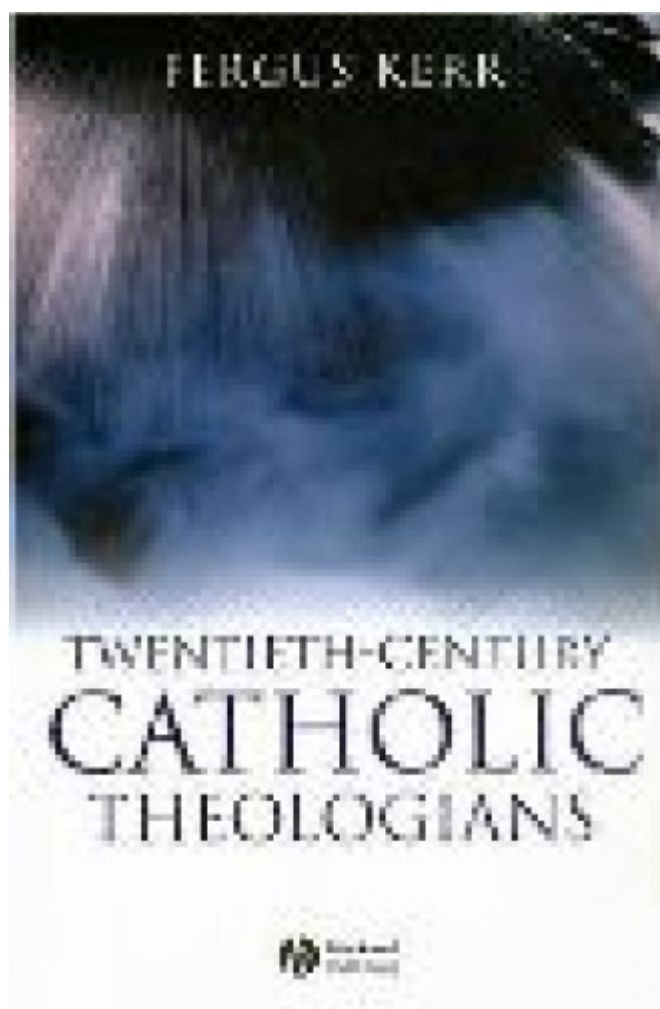


Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [December 25, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians

Fergus Kerr
Blackwell

Fergus Kerr's new book is so good that the only thing worth criticizing about it is its title. *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* is descriptively accurate, but it suggests the detachment of a dull textbook. Don't let that fool you: this book is genuinely important, and a delight to read besides.

Kerr might have called it *The Triumph of Origen*, for each of the ten figures he considers Catholic greats of the past century did his part to rejuvenate the reputation of the great third-century Alexandrian, whether on the nature of the spiritual senses, the presence of God throughout creation, or the near-universal scope of salvation.

Or Kerr might've chosen this sparkling phrase from his book: *Creative Amnesia*. In the 20th century Catholic theology underwent seismic shifts, yet popes and bishops continued to speak as though nothing had changed from the apostles until now. Kerr expounds with great sympathy the "theology of the body" first articulated by John Paul II in the early 1990s (a theology often championed now by Catholics far more conservative than Kerr). He points to the delicious irony of a 2004 document that claims that this doctrine, which Kerr calls "entirely new," is now regarded as "the only one. Amazingly, with characteristic Roman Catholic talent for creative amnesia, the *imago Dei* theology that has held sway for 2,000 years is never even mentioned!"

Kerr has been a player in the game he describes, as a Dominican priest, great scholar of Thomas Aquinas and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and editor of his order's influential academic journal, *New Blackfriars*. He was one of those who entered ordination studies in the 1950s when neoscholasticism dominated the theological curriculum. "That the century ended with a reaffirmation of nuptial mysticism by influential theologians, we did not anticipate."

Kerr examines the careers of ten white European males, a limitation for which he apologizes—liberation theologians have been amply described in English elsewhere, and it would indeed be hard to supplant any one of these ten given their importance leading up to and then interpreting the Second Vatican Council. The chapter on each follows a pattern: the student enrolls in seminary and is bored with the detached, philosophically arid version of Aquinas's philosophy then on offer. For neoscholasticism, the truth of Aquinas's teaching could be demonstrated dispassionately and analytically. There was no need to read Aquinas himself, for it

was thought that later interpreters aptly summarized his teaching. In fact, there was little need to read the scriptures. Teaching was not grounded in history, was not mediated by liturgy, was not embodied in communities; it was timeless and universal, not subject to historical accident (never mind that this teaching was itself historically traceable, largely to Immanuel Kant).

In those days, Catholic theologians, priests and religious had to swear the antimodernist oath, denouncing any would-be incursion against this Thomist fortress. Of the oath Kerr writes, "It may seem incredible that grown men would come up with the proposition that 'It is glorious for the Church to have the system of Saint Thomas as truly orthodox,' and suchlike, and to badger [Marie-Dominique] Chenu into putting his signature to such poppycock—but that is symptomatic of the theological pathology of those days." Even so he writes with gentleness of the experience of those left in the dust of Vatican II: "One should not forget the pain suffered by [this] generation."

Each of these ten greats rebelled, in ways great or small. Many were disciplined: Karl Rahner's doctoral dissertation was rejected; Hans Urs von Balthasar, "widely regarded as the greatest Catholic theologian of the century," was not invited to Vatican II; Henri de Lubac was rebuked by his fellow Jesuits. More famously, Hans Küng's right to teach in Catholic institutions was revoked because of his attack on papal supremacy (which, Kerr says with typical understatement, "did not hurt sales"). But each retrieved something of Catholic tradition that had been buried by neoscholasticism, and their teaching won out at Vatican II.

Subsequently each became disillusioned with the implementation of Vatican II. Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, is the most famous of those whose support for the council became tepid after the fact, and he now leads what Catholic conservatives commonly call "the reform of the reform," with the Tridentine liturgy reintroduced, Catholic supremacy over other churches reaffirmed and so on. Only Karl Rahner's criticisms came from the left; he thought that the council's radical edge was not pushed far enough. One of his final acts was to write a letter in support of Gustavo Gutiérrez, the father of liberation theology, to bishops in Peru. Benedict has frequently written and spoken of the way his views clashed with Rahner's—before, during and after the council. Kerr has too sharp a historical eye to let such comments go unchallenged: "Ratzinger was a good deal more revolutionary than he remembers."

The mini-rebellion of each of these figures was an attempt to be more Catholic than his fellow Catholics—to sink roots more deeply into the tradition, liturgy and prayer life of the church (amazing to think that these things now conjured up by the very word *Catholic* were a novel threat then). As Chenu put it, “The truth is no less true for being inscribed in time,” especially in the incarnation. Each of the ten also reached out ecumenically in various ways. Yves Congar, for example, met with Lutheran clergy, who told him their view of the Catholic Church was shaped by Dostoevsky’s story of the Grand Inquisitor. Congar had never even heard of Dostoevsky’s story.

When Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange (who criticized the dissertation of his advisee Karol Wojtyla, the future Pope John Paul II) coined the dismissive moniker *nouvelle theologie* for some of these ten, Henri de Lubac could rightly fire back that it was neoscholastics who represented the “truly ‘new theology,’” whereas he and his companions who were busy recovering the scriptures and the church fathers could rightly lay claim to the proud description “old.”

One detects in Kerr an especial affinity for de Lubac, the French Jesuit who opposed the Vichy regime over his superiors’ protests and spent the war years wandering in French libraries carrying bags filled with bits of research scribbled on scrap paper. These would become his magisterial *Medieval Exegesis*, which has done so much to rehabilitate an appreciation of allegorical readings among Catholics and, more recently, Protestants. Not content with one magnum opus, de Lubac also published *Catholicism*, which several of the ten (Congar, Balthasar, Wojtyla and Ratzinger) have regarded as “the one indispensable text” of 20th-century Catholic theology. It influenced John Paul II’s pontificate deeply.

De Lubac also published *Corpus Mysticum*, with its simple yet profound adage, “The church makes the eucharist and the eucharist makes the church.” That revisionist book argued that for the church fathers and early medievals, the “mystical body of Christ” was the eucharistic assembly, not the institutional church (Vatican II validated this completely). Finally, his work *Surnaturel* argued against Aquinas’s notion of “pure nature,” since, for de Lubac, nature is always already graced. Kerr’s occasional critical comment on Balthasar leads one to think that he sees de Lubac as the greatest mind of these ten.

But of course it is not the greatness of individual minds that counts in Catholicism, it is the whole church, through time and space—as these ten reminded their

colleagues. Kerr has a great eye for irony: an indulgence is granted to Catholics who pray for the restoration of church unity during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, to cite only one hilarious example. And he is an unbiased observer of fights still roiling the Church of Rome, such as those over birth control and divorce, in which the bishops and the laity are so divided that they do not even argue, and the church is left in a state of “silent schism.”

But unlike more liberal observers of the Catholic Church, Kerr does not merely cluck his tongue over Catholic failings. He describes here a triumph in the Catholic theology of the last century, especially in the near-universal retrieval of Origen (the church may take a while, but it eventually gets it right) and the recent retrieval of nuptial mysticism. The marriage between Christ and his church is seen most fully in allegorical readings of the Song of Songs, but also in believers’ own marriages, for our creation in the image of God, male and female, allows us to be intimate with one another and so bear fruit also. The *imago dei* is now “not in our rationality but in sexual difference . . . in our genitalia, not in our heads, so to speak.”

Kerr shows that the innovation of creative amnesia in Catholic thought was largely mediated through Karl Barth, from whom many of these ten learned a great deal. Ecumenism is inscribed into the fabric of Catholic theology forever now. One hopes that this doctrine’s provenance will not be creatively forgotten.

Kerr ends with a brief meditation on the church as a communion not only of saints but also of sinners, though he notes that “some will say that we have learnt, at last, to fudge issues, to avoid confrontations, to leave judgement too easily to God.”