

American-European relations. Indeed, his book reminds us how our context provides the lens through which we view developments occurring elsewhere. America did not have a feudal history, entrenched aristocracy, or strong clerical tradition. It was the *presence* of these in Europe which made American developments difficult to understand, easy to criticise and even ridicule. One can therefore grasp more easily how much a break with history America's founding principles were, and consequently appreciate the contributions of transatlantic personalities to bridging the ensuing disconnect and misunderstanding.

This book is written in a very engaging manner, and can appeal to almost any reader. Howard's style and use of primary sources also makes the reading amusing, even leading to a good chuckle. The book allows us to enter into the mindset of the time, and perhaps even helps us realise the sources of our own hidden biases in the book's very pages!

SUSAN DIVALD

STARTING WITH KIERKEGAARD by Patrick Sheil, *Continuum*, 2010, pp. xi + 172, £12.99, pbk

KIERKEGAARD AND THE CATHOLIC TRADITION by Jack Mulder Jr., *Indiana University Press*, 2010, pp. xvi + 283, \$ 24.95, pbk

KIERKEGAARD ON SIN AND SALVATION by W. Glenn Kirkconnell, *Continuum*, 2010, pp. 181, £65, hbk

I approached these three books knowing very little about Søren Kierkegaard other than that the Dane was famous for being gloomy and the father of existentialism. I was also aware that his writings were attracting more and more attention from theologians, writers on spirituality, psychologists and psychotherapists. I have since learned that, like Marx, Kierkegaard was in reaction to Hegelianism, considering Hegel to be preoccupied with knowledge, with all forms of human activity having their place as 'moments' in the self-knowledge of the absolute spirit. Just as Marx wished to change the world and not just understand it, so Kierkegaard also wished that individuals would cease being mere spectators, take their lives into their own hands, and shape their future by their decisions and actions. Where Hegel focused on mere knowledge, Kierkegaard's area of investigation was the human area of freedom and responsibility, the existential area of decision and action, the level of human consciousness at which we make fateful choices and commitments. Kierkegaard was preoccupied with the individual and the self and his analyses of the self or human subjectivity are detailed, refined and highly intricate. They are also 'challenging' to the reader in the existential sense of that word.

For fairly obvious reasons I began the task of reviewing these three works by opening Patrick Sheil's *Starting with Kierkegaard*. I soon found this to be a mistaken approach, however, for the simple reason that, like many books designed for those starting out on a subject, in seeking to be both short and comprehensive it was rather too packed and condensed. Kierkegaard is a highly discursive author whose thinking takes many twists and turns; he employs an idiosyncratic vocabulary and he made things even more complicated by writing some books using a range of pseudonyms and writing others under his own name – the so-called 'signed works'. I needed a slightly looser and less compact treatment of some of his key ideas if I were ever to get a handle on him. This brought me to Jack Mulder's book which is a good starting point for Catholic readers since it is to a large extent a comparison of some of Kierkegaard's key theological concerns

and ideas with the treatment of these themes and ideas in the Catholic tradition, represented for the most part by Aquinas.

With considerable boldness, Mulder, who describes himself as a 'Catholic Kierkegaardian' and was in fact a Kierkegaardian before becoming a Catholic, tackles a number of issues that might be thought of as setting Kierkegaard apart from the Catholic tradition: Kierkegaard and Natural Reason, the Order of Love, Apostolic Authority, and Fear of Hell being four of the six topics selected. Mulder shows very good understanding of both Kierkegaard and his Catholic sources and a refreshing aspect is his appreciation of Kierkegaard's not uncritical assimilation of the Lutheran tradition. For example, he quotes Kierkegaard excoriating Luther's notion of the priesthood of all believers, a belief Kierkegaard claims that has led to the thoroughgoing secularism – by which he seems to mean the conflation of religion and politics – that he sees to be the case in the Danish State Church of his day, and concluding that 'the magnificent sublimity that we are all priests – leads to the tragic nonsense we see before us'. Mulder argues ably the case that Kierkegaard is much less of an irrationalist than he has been portrayed as being by some of his critics, and he also draws out the fact that on the subject of imperfect contrition, which is tied to the fear of hell, there is, perhaps surprisingly for such a Christian purist as Kierkegaard, much common ground between the Dane and the traditional Catholic position. He does admit, however, that on the subject of 'nature' and the 'natural' Kierkegaard, showing in this his affinity with Luther and Luther's abhorrence of Aristotle, stakes out a position that is in conflict with traditional Catholicism as represented by Aquinas; 'justification' is another area where the two are in conflict. With a note of sadness, Mulder admits to parting company with Kierkegaard but hopes to have done so with the kind of 'inwardness' which was the essence of Kierkegaard's true message. It is this quality of 'inwardness' which leads Mulder to the conclusion that Kierkegaard should be ranked as one of Christianity's great teachers and one from whom all Christians can learn.

One of the basic ideas of Kierkegaard, which runs through the three books under consideration here, is that of the relationship he sees between the three 'spheres of existence', namely the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. These spheres of existence, which represent stages in Kierkegaard's own life journey, tend to be treated by Kierkegaard in his pseudonymous works and he never treated them directly in his signed works but they provide, nevertheless, W. Glenn Kirkconnell argues, 'a tool-kit of concepts, images and relationships to point the reader toward the existential realities of guilt, belief, faith, grace, sin and salvation'. Very roughly, from what I can gather from all three books, the aesthetic is devoted to the love of self, the pursuit of fun and leads ultimately to a formless type of existence, spiritual bankruptcy and despair; with the ethical the individual discovers and regains a self along with a consideration and love for others, but ethics on its own cannot take sin and guilt seriously and once the individual begins to do so he/she passes beyond the ethical and enters into the sphere of religion. For it is only through one's relationship with God as revealed in the Incarnation that the three spheres can come together in any coherent fashion and the highest form of self-actualisation is achieved by the individual. In a manner that anticipates T.S. Eliot's description of the modern age as a 'wasteland', Kierkegaard saw his age as spiritless, with the cultivation of a public herd instinct leading to a loss of true community and of genuine mutual caring and love, which can only really take place when the God-relationship is placed as the 'middle term' between oneself and one's neighbour. It is the absence of this authentic mutuality that leads to the spiritless society. So sin for Kierkegaard is not simply an individual phenomenon but it a social force leading to a levelling, envious mass culture. The spread of true, inward Christianity, in which individuals make up their own minds and stand out against the 'crowd'

and the ‘herd’ would not just redeem individuals, but society as well. Kirkconnell argues his case skilfully and, while his approach differs radically from that taken by Mulder, it is balanced and coherent and not only communicates an important Kierkegaardian message but has much to teach us about how Kierkegaard should be read.

I found Patrick Sheil’s book disappointing as an introduction to the great Danish philosopher but excellent as a summary aiming at being comprehensive, since it filled out and gave a broader context to the themes and ideas I encountered in the other two books. As well as providing a biographical outline of the Danish philosopher and placing him to some extent in his historical context, Sheil is particularly good at defending Kierkegaard against the criticisms of other philosophers, such as Theodor Adorno, or at relating him to themes and ideas to be found in authors such as George Eliot. I found particularly illuminating his commentary on Kierkegaard’s profound empathy with St Paul, who along with Socrates features across the pages of both the pseudonymous and the signed works. Kierkegaard admires Paul because he is ‘always running’, with the result that past sufferings do not hold him fast and future sufferings have no time to frighten him – he runs because there is more work to be done; likewise, he admires how Paul can admit past sins without being paralysed by them and how he never has an unfinished opinion of other people but is always prepared to be surprised by future events: these features of Paul throw light on Kierkegaard’s intricate and highly nuanced value system. And they also reveal how Kierkegaard, who can appear exceedingly fastidious, tortured even, in his analyses of such favourite themes and motifs as sin, self-accusation, ‘comparison’ and ‘immediacy’ in its various forms – all of which are examined in Sheil’s work – nevertheless could not abide the self-indulgence of the dreamer or speculative philosopher and at all times was insistent that one’s work or task had to get done: ‘Get on with it’ seems to have been a strong undercurrent of even his most intricate and painstaking analyses. While his imagination could soar, most especially when he dwelt on what he called the ‘God relationship’, at all times his ideas have a practical, down to earth application. One can well see why, despite the hard work entailed in coming to grips with his thinking, Kierkegaard has become such an attractive author for so many theologians, spiritual writers and psychotherapists. He never ceases to challenge and surprise.

JOSEPH FITZPATRICK

BIOMEDICINE AND BEATITUDE: AN INTRODUCTION TO CATHOLIC BIOETHICS by Nicanor Pier Giorgio Austriaco OP, *Catholic University of America Press, Washington, DC, 2011, pp. xiv + 327, \$24.95, pbk*

If you wanted to recommend a book to undergraduates or seminarians studying Catholic bioethics for the first time, there are several books available. The pontificate of John Paul II spanned the birth and development of bioethics as a serious academic endeavour, and a new generation of seminarians and students has also come along, actively supportive of the John Paul II project, and rather bemused by theologians who are not. Amongst the possible introductory textbooks for such a generation, the one that seems most acceptable is William May’s *Catholic Bioethics and the Gift of Human Life*. It takes the most important magisterial documents available, comments on them, develops an understanding of human dignity, the human act, and natural law, and then applies that thinking to various issues in bioethics. The book does not contain the kind of proportionalist moral thought that was common some years ago.