

## Henri de Lubac and the “New Theology”

“All nature,” according to Henri de Lubac, is an “infinitely vast and diverse symbol across which the Face of God is mysteriously reflected. A man is religious to the very degree that he recognizes everywhere these reflections of the divine Face, that is, that he lives in a sacred atmosphere.”<sup>1</sup> When he spoke these words in 1942, de Lubac was concerned that this “sense of the sacred” was hard to find in the modern, secular world of twentieth-century Europe. He was also concerned that early twentieth-century Catholic theology was doing too little to restore it.<sup>2</sup> Indeed de Lubac was critical of all theology that assumes God to be a being, though of much greater power and proportion, like other beings. He believed, of course, that God is not one being among others but rather the total context within which all creatures “live and move and have [their] being” (Acts 17:28, NRSV). De Lubac believed that Christian theology, at least since the late Middle Ages, has too often proceeded as though the natural world were cut off from its divine context—from the God, who is its beginning and end.

Moreover, de Lubac feared that some of Catholicism’s most important constitutive practices, such as the sacraments and the spiritual exegesis of Scripture, had been obscured and stripped of their vitality by extrinsicist and historicist conceptions of the faith. Accordingly, his entire career focused on a revisioning of both theology and philosophy unencumbered by rationalist and historicist presuppositions.

1. De Lubac, “Internal Causes,” 231. This essay is the published version of a lecture given to a group of youth-camp chaplains in Saint-Baume, from April 14 to 17 in 1942.

2. For his personal reflections on these years, see de Lubac, *Christian Resistance to Anti-Semitism*.

Like many of the twentieth century's most notable philosophers, de Lubac affirmed, "human knowledge is never without an a priori." He suggests, "man is made in such a way that he cannot give meaning to something without choosing his perspective."<sup>3</sup> De Lubac argued that critical biblical scholars and neoscholastic theologians both assume an ahistorical, disincarnate, and impossible objectivity.<sup>4</sup> In order to overcome the twin problems of rationalism (which, following Maurice Blondel, he often called "extrinsicism") and historicism, de Lubac advocated a *Ressourcement*—a return to the sources of the great Catholic tradition and specifically a retrieval of the best insights of patristic and medieval exegesis. He believed that the ultimate goal of theology is not the identification and explication of a static body of revealed knowledge but rather the cultivation of Christ's wisdom and love within the church through a christological reading of signs.<sup>5</sup> While de Lubac was clearly interested in helping the church overcome the dualism of post-Cartesian philosophy and theology, he affirmed consistently that spiritual exegesis mediates the church's ontological participation in Christ.<sup>6</sup>

De Lubac argued that, unlike historical-critical biblical scholarship, that the allegorical approach of the Fathers sought not scientific knowl-

3. De Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 39.

4. Notably, de Lubac did not reject the contributions of historical-critical scholars. Indeed, he understood well that there could never be a return to the days of pre-critical exegesis. For de Lubac, the methods of critical scholars have become indispensable in the never-ending effort to understand the literal sense of Scripture. Moreover, de Lubac never advocated a new exegetical method based upon the fourfold sense of Scripture. He did, however, advocate a retrieval of the participatory ontology and philosophy of history that under girded patristic and medieval exegesis. See de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 67–68.

5. In one essay, de Lubac ridiculed Catholic neoscholastic theologians who "stroll about theology somewhat as if in a museum of which we are the curators, a museum where we have inventoried, arranged and labeled everything; we know how to define all the terms, we have an answer for all objections, we supply the desired distinctions at just the right moment. Everything in it is obscure for the secular, but for us, everything is clear, everything is explained. If there is still mystery, at least we know exactly where it is to be placed, and we point to this precisely defined site" (de Lubac, "Internal Causes," 233).

6. Consider the following statement: "the two Testaments are always considered in tradition as the place of operation for all sacraments, and the place of concealment for all mysteries." Moreover, "the sacrament would play, therefore, the role of package, or envelope in relation to the mystery which hides in it" (de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 57–58). The mystery of which he speaks is the "mystical" or "spiritual" sense of Scripture.

edge but a sapiential and thoroughly christological wisdom to guide the church in its inherently social and political mission to the world. In a certain sense, his entire career was focused on returning the Catholic Church to a way of doing theology that, like the exegetical approach of the Fathers, serves both to draw the church into the mystery of Christ and salvation history while extending the reach of the church into the fullness of Christ where all of humanity is reconciled and redeemed.<sup>7</sup>

## THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT

The purpose of this work is to examine the centrality of Henri de Lubac’s retrieval of patristic and medieval exegesis within the context of his broader efforts to inspire a more faithful and robust Catholic engagement with the secular world. It is well known that de Lubac’s groundbreaking and highly controversial work on nature and grace had important implications for the Catholic Church’s relationship to culture and was intended to remove a philosophical obstacle hindering Catholicism’s witness to the world. This book will address a too-often neglected dimension of de Lubac’s thought by examining the centrality and indispensability of spiritual exegesis in his *oeuvre* and making explicit its social and political significance in the church’s worship and witness. While de Lubac’s major preconciliar works are the primary focus of this study, recent theological movements such as postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy will serve as helpful interlocutors, especially in the final chapters. Placing de Lubac in a critical dialogue with some of his recent interpreters will highlight the continuing relevance of his work and put some distance between *la nouvelle théologie* and more recent theological programs such as Radical Orthodoxy.

## NOUVELLE THÉOLOGIE AND RADICAL ORTHODOXY

Certainly the “post-modern critical Augustinianism”<sup>8</sup> of John Milbank and others constitutes the most explicit (and controversial) recent appro-

7. This is the theme of the first chapter of his first book, published in 1938. For a more recent English translation, see de Lubac, *Catholicism*. It is widely agreed that de Lubac’s entire publishing career was foreshadowed in this book, whose individual chapters were expanded to become the basis for nearly all of his major works.

8. See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 225–37.

priation of de Lubac's work.<sup>9</sup> In the introduction to *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward suggest that their own "perspective is in profound continuity with the French *nouvelle théologie*,"<sup>10</sup> and elsewhere they acknowledge a special appreciation for the work of Henri de Lubac. Milbank suggests that Radical Orthodoxy has a greater "alliance" with *la nouvelle théologie* than with neo-orthodoxy. "Radical Orthodoxy," he writes, "considers that Henri de Lubac was a greater theological revolutionary than Karl Barth, because in questioning the hierarchical duality of grace and nature as discrete stages, he transcended, unlike Barth, the shared background assumption of all modern theology. In this way one could say, anachronistically, that he inaugurated a postmodern theology."<sup>11</sup>

Like their French Catholic forerunners, the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy intend a careful retrieval of the patristic and medieval sources, and they are especially intent on a recovery of the "Augustinian vision" that rejects any dichotomy between nature and grace or reason and faith. The Radical Orthodoxy project shares with *la nouvelle théologie* a desire to engage the secular world with the gospel, but "where radical orthodoxy wishes to reach farther is in recovering and extending a fully Christianised ontology and practical philosophy consonant with authentic Christian doctrine."<sup>12</sup>

9. It is of course true that de Lubac has always been of interest to readers of and contributors to the International Catholic journal *Communio*, which was founded by de Lubac, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, Joseph Ratzinger, and others. *Communio* is currently published in fourteen countries and languages, and has continued to publish translations of de Lubac's shorter writings as well as various articles by contemporary theologians on all aspects of his thought. *Communio*'s American editor, David L. Schindler, is inarguably the most important figure on the American theological landscape when it comes to carrying on the legacy of *la nouvelle théologie*.

10. Milbank et al., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 2.

11. Milbank, "Programme of Radical Orthodoxy," 35.

12. The authors write that "the consequences of modern theological decadence for philosophy and the wider culture were never fully considered by *nouvelle théologie* (and indeed it sometimes uncritically embraced various modes of secular knowledge)" (Milbank et al., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 2). It is somewhat inaccurate, I believe, to suggest that de Lubac failed to fully consider the "consequences of modern theological decadence." See for example, de Lubac, *Drama of Atheist Humanism*. Milbank and the others may be faulting *la nouvelle théologie* for failing to propose a theological engagement with culture along the lines of Radical Orthodoxy. I will argue, especially in chapters 5 and 6, that the program of *nouvelle théologie* remains the better approach.

The recovery and extension of a fully Christianized ontology is the main thrust of the Radical Orthodoxy project, and the initial volume in the Routledge Press series contains essays on diverse topics such as desire, language, friendship, music, the city, and knowledge.<sup>13</sup> This effort has continued through the publication of books and articles that offer a theological perspective on issues where "secularism has invested heavily—aesthetics, politics, sex, the body, personhood, visibility, space," economics, and more.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, de Lubac and others associated with *la nouvelle théologie* never addressed many of these topics in writing, so Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward are correct in claiming that their project goes farther in this direction.<sup>15</sup>

However, there are other, perhaps more important differences between *la nouvelle théologie* and Radical Orthodoxy thus conceived. One difference is obvious in light of de Lubac's sustained efforts to illumine and retrieve the participatory ontology and distinctively Christian philosophy of history that under girded patristic and medieval exegesis. Although he is best known for his works on the social nature of Catholicism, the relationship between nature and grace, and the eucharistic nature of the church, de Lubac wrote more pages on the history of biblical exegesis than on any other single issue. In contrast, the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy have had little to say about the role that biblical interpretation should play in the church's struggle for a "fully Christianised ontology."<sup>16</sup>

13. "The central theological framework of radical orthodoxy is 'participation' as developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity, because any alternative configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God. The latter can lead only to nihilism (though in different disguises). Participation, however, refuses any reserve of created territory, while allowing finite things their own integrity. Underpinning the present essays, therefore, is the idea that every discipline must be framed by a theological perspective; otherwise these disciplines will define a zone apart from God, grounded literally in nothing" (Milbank et al., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 3).

14. Ibid., 1.

15. De Lubac did, of course, recognize the "all-encompassing" nature of theology. See, for example, de Lubac, "Authority of the Church in Temporal Matters," 214.

16. Although biblical exegesis is lacking in Milbank's work thus far, he acknowledges in his recent book on de Lubac that spiritual exegesis is fundamental in de Lubac's theology (see Milbank, *Suspended Middle*, 56–59). It is unclear, however, whether Milbank thinks spiritual exegesis is a viable alternative for Christians today or whether it is merely an interesting, though dispensable, dimension of de Lubac's *Ressourcement*. One wonders, moreover, whether Milbank would amend any of his earlier christological proposals, especially those found in *The Word Made Strange*, given his more recent comments in *The Suspended Middle* about the christological dimension of de Lubac's spiritual exegesis.

In a critical review of the initial Radical Orthodoxy volume, David Ford suggests that “Graham Ward’s essay on ‘Bodies’ is interesting and provocative, but it is the only one of the twelve essays to try to interpret Scripture as part of its argument.” He explains: “I find all this very disturbing, because I do not see a good theological future for the movement unless this is urgently addressed. Scripture is so intrinsic to the traditions, practices and theologians they espouse that without it their claim to be in continuity with these is hopelessly compromised.”<sup>17</sup>

Whereas Radical Orthodoxy theologians have been criticized for neglecting biblical exegesis, de Lubac’s *nouvelle théologie* makes spiritual exegesis fundamental and constitutive for the church in its engagement with secular culture and in the ultimate extension of a “christianised ontology.” Although Radical Orthodoxy’s commitment to a theological engagement with secularism is laudable, it will remain too separated from the life of the church unless it embraces the centrality of spiritual exegesis, as de Lubac did.

## AN OUTLINE OF FORTHCOMING CHAPTERS

In chapter 2, I examine the historical and philosophical context of de Lubac’s work, beginning with a summary of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century atheism and secularism. In particular, I argue that de Lubac saw a connection between the atheist humanism of the nineteenth century and the various sociopolitical crises of the early twentieth century, and that he believed the Catholic Church’s response to atheist humanism and its social and political manifestations was insufficient.

Chapter 3 considers the social and political context within which de Lubac wrote two of his major works on the church: *Catholicism* (1938) and *Corpus Mysticum* (1944). Whereas his first book, *Catholicism*, set out a grand vision for a renewed Church, his subsequent genealogical works sought to overcome a series of obstacles that he thought were obscuring the Church’s identity and preventing its faithful engagement with the world. *Corpus Mysticum* offered a somewhat-veiled challenge to the

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I will return to a comparison of de Lubac and Milbank in chapters 5 and 6 below.

17. Ford, “Radical Orthodoxy and the Future of British Theology,” 398. In a response to David Ford’s essay, Catherine Pickstock expresses sympathy with the concern regarding scriptural engagement, and she writes that “this should be remedied in the future” (Pickstock, “Reply to David Ford and Guy Collins,” 411).

extrinsicism of Catholic sacramental theology and ecclesiology as well as to the dialectical method of Scholastic theology.

Chapter 4 focuses on the efforts of de Lubac and several other *nouvelle* theologians who worked hard from the 1930s through the 1950s to enrich and revitalize Catholic theology.<sup>18</sup> Although the battle between *la nouvelle théologie* and neoscholasticism did not begin in 1946, de Lubac’s *Surnaturel* (1946) became the central and most controversial work in the debate, since it challenged an entrenched neoscholastic dualism that considered the sacred and secular as two distinct realms with separate ends. After reviewing this mid-twentieth-century conflict, I will illustrate how de Lubac’s work on spiritual exegesis should be considered in relation to these earlier debates over the nature of theology and theology’s engagement with secularism.

Chapter 5 examines several recent proposals for a philosophically sound christological hermeneutic to guide the church in its engagement with secular culture and politics. It includes a survey of several recent theological attempts to address and overcome the deficiencies of historical criticism. The work of postliberal theologians Hans Frei and George Lindbeck is assessed, and John Milbank’s hermeneutic alternative to postliberalism is considered and evaluated as well.

In chapter 6, I argue that de Lubac’s retrieval of spiritual exegesis offers a needed correction to the work of postliberal and Radical Orthodoxy theologians. Specifically, I argue that the hermeneutical theories of postliberal and Radical Orthodoxy theologians fail to overcome the problem of extrinsicism, while de Lubac’s retrieval of spiritual exegesis succeeds. I argue that the key to de Lubac’s vision of Catholicism fully engaged with contemporary secularism, and the factor that makes it preferable to postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy, is its christological mysticism, which is grounded in spiritual exegesis.

The seventh and concluding chapter offers a brief summary of de Lubac’s theological program and makes a number of suggestions as to how contemporary biblical scholars and theologians can and should appropriate his work in service to the church and the world. Specifically, I discuss de Lubac’s hope for a revitalized approach to spiritual exegesis—one that makes good use of the contributions of critical biblical scholarship. I ar-

18. I first encountered the phrase, “*nouvelle* theologians,” in a conference presentation by Hans Boersma, “Nature and the Supernatural in *nouvelle théologie*,” 1

gue that such a development will strengthen the church's sociopolitical witness, since recent exegetical methods like literary, social-scientific, and rhetorical criticism offer helpful means of gaining insight into the social and political contexts of biblical stories. By synthesizing critical scholarship with contemporary approaches to participatory/spiritual exegesis, the social and political dimensions of Scripture's literal sense are preserved without accommodating the church's witness to secular social and political ideologies.

SAMPLE