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THE KIERKEGAARDIAN SHAPE OF ROMANO GUARDINI'S RESILIENT SPIRITUALITY

Summary – In this article, I present briefly Guardini's view of the role of the church community in the imitation and contemporaneity of Christ, which represents a parting of ways and distinguishes Guardini (as a Catholic) from a Protestant thinker like Kierkegaard. However, by attending to the crucial role of the individual in Kierkegaard's thought, and the distinction between the actual and ideal self in particular, I attempt to reconcile the disagreement between two thinkers. To accomplish this, I will explore briefly Kierkegaard's diagnosis of despair and his remedy of contemporaneity with Christ to assess Guardini's critical appropriation of Kierkegaard as an important resource for theological resilience. My claim is that there are two primary ways in which Kierkegaard featured as a theological resource for Guardini's resilience: i) Kierkegaard's diagnosis of despair as a condition of modernity shaped Guardini's criticism of the modern age; and ii) Guardini shared Kierkegaard's emphasis upon the imitation or 'contemporaneity with Christ' as the gift and task of all Christians that must be renewed in each generation.

Introduction

The nineteenth-century Danish philosopher and Protestant theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) had a great impact on Romano Guardini's intellectual formation and proved to be an important theological resource for Guardini's resilient spirituality.[1] Guardini owned many copies of Kierkegaard's books in his library and Kierkegaard's influence on Guardini spanned four decades, leaving a distinctive life-long trace across Guardini's signature ideas – both philosophical and theological.[2] Between 1925 and 1927, Romano Guardini

[1] For more on Guardini's contribution to Kierkegaard's wider European reception, see Joshua Furnal, *Catholic Theology after Kierkegaard*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Also see, Heiko Schulz, 'A Modest Head Start: The German Reception of Kierkegaard', in: Jon Stewart (Ed.), *Kierkegaard's International Reception*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, 307-419.

[2] For more, see Hanna-Barbara Gerl, *Romano Guardini, 1885-1968: Leben und Werk* (2nd rev. ed.), Mainz: Grünewald, 1985, 133-134, 253-257, 281-290, 308-310. See also, Stephan Pauly, *Subjekt und Selbstwerdung: Das Subjektdenken Romano Guardinis: Seine Rückbezüge auf*

taught a course on Kierkegaard in Berlin that examined the relationship between Christianity and Culture, which formed the basis for Guardini's interpretation of Kierkegaard's writings. One of his students, Hans Urs von Balthasar, observed that Guardini was 'profoundly affected by Kierkegaard'. For example, Guardini's philosophical anthropology is also known as personalism, a European movement that is indebted to Kierkegaard's emphasis on understanding the primacy of human dignity in terms of 'the single existing individual before God'.[3] Kierkegaard scholars like Peter Šajda have detected Kierkegaardian echoes in Guardini's notion of the 'living concrete' person, which Guardini deployed to emphasize the primacy of freedom as an inalienable feature of human personhood.[4]

In this article, I present briefly Guardini's view of the role of the church community in the imitation and contemporaneity of Christ, which represents a parting of ways and distinguishes Guardini (as a Catholic) from a Protestant thinker like Kierkegaard. However, by attending to the crucial role of the individual in Kierkegaard's thought, and the distinction between the actual and ideal self, in particular, I attempt to reconcile the disagreement between two thinkers. To accomplish this, I will explore briefly Kierkegaard's diagnosis of despair and his remedy of contemporaneity with Christ to assess Guardini's critical appropriation of Kierkegaard as an important resource for theological resilience. My claim is that there are two primary ways in which Kierkegaard featured as a theological resource for Guardini's resilience: i) Kierkegaard's diagnosis of despair as a condition of modernity shaped Guardini's criticism of the modern age; and ii) Guardini shared Kierkegaard's emphasis upon the imitation or 'contemporaneity with Christ' as the gift and task of all Christians that must be renewed in each generation. But to make sense of Guardini's critical appropriation of Kierkegaard's writings, more needs to be said about Kierkegaard's contrast between 'despair' [*Fortvivlelse*] and 'contemporaneity' [*Samtidighed*].

Søren Kierkegaard und Seine Einlösbarkeit in der Postmoderne, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2000 (Forum Systematik).

[3] Juan Manuel Burgos, *An Introduction to Personalism*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2018, 19-21, 137-142.

[4] Peter Šajda, 'Romano Guardini: Between Actualistic Personalism, Qualitative Dialectic and Kinetic Logic' in: Jon Stewart (Ed.), *Kierkegaard's Influence on Theology: Catholic and Jewish Theology*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012 (Kierkegaard: Research Sources, Reception and Resources 10:3), 45-74. For example, Šajda traces this Kierkegaardian influence in 'Über Sozialwissenschaft und Ordnung der Personen' (1926), 'Lebendiger Geist' (1927), 'Der Ausgangspunkt der Denkbewegung Sören Kierkegaards' (1927), and 'Freiheit, Gnade, Schicksal' (1948).

Despair and Contemporaneity in Kierkegaard's Theological Anthropology

In *The Sickness unto Death* (1849), Kierkegaard's super-Christian pseudonym Anti-Climacus writes that the fatal sickness endemic in modernity is despair. For Anti-Climacus, despair is an indication of the failure to live one's life before God – that is, an ethical and religious way of relating to oneself and taking responsibility for oneself (and others) to give an account of oneself to the Creator. Importantly, Anti-Climacus argues that freedom from despair is not automatically given to us as a default feature of life, but rather something that we find ourselves in as a failure of striving toward the good throughout the whole of one's life. For Kierkegaard, selfhood is a dynamic and unfinished project of self-coincidence that attempts to relate oneself truly to God. Wilfully or unwilfully failing to achieve this ideal selfhood before God is how Anti-Climacus defines despair – an overemphasis on finitude, physicality, temporality, or necessity at the expense of the infinite, eternal, spiritual, and freedom (or vice versa).[5]

If despair represents the failure of striving for moral perfection in the right way, then contemporaneity with Christ represents achieving the positive ideal of this striving for perfection. By using the term 'contemporaneity with Christ', Kierkegaard's pseudonym refers to the act of faith in Christ – the encounter of being present with Christ in suffering – not in a disinterested way of establishing an historically accurate *fact* but rather decisively and existentially taking a stand for saving *truth*. Contemporaneity involves viewing one's relation to Christ not as something from the past that no longer remains relevant today, but rather as actively receiving an ongoing task of self-coincidence – that is reconciling one's ideal and actual self – that every follower of Christ must take up in every generation. For example in *Practice in Christianity* (1850), Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus argues that the Christian should seek to model their life *not* on the triumphant risen and ascended Christ, but rather imitating the humanity of Christ in suffering and self-abasement.

> Christ's life here on earth is the paradigm; I and every Christian are to strive to model our lives in likeness to it, and this is the primary subject of preaching, since it is to serve this – to keep me up to the mark when I want to dawdle, to fortify when one becomes disheartened. In this way he is indeed the paradigm in the situation of contemporaneity; in that situation there was no chattering about what happened afterward. But Christendom has abolished Christ; yet, on the

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[5] For more, see Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983 (Kierkegaard's Writings 19), 40-46, 136, 155-156, 161.

> other hand, it wants – to inherit him, his great name, to make use of the enormous consequences of his life (…) to delude us into thinking that Christendom is Christ. Rather than that every generation must begin from the beginning with Christ and then set forth his life as the paradigm (…) That is why being a Christian in Christendom is as different from being a Christian in the situation of contemporaneity as paganism is different from Christianity.[6]

The heart of Anti-Climacus' concern is the meaning of the act of faith. For Anti-Climacus, the task of 'contemporaneity with Christ' is not accomplished automatically but rather must be renewed by every individual Christian in every generation.[7]

However, the act of faith amid suffering is dialectical for Anti-Climacus; the situation of contemporaneity moves from impossibility to possibility to necessity.[8] So if we are meant to take seriously the context in which Christ revealed himself to his disciples, then we have a poor humble man with a revolutionary message. What is hidden must be revealed and yet the revelation comes as an inward, invisible, and hidden necessity: God is Jesus of Nazareth. Outwardly and visibly speaking, the divinity of Jesus could not be identified as his face and thus faith involves the contingency of the objective uncertainty of the God-Man's unrecognizability: Jesus of Nazareth looks like anyone else from Nazareth. Thus, the situation of contemporaneity in the act of faith involves at once acknowledging the *actual* unrecognizability of divinity in the God-Man, and yet overcoming the *possibility* of offense with the hiddenness of divinity in humanity. And yet this is no historical observation but rather an existential task – the ethical and religious demand of self-coincidence still paradoxically remains – of overcoming any recognizable offense with the words and deeds of Christ and yet seeking to become unrecognizable in union with Christ – as St. Paul says 'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who lives, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2:19-20).

Anti-Climacus' claim is universal: every individual human being in every epoch *potentially* stands in an equidistant relation to Christ, which presents contemporaneity with Christ as a demand to be actualized in an individual

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[6] Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991 (Kierkegaard's Writings 20), 107. Henceforth, PC.

[7] A contemporary and compelling example of this gets explored in Terrence Malick's recent film *A Hidden Life* (2019), which traces the struggle of Franz and Fani Jägerstätter against the Nazi's during World War II.

[8] PC 63-66, 81-82, 127-128. To use Kierkegaard's phrasing, the situation of contemporaneity with Christ involves always maintaining three things at once: i) direct communication between Christ and his disciples is *impossible*; ii) the threat of unbelief and offense is *possible*; iii) and yet the imitation of Christ or conforming oneself to the likeness of Christ remains a *necessary* task.

relation to Christ (PC 66, 82). This universal potentiality is indeterminate because it may never be actualized for some people (PC 81-83, 99) who take offence at God becoming flesh in Christ and Christ offering his flesh to be consumed (Jn 6:51ff). Hence, Anti-Climacus argues that there is no time like the present (PC 63) to show that the difference between admiring a moral exemplar and the imitation of Christ is the difference between possibility and actuality.

> There is an infinite difference between an admirer and an imitator, because an imitator is, or at least strives to be, what he admires. Only the danger of actuality can really make it manifest, and therefore in contemporaneity with Christ it really became manifest who was the admirer, who the imitator, how few of the latter there were. (PC 249-250)

The problem with admiration is that it can take a disinterested stance toward Christ rather than an existential one. The historian's reconstruction of Christ and the two millennia that separate us historically will not necessarily transform the possible relation into an actual one (PC 144). For this reason, Anti-Climacus emphasizes the first-personal existential demand of contemporaneity over against the third-personal testimonial knowledge, which matches the apostle's passionate contemporaneity with Christ as the real presence of saving truth rather than the historian's dispassionate reconstruction of the historical record.[9] As we shall see in the next section, Guardini hesitates to sever the first-personal from third-personal when evaluating the act of faith based on testimonial knowledge.

Guardini's Critical Appropriation of Kierkegaard's Theological Anthropology

Whereas Kierkegaard's pseudonym emphasizes the individual's relationship with Christ, Guardini situates this relationship in a concrete community. Guardini adapts Kierkegaard's theological emphasis because it was susceptible to an 'actualistic' interpretation of the human person – that is, the status of personhood is not *given* with creation but is only *achieved* by the culmination

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[9] PC 30-33, 56, 64, 221. Šajda rightly observes that Guardini overlooks Anti-Climacus' ecclesiological distinction between the 'apostle' of the Church Militant and the 'historian' of the Triumphant Church when speaking about the difference between the historical record and salvation history. This is another way in which Fabro's reading of Kierkegaard appreciates what Guardini tends to overlook. For more, see Cornelio Fabro, 'Il Problema Della Chiesa in Newman e Kierkegaard', in: *Newman Studien* 10 (1978), 120-139.

of specific acts.[10] However, Peter Šajda has rightly observed that Guardini conflates the word 'person' with Kierkegaard's use of 'self'. On the face of it, this seems like a straightforward interpretation, but this reading covers up Kierkegaard's dialectic between our actual and ideal self when it comes to the task of moral perfection.[11] In light of this interpretive misstep, Guardini proceeds to (mistakenly) indict Kierkegaard's anthropology of dynamic voluntarism, which promotes the self-subverting and tragic task of 'becoming who you are' by achieving a set of facts that pass away as soon as they appear, to the point of even dispersing one's relationship to oneself into a vanishing point across time.

Kierkegaard's view of despair was also an important resource for Guardini's theology of melancholy, which Guardini viewed as something that can present itself either as a temptation to despair or as a prompt to place your trust and hope in God. In his own words, Guardini describes melancholy as 'the call of God' and 'the cost of eternity's birth in the person'. The instructional aspect of what Guardini gleans from Kierkegaard is that despair is a double temptation: it is important to neither yield to the *status quo* of sense-experience as the absolute, nor to isolate oneself off in a nostalgic withdrawal from the world. For both Guardini and Kierkegaard, the double temptation of despair represents the refusal of responsibility and the denial of freedom. The path toward renewal sits on a knife-edge between faith and the sin of despair (Rm 14:23).

Nevertheless, Guardini resists an isolating tendency in Kierkegaard's abstract presentation that risks severing the positive ideal of contemporaneity with Christ from the actual Church community which bears witness to Christ's real presence throughout history.[12] For example, in one of Guardini's final works *The Church*

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[10] Peter Šajda, 'The Choice of Oneself: Revisiting Guardini's Critique of Kierkegaard's Concept of Selfhood', in: *Filozofia* 66 (2011) no.9, 868-878. Space does not permit, but it is interesting to note that in an Italian context, this actualistic anthropology is associated with the right-wing Hegelian Giovani Gentile, and Cornelio Fabro deploys Kierkegaard's critique of Hegelianism to criticize the Italian proponents of this view.

[11] Šajda rightly notes that Kierkegaard's (Anti-Climacus') point is not to deprive people of selfhood, but rather to claim that ideal selfhood remains an actual task for everyone, even when this task is abandoned (willfully or unwilfully) in despair – a misrelation still remains a relation (cf. Šajda, 'The Choice of Oneself', 875-876). Nevertheless, because Anti-Climacus is Kierkegaard's super-Christian persona, Guardini's critique of an elitist spirituality still sticks to the fictive author (rather than to Kierkegaard himself). Although Guardini explicitly did not write critically against the Third Reich until 1935, one can detect a contrastive anthropology emerging in his academic articles on Kierkegaard, which would contribute to his eventual dismissal from the university of Berlin in 1939. For more on Guardini and Nazism, see Robert Anthony Krieg, *Romano Guardini: A Precursor of Vatican II*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997, ch. 6.

[12] Jon Stewart (Ed.), *A Companion to Kierkegaard*, Chichester: Blackwell, 2015, 241-242.

of the Lord (1965), he provides an ecclesial supplement to the underdeveloped aspects of Kierkegaard's theology.[13] Guardini's Christology has an ecclesiological dimension in that the words and deeds of Christ are proclaimed throughout every subsequent epoch and, dialectically speaking, the Church heralds the higher unity of salvation history amid the clash between faith and history.[14] In other words, the people of God scattered among the twelve tribes of Israel are united in the twelve disciples of Jesus, which continues in the apostolic succession of the Church. In his own words, Guardini writes:

> it is Christ who comes in the apostles. And not only in them, but also in their successors. In the Church, in its earthly reality, [Christ] draws near to be face to face with us in every epoch, in every cultural situation, 'until the end of the age'. In this is manifested the entire situation that is given with the structure of contemporaneity (…) It is clear that the 'situation of contemporaneity' gets repeated here in its possible form, which, according to Kierkegaard's thought, cannot be established. But what sustains and makes possible legitimate contemporaneity is the Church. Certainly it is to Christ whom it refers, for whom the choice is accomplished, but as one that comes announced by the Church.[15]

Following Kierkegaard, Guardini interprets the act of faith in terms of an existential response to a divine calling 'in a situation of "contemporaneity" with Christ'. However, unlike Kierkegaard, Guardini goes on to stipulate that the situation of contemporaneity with Christ includes an ecclesial link with the Church as the body of Christ. Viewed in isolation, Guardini's ecclesiological position risks reducing Christ to merely a bridging concept of a supercessionist dialectic between Israel and Church. Instead, Guardini reads the ascension in light of Pentecost and the sending of the Spirit to Christ's disciples on earth, which theologically does not indicate something separate from Christ's real, transforming, and living presence in the Church 'until the end of the age' (Mt 28:20).[16]

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[13] Romano Guardini, *Die Kirche des Herrn: Meditationen über Wesen und Auftrag der Kirche*, Würzburg: Werkbund-Verlag, 1965, 69-80. This book is also significant because it demonstrates that Guardini's engagement with Kierkegaard was a life-long conversation and interpreters of Guardini have suggested that this book in particular represents Guardini's critical reply to the unwarranted optimism of post-conciliar developments.

[14] Šajda notes how Guardini's Christological and ecclesiological view of contemporaneity can be detected as early as his essay 'Vom Wesen katholischer Weltanschauung' (1923), where the Christological (subjective proximity) and ecclesiological (intersubjective proximity) provide first and third personal dimensions to contemporaneity. For more, see Šajda, 'Romano Guardini: Between Actualistic Personalism, Qualitative Dialectic and Kinetic Logic', 54, 68ff.

[15] Romano Guardini, *L'esistenza del cristiano*, Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1985, 337. Translation mine.

[16] Eva-Maria Faber, *Kirche zwischen Identität und Differenz: Die ekklesiologischen Entwürfe von Romano Guardini und Erich Przywara*, Würzburg: Echter, 1993 (Studien zur Systematischen und Spirituellen Theologie), 26.

For Guardini, human interiority is the invisible domain where the Spirit dwells and works primarily in *people* rather than the visible *institution* of the Church.[17] In short, Guardini emphasizes that the bearer of divine revelation always remains the work of the Spirit and it is Christ himself that communicates directly through the Church in every subsequent epoch.[18] In this way, the Church is a living people that *scandalously* ascends and participates in the real presence of the *crucified* Christ through the Spirit.[19] For Kierkegaard, the emphasis is placed upon the single individual Christian whose task and goal *is* the imitation of Christ. If Guardini's emphasis falls on the action of the Spirit, then Kierkegaard's emphasis falls on the single individual's receptivity to that work of the Spirit.

To sum up, Kierkegaard's relentless emphasis on the historical and theological nature of God's self-revelation in Christ, shaped Guardini's theology of the human person as 'being before God'. Following Kierkegaard, Guardini says that we are 'boundary dwellers' between time and eternity, and the tension that we feel in this present moment is instructive and potentially edifying. For example, Guardini writes that the mission of the Church is to arouse in us 'that tension which constitutes the very foundation of nature: the tension between being and the desire to be, between actuality and the task to be accomplished' and to resolve this tension by reminding us that we are 'God's image and therefore capable of apprehending and possessing God'.[20]

Concluding remarks

In his book on Guardini, Hans Urs von Balthasar summed up Guardini's main criticism of Kierkegaard in this way:

> What is missing in Kierkegaard's intensity is the gift of the undisturbed vision of the established form. The idea of a 'wholly other God', who remains hidden from the sinner, betrays Protestant extremism, the absence of the Catholic element of analogy, and, therefore, the repudiation of any pathway leading from the world to God. Kierkegaard inaugurates dialectical theology, whose positions Guardini always rejected.[21]

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[17] Ibid., 83.

[18] For more, see Ibid., 24-29.

[19] Ibid., 27-28. For more on how Guardini anticipates the ecclesiology of Vatican II, see Krieg, *Romano Guardini: A Precursor of Vatican II*, ch. 3.

[20] Romano Guardini, *The Church and the Catholic, and the Spirit of the Liturgy*, transl. Ada Lane, London: Sheed & Ward, 1935, 62.

[21] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Romano Guardini: Reform from the Source*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010, 78. On the other hand, Christopher Barnett has argued persuasively that

However as we have seen, Guardini's theological anthropology reflects Kierkegaard's emphasis on discontinuity and paradox as a critical reply to the undesirable effects of Hegelian idealism and Romanticism, which overemphasized the conceptual reconciliation of opposites in a higher unity in logic and history.[22] Although Guardini often turns to Kierkegaard as a dialectical thinker who emphasizes 'the infinite qualitative difference' between the finite and infinite, Guardini does not uncritically endorse Kierkegaard's dialectical performance. Instead, Guardini recasts Kierkegaard's dialectical emphasis on *opposition* into analogical terms of *difference-in-relation*.[23] In Guardini's view, Kierkegaard does not operate with an analogical ontology but rather an equivocal one that separates one region of being as qualitatively incommensurable from another region – like sense and nonsense.[24] As a result, Guardini claims that Kierkegaard antagonistically separates Christianity from culture, nature from grace, and creation from redemption, which places God in a heteronomous relation to humanity condemned to despair.

However, as a remedy to the ills of the modern condition, Guardini supplements Kierkegaard's *negative* diagnosis with another *positive* Kierkegaardian idea of the imitation or contemporaneity with Christ.[25] Guardini significantly adapts and expands Kierkegaard's Christological use of the term to include (but *not* to replace it with) an ecclesiological dimension because Kierkegaard's position risks exalting the risen and ascended Christ above every epoch to such an extent that he isolates Christ's real presence from the rest of humanity situated in history.

In short, I have suggested that, despite these criticisms, there are two primary ways in which Kierkegaard featured as a theological resource for Guardini's resilience: i) Kierkegaard's diagnosis of despair as a condition of modernity shaped Guardini's criticism of the modern age; and ii) Guardini shared Kierkegaard's emphasis upon the imitation or 'contemporaneity with Christ' as the gift

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Balthasar missed Kierkegaard's dialectical use of literary 'images' as a kind of theological aesthetics in Eric Ziolkowski (Ed.), *Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018, 177-191.

22 Peter Šajda, 'A Jewish, a Catholic, and a Neo-Marxist Critique of Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion', in: Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, & Karl Verstrynge (Eds.), *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012, 303-321.

23 Šajda, 'Romano Guardini: Between Actualistic Personalism, Qualitative Dialectic and Kinetic Logic', 55. Šajda shows how in *Der Gegensatz* (1925), Guardini argues that dialectical thinking can only operate on the basis of privileging either identity or difference, whereas analogical reasoning views the tension between opposing poles as indicating a proportionality to a larger whole.

24 Ibid., 70.

25 Faber, *Kirche zwischen Identität und Differenz*, 77ff.

and task of all Christians that must be renewed for each individual in each generation.[26]

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