to him in respect of that habit, so, by the habit of faith, the human mind is directed to assent to such things as are becoming to a right faith, and not to assent to others” (*ibid.*, ad 3). Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/FS/FS065.html#FSQ65A2THEP1>.

68. Fabro, “Fede e ragione,” 176.

69. *Ibid.*, 177.

70. “Only the infused virtues are perfect, and deserve to be called virtues simply: since they direct man well to the ultimate end. But the other virtues, those, namely, that are acquired, are virtues in a restricted sense, but not simply: for they direct man well in respect of the last end in some particular genus of action, but not in respect of the last end simply. Hence a gloss of Augustine [*\*Cf. Lib. Sentent. Prosperi cvi.*] on the words, ‘All that is not of faith is sin’ (Rom 14:23), says: ‘He that fails to acknowledge the truth, has no true virtue, even if his conduct be good,’” *ST* 2-1, q. 65, a. 2. For more, see Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1995), chap. 7.

71. Fabro traces Heidegger’s critique of Scholasticism back to a misrepresentation of Carl Braig’s (1852–1923) work, who was a representative of the Tübingen school and from whom Heidegger took a theology course at the University of Fribourg in 1911. For more, see Fabro, *Introduzione a San Tommaso*, 280–81. See also Martin Heidegger,

theology of faith in both Thomism and in the founder of existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard, since he remains faithful to the principles of Aristotelian realism and Christian revelation."<sup>72</sup> Fabro goes on to explain and it is worth quoting at length:

The spark of freedom that Thomas demands first and foremost in the theological sphere begins with the act of faith, which for him is and must be an absolutely free act, since its object is absolute and immutable. Precisely because God is the perfect and immutable Principle, and since all of His attributes are immutable and perfect, and precisely because the Incarnation of Christ is the absolute *Fact* of salvation (because of these two supreme guarantees in the metaphysical order and in the flux of history), the decision is mine because in it, I directly communicate with God and with Christ. Thus for Thomas, faith is also a dialectical encounter between intellect and will, where primacy belongs to the will: "To believe is immediately an act of the intellect as it is prompted by the will."<sup>73</sup> The object to believe in—the Trinity, Incarnation, sin, etc.—certainly transcends the intelligence which cannot comprehend it, or even if it does realize this fact, it understands that it cannot comprehend it: even here Thomas is in full agreement with Kierkegaard's claim that in the act of faith, reason comprehends that it must believe.<sup>74</sup>

To sum up, Kierkegaard views the relationship between faith and reason not in terms of one cancelling out the other, but in positive, dialectical terms that allow reason to believe what is above reason by faith. Kierkegaard uses the term "paradox" to refer to the way that faith can generate both offense and belief—but this response does not cancel out the way that the individual reasons or accepts knowledge based upon testimonial authority. In his own words, Fabro says that for Kierkegaard, faith "in an

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*Philosophical and Political Writings*, German Library (New York: Continuum, 2003), 70–71. In passing, Fabro also notes Heidegger's bemusement with Braig's simultaneous critique of modern philosophy and Neo-Scholasticism, but Braig's general pattern of argument is one that Fabro himself seems to adopt. In his *Introduction to St. Thomas*, Fabro connects the errors of neo-Scholasticism with those of modern philosophy and presents the recovery of Aquinas (endorsed by magisterial documents) as the solution to this failure which also provides a new project for philosophers and theologians after the Second Vatican Council. For more on the relation between Carl Braig and Martin Heidegger, see John D. Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University, 1982), 45ff.; S. J. McGrath, *The Early Heidegger & Medieval Philosophy: Phenomenology for the Godforsaken* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2006), 29–34; Judith Wolfe, *Heidegger's Eschatology: Theological Horizons in Martin Heidegger's Early Work*, Oxford Theology & Religion Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013), 25–38.

72. Fabro, *Introduzione a San Tommaso*, 260–61. Translation mine. See also Cornelio Fabro, "Intorno Al Nozione Tomista Di Contingenza," *Rivista di filosofia neo-scolastica* 30, no. 2 (1938): 132–49. For more, see Joshua Furnal, "Doing Theology with Cornelio Fabro: Kierkegaard, Mary, and the Church," *The Heythrop Journal* 56 (2015): 931–47, <https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.12215>.

73. *ST* 2-2, q. 6, a. 2.

74. Fabro, *Introduzione a San Tommaso*, 299. Translation mine.

ontological sense is meta-rational, it is the object of faith that truly ‘knows’ the truth of its object and it can move reason itself.”<sup>75</sup> In his own works, Kierkegaard plays with this dialectic using his pseudonyms that, in the case of Johannes Climacus and Johannes de Silentio, do not claim to be insiders to faith, but only observers—a point that many interpreters of Kierkegaard miss. For this reason, Fabro includes in the final part of his essay an extended translation of Kierkegaard’s response to Theophilus Nicolaus.<sup>76</sup> In short, Fabro is able to trace Kierkegaard’s position about the way faith transcends reason back to a strand of the Catholic tradition.

## Concluding Observations

The sheer output of Fabro’s scholarship will continue to take many decades and more doctoral research to fully appreciate. As I have suggested here, just one of Fabro’s articles on Kierkegaard illuminates a whole host of questions that could generate future research. In order to conclude, let me sum up what I see as two important features of Kierkegaard’s theology of faith for Fabro’s intellectual journey. First, Kierkegaard’s theology of faith positively evaluated the role of human subjectivity in such a way that the object and ground of faith is not merely anthropological but properly *theological*. This point anticipates Fabro’s later critique of Feuerbach and Rahner. In his own words, Fabro says that “Kierkegaard proved against G. E. Lessing and modern philosophers, the Christian’s act of faith constitutes the decisive proof and the surest commitment the human person can have for God.”<sup>77</sup> For Fabro, what separates Kierkegaard from Marx and atheistic existentialism is Kierkegaard’s insistence upon “the act of freedom to choose the Absolute and to base oneself on it.”<sup>78</sup>

Second, Kierkegaard’s view of the truth and authority of faith is *dialectical*. For Kierkegaard, the absurdity of faith indicates a limit to human reason, but when faith existentially bears upon the course of one’s life, the absurd is transformed in the light of faith. This point anticipates Fabro’s critique of German idealism and what he refers to as “philosophies of immanence.” For Fabro, Kierkegaard is one thinker that resists totalitarian philosophies of immanence by emphasizing the existence of the supernatural act of faith. It would be interesting to trace the ways in which Fabro’s critique of immanence anticipates many theological critiques of secularism. Although many of the secularization debates in sociology are being heavily revised, there is a resurgence in continental philosophy of religion with the thinkers that Fabro groups together in his attack on the philosophy of immanence.

In short, Kierkegaard remains crucial to Fabro’s own intellectual development. In a time when human subjectivity presented itself as a challenge for neo-Thomism, Fabro learned to appreciate Kierkegaard’s dialectical view of subjectivity in his theology of faith. By reading Kierkegaard’s *Journals*, Fabro learned more about the dialectical

75. Fabro, “Fede e ragione,” 170. Translation mine.

76. X<sup>6</sup> B 114.

77. Fabro, *Selected Articles on Metaphysics and Participation*, 266.

78. *Ibid.*, 271.

integration of faith and reason in Kierkegaard, which previous scholarship had neglected. Moreover, Fabro learned to appreciate the ways in which Kierkegaard departed from Luther's theology and moved closer to patristic thinkers that were also influential for Thomas Aquinas. In this way, rather than being merely a historical endeavor, Kierkegaard's writings helped Fabro to see a way to confront contemporary philosophies that had attacked or dismissed the central claims of Christianity. Indeed, for contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship today, Fabro's interpretation of Kierkegaard remains relevant because Fabro illuminated the themes of authority, dogma, dialectic, and paradox in Kierkegaard's view of the Christian faith to highlight the broader catholicity of Kierkegaard's thinking.<sup>79</sup>

### **Author biography**

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