ABSTRACT

Ontology, Exegesis, and Culture in the Thought of Henri de Lubac

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This dissertation examines the continuity between Henri de Lubac's retrieval of patristic and medieval exegesis and his treatment of the ontological relationship between nature and grace. I argue that, for de Lubac, the spiritual exegesis of Scripture, which is best exemplified in the work of patristic and medieval theologians, is constitutive for the church in its engagement with secular culture and in the ultimate extension of, what John Milbank calls, a "Christianised ontology." While embracing many of Milbank's insights on the relationship between Christology and ecclesiology, I argue that his relative silence concerning the role of biblical exegesis in the church's engagement with culture stems from an insufficient consideration of Scripture's function in mediating Christ to the church and through the Church to a fallen world. This dissertation argues that de Lubac's theological appropriation of the philosophy of history and participatory ontology of ancient Christian exegesis can advance and offer a correction to the work of recent postliberal theologians such as Hans Frei and George Lindbeck as well as radical orthodoxy theologians such as Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward.
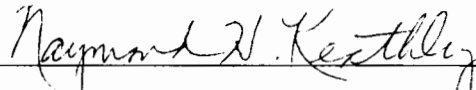
Ontology, Exegesis, and Culture in the Thought of Henri de Lubac

by

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A Dissertation
Approved by the Department of Religion

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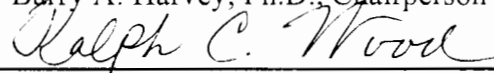Naymond H. Keathley, Ph.D., Interim Chairperson

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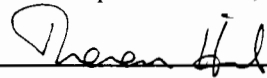
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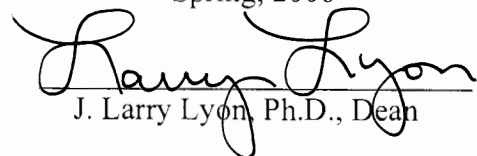Barry A. Harvey, Ph.D., Chairperson

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For Suzanne

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Influence of Henri de Lubac

Henri de Lubac was among the most influential Catholic theologians of the last

century. A key figure in the movement referred to as *nouvelle théologie*, which

challenged the neo-scholasticism that dominated Catholic theology until the nineteen-

sixties, de Lubac had a significant influence on several key constitutions of Vatican II.[1]

However, compared with scholars such as Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, Edward

Schillebeeckx, and Hans Urs Von Balthasar, de Lubac has been, in the decades since

Vatican II, relatively unappreciated within Catholicism and relatively unknown without.

There is reason to believe, however, that his thought will attract greater attention in the

coming years than it did in the four decades that followed the Council. Indeed, a

resurgence in Lubacian scholarship is already underway, and it is making inroads in

protestant and Roman Catholic academic circles.[2]

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[1] De Lubac had a major influence on the "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: *Dei Verbum.*" His work also influenced the "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: *Lumen Gentium*" and the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: *Gaudium et Spes*." For his personal reflections on the events of Vatican II, see Henri de Lubac and Angelo Scola, *Entretien Autour de Vatican II: Souvenirs et Réflexions*, Théologies (Paris, France: Editions du Cerf, 1985). For his commentary on *Dei Verbum*, see Henri de Lubac, *La Révélation Divine*, Traditions Chrétiennes (Paris, France: Editions du Cerf, 1983). For the major Vatican II documents, see Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations: A Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language* (Northport, NY: Costello Pub. , 1996).

[2] For example, whereas introductory surveys of modern Christian theology published in the decades after Vatican II often failed even to mention de Lubac, more

The Appropriation of De Lubac's thought in Radical Orthodoxy

The most explicit recent engagement of de Lubac's work is found in the so-called

"post-modern critical Augustinianism"[3] of John Milbank and others associated with the

radical orthodoxy project. In the introduction to *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*,

John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward acknowledge that their own

"perspective is in profound continuity with the French *nouvelle théologie*,"[4] and

elsewhere they acknowledge a special appreciation for the work of Henri de Lubac.

Milbank suggests that radical orthodoxy has a greater "alliance" with the *nouvelle*

théologie than with neo-orthodoxy. He explains that "Radical Orthodoxy 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,

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recent works include him among the most important thinkers of the twentieth century.
See for example, James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: From the
Enlightenment to Vatican II* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1971). See also Dean G.
Peerman and Martin E. Marty, *A Handbook of Christian Theologians*, Enlarged ed.
(Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984). Catholic theologians worthy of mention in the
estimation of Peerman and Marty include Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner,
Edward Schillebeeckx, David Tracy and Hans Küng. For a more recent survey that
considers de Lubac's work worthy of attention, see David Ford and Rachel Muers, *The
Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, 3rd ed., The
Great Theologians (Malden, MA: Blackwell 2005). Ford and Muers have listed de Lubac
among the six "classic" theologians of the last century. Others included in the list of
"classic" theologians are Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, and
Hans Urs Von Balthasar. I should also point out that many of de Lubac's works have
been only recently translated into English and that additional translations are in progress.
Recent English translations of some of de Lubac's most important works are currently
available from Ignatius Press, Crossroads Publishing Company, and William B.
Eerdmans.

[3] John Milbank, ""Postmodern Critical Augustinianism": A Short Summa in Forty
Two Responses to Unasked Questions," *Modern Theology* 7 (1991).

[4] John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy: A
New Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 2.

unlike Barth, the shared background assumption of all modern theology. In this way one could say, anachronistically, that he inaugurated a postmodern theology."[5]

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 the *nouvelle théologie* a desire to engage the secular world with the gospel, but "where radical orthodoxy wishes to reach further is in recovering and extending a fully Christianised ontology and practical philosophy consonant with authentic Christian doctrine."[6]

The recovery and extension of a fully Christianised 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.[7] This effort continues through the publication of books and articles that offer

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[5] John Milbank, "The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy," in *Radical Orthodoxy? - a Catholic Enquiry*, ed. Laurence Paul Hemming, Heythrop Studies in Contemporary Philosophy, Religion, & Theology (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 35.

[6] 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, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 2. I will argue in the body of the dissertation that, although de Lubac took a somewhat different and, as I will show later, more philosophically and theologically sound path from the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy in his engagement with secularism, he did not fail to fully consider the "consequences of modern theological decadence." See for example, Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995).

[7] "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

a theological perspective on issues where "secularism has invested heavily – aesthetics, politics, sex, the body, personhood, visibility, space," economics, and more.[8]

Certainly, Henri de Lubac and others associated with the *nouvelle théologie* never addressed many of these topics in writing, so Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward are correct in claiming that their project goes further in this direction. However, there are other, perhaps more important, differences between *nouvelle théologie* and radical orthodoxy. One difference is obvious in light of de Lubac's sustained efforts to illuminate 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." 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 writes further: "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

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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, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 3.

[8] Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 1.

espouse that without it their claim to be in continuity with these is hopelessly

compromised."[9]

Purpose and Significance of this Project

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the continuity between Henri de

Lubac's retrieval of patristic and medieval exegesis and his treatment of the ontological

relationship between nature and grace. I will show that for de Lubac the spiritual

exegesis of Scripture, best exemplified in the work of patristic and medieval theologians,

is constitutive for the church in its engagement with secular culture and in the ultimate

extension of a "fully Christianised ontology." While embracing many of John Milbank's

insights on the relationship between Christology and ecclesiology,[10] I will argue that

radical orthodoxy's relative silence concerning the role of biblical exegesis in the

church's engagement with culture stems from an insufficient consideration of Scripture's

function in mediating Christ to the church and through the Church to a fallen world. This

dissertation will thus argue that de Lubac's work on patristic and medieval exegesis both

advances and offers a correction to the work of radical orthodoxy theologians such as

Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward.

This project is timely for several reasons. First, as previously mentioned, it

advances and offers a correction to the efforts of thinkers associated with radical

orthodoxy. As Milbank has rightly suggested, de Lubac was a pioneer among twentieth-

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[9] David Ford, "Radical Orthodoxy and the Future of British Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001): 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." Catherine Pickstock, "Reply to David Ford and Guy Collins," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2000): 411.

[10] See especially John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 145-168.

century theologians who recognized the limitations of theology wedded to enlightenment philosophy. Indeed, he devoted his entire life to a revisioning of both theology and philosophy unencumbered by rationalist and historicist presuppositions. Like many of the twentieth century's most notable philosophers, de Lubac affirmed that "human knowledge is never without an a priori." Indeed, he suggests, "man is made in such a way that he cannot give meaning to something without choosing his perspective."[11] De Lubac suggests that the methods of both historical-critical scholars and neo-scholastic theologians assume an ahistorical, disincarnate, and impossible objectivity.[12] In order to overcome the twin problems of rationalism (which he often called "extrinsicism") and historicism, de Lubac advocated 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.[13] Rather, theology is a practice that the church

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[11] Henri de Lubac, *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius 1989), 39.

[12] 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 undergirded patristic and medieval exegesis. See, Henri de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2000), 67-68.

[13] In one essay, de Lubac ridiculed Catholic neo-scholastic 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." Henri de

engages in as it seeks to extend the reign of God on earth. While de Lubac, like the

proponents of radical orthodoxy, was clearly interested in helping the church overcome

the dualism of post-Cartesian philosophy and theology, he affirmed consistently, unlike

the proponents of radical orthodoxy, that the church's ontological participation in Christ

is necessarily mediated through the spiritual exegesis of Scripture.

Accordingly, this project is also timely since an increasing number of Christian

scholars are rediscovering the value of patristic and medieval exegesis and affirming its

historic role in the creation of Christian culture before the enlightenment.[14] Due in no

small part to the work of Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and others associated with the so-

called "Yale School," theologians and biblical scholars have become increasingly aware

that the methods of historical-critical scholarship are limited in their ability to grasp the

full "meaning" of Scripture. Whereas Frei and Lindbeck were focused primarily on a

retrieval of the "literal" or "plain" sense of Scripture, which was emphasized by the

sixteenth-century reformers, recent scholarship has focused increasingly on the methods

of patristic and medieval exegesis.[15] De Lubac argued throughout his career that, unlike

the methods of historical-critical scholars, the allegorical approach of the Fathers sought

Lubac, "Disputed Theological Questions and Anticipations of Vatican II," in *Theology in History* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1996), 233.

[14] For a work explaining the role of patristic exegesis in the formation of Christian culture, see Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002).

[15] Indeed, several major publishing houses have launched new multi-volume commentaries that focus on the interpretation of Scripture in the early and medieval church. See, for example, the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* series edited by Thomas Oden and published by Intervarsity Press as well as *The Church's Bible* series edited by Robert Wilken and published by Eerdmans. For an important early argument in favor of pre-critical exegesis, see David Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Theology Today* 37 (1980).

not scientific knowledge 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, de Lubac's entire theological 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.[16]

This dissertation will show that de Lubac's work anticipated the linguistic turn of postmodern theology as well as the contemporary reconsideration of patristic and medieval exegesis. Moreover, it will show that these contemporary theological trends are complementary and inseparable. This project will also fill a void in Lubacian scholarship. Although it is widely recognized that de Lubac's work on nature and grace was intended to remove a philosophical obstacle hindering the church's engagement with culture, there has been no major work examining his recovery of spiritual exegesis as an advancement of this same goal.

Chapter Outline

In chapter two I will examine the historical and philosophical context of de Lubac's work, beginning with an examination of several nineteenth century philosophers including Auguste Comte, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche. In particular, I will argue that de Lubac saw a connection between the atheist humanism of

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[16] This is the theme of the first chapter of his first book, published in 1938. For a more recent English translation, see Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius 1988). 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.

the nineteenth century and the various socio-political crises of the early twentieth century and that he believed that the Catholic Church's response to atheist humanism and its social and political manifestations was insufficient. The purpose of this chapter is to show that de Lubac's entire theological career was focused on enabling the Catholic Church to engage, more fully and faithfully, the modern secular world.

Chapter three will consider the trajectory of de Lubac's theological career, showing how all of his major works were focused on bringing the Catholic Church out of cultural exile and into an engagement with modern secularism. Whereas his earliest book, *Catholicisme* (1938), set out a grand vision for a renewed Church, his subsequent works sought to overcome a series of obstacles that he thought were obscuring the Church's identity and preventing its full engagement with the world. *Corpus Mysticum* (1944) offered a somewhat veiled challenge to the extrinsicism of Catholic sacramental theology and ecclesiology. *Surnaturel* (1946) challenged an entrenched neo-scholastic dualism that considered the sacred and secular as two distinct realms with separate ends, and the final obstacle that he confronted in a series of works beginning with *Histoire Et Esprit* (1950), was an entrenched extrinsicism in Catholic biblical scholarship.

Chapter four will focus on the contemporary search for a philosophically sound Christological hermeneutic to guide the church in its engagement with culture. It will include a survey of several recent theological attempts to address and overcome the deficiencies of historical criticism. The work of postliberal theologians such as Hans Frei and George Lindbeck will be assessed, and John Milbank's hermeneutic alternative to postliberalism will be considered and evaluated as well.

In chapter five I will argue that de Lubac's retrieval of spiritual exegesis offers a needed correction to the work of postliberal and radical orthodoxy theologians. Specifically, I will argue that postliberal and radical orthodoxy positions fail to overcome the problem of extrinsicism while the spiritual exegesis of the fathers, as presented in the work of Henri de Lubac, does not. I will argue that the key to de Lubac's biblical hermeneutic, and the factor that makes it superior to postliberalism and radical orthodoxy, is its christological mysticism.

The sixth and concluding chapter will provide a brief summary of de Lubac's theological program and offer a number of suggestions as to how his work on spiritual exegesis can and should be appropriated by contemporary biblical scholars and theologians.

CHAPTER TWO

The Background of Henri de Lubac's Theology

Introduction

The turmoil that enveloped Europe during the early twentieth century had a

significant influence on the theology of Henri de Lubac. Born in Cambria of northern

France in 1896, de Lubac entered the Society of Jesus in 1913. He was conscripted into

the French army in 1916 and sent to the battle of Verdun, the longest and deadliest

conflict of the First World War.

[1] During the battle he fought at Éparges where Pierre Rousselot had been killed

in 1915, and he sustained an injury that afflicted him for the rest of his life.[2] After the

war he began studies for the Jesuit priesthood and was ordained in 1927. In 1929 he

became professor of fundamental theology and history of religion at the Catholic

University of Lyons and soon thereafter was appointed to the Jesuit Faculty at Fouviere.[3]

De Lubac was also actively involved in the French resistance to Nazism during World

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[1] It is estimated that 500,000 French soldiers were killed or wounded in the battle of Verdun, while the German toll was closer to 400,000. S. L. A. Marshall, *World War I* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin 2001), 248.

[2] De Lubac mentions the death of Rousselot in his Memoirs, and he also discusses his own continuing struggle with headaches, earaches, and dizziness as a consequence of his military service. See, Henri de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances That Occasioned His Writings* (San Francisco, CA: Communio Books, 1993), 15-19.

[3] Jean-Pierre Wagner, *Henri de Lubac*, Initiantions Aux Théologiens (Paris, France: Cerf, 2001), 12.

War Two, and later he played an important role in the proceedings of Vatican II.[4]

Although his professorial role ended in 1961, his service to the Church as priest,

theologian, and eventually Cardinal, continued until his death in 1991.[5]

There is little doubt that de Lubac was deeply committed to the Roman Catholic

Church throughout his life.[6] Even during the years of his forced silence,[7] he remained

faithfully obedient to the hierarchy and published his most affectionate work on the

church, *The Splendor of the Church* (1956).[8] However, he was also deeply concerned,

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[4] For his personal reflections on the World War II era, see Henri de Lubac, *Christian Resistance to Anti-Semitism: Memories from 1940-1944* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius 1990). See also, Henri de Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," in *Theology in History* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius 1996), 367-501. For reflections on Vatican II, see Lubac and Scola, *Entretien Autour de Vatican II: Souvenirs et Réflexions*.

[5] For a more complete biographical treatment, see Wagner, *Henri de Lubac*, 11-27. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar and Georges Chantraine, *Le Cardinal Henri de Lubac, L'homme et Son Œuvre*, Culture et Vérité (Paris, France: Editions Lethielleux;, 1983).

[6] While he was in his mid-eighties, de Lubac completed a manuscript "which explains the genesis, meaning and fate of his books and situates them within the course of the various stages of his life, his studies, his meetings, his friendships as well as his legendary exiles and banishments." Overall, the book portrays a life devoted to the Church. See Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 7. The nature of the church was a subject that de Lubac returned to again and again.

[7] When de Lubac published his controversial, *Surnaturel* (1946), neo-scholastics, especially in Rome and in Southern France, were offended at the obvious criticisms of their approach to doctrine. They aggressively sought a condemnation, and many people believed that Pius XII's encyclical *Humani generis* (1950) contained one. However, as de Lubac has noted, the one sentence in the encyclical that appears to condemn his position in *Surnaturel* is in agreement with him and in fact reproduces his language exactly. Nevertheless, de Lubac was prohibited from teaching at Fouviere, and several of his books, including *Surnaturel*, *Corpus Mysticum*, and *Le Conaissance de Dieu* were censored. The affair, which involved a number of other theologians besides de Lubac, lasted for over ten years. See Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 67-79.

[8] Henri de Lubac, *The Splendour of the Church* (New York, NY: Sheed and Ward, 1956). Published originally as Henri de Lubac, *Méditation Sur L'église* (Paris: Aubier, 1953). Notably, de Lubac composed this work between the years of 1946 to

from early in his career, that the theological vision of early twentieth century Catholicism

was too narrow to speak effectively to the social and intellectual crises of early twentieth

century Europe.[9]   Accordingly, much of his theological career was focused on enabling

the church, through a renewal of the Spirit that inspired her great tradition, to reengage

the surrounding culture with the gospel.[10]

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the cultural and ecclesial contexts

within which de Lubac was formed as a theologian. The chapter will include three

sections. First, I will examine the "atheistic humanism" that swept Europe during the

nineteenth century. Next, I will examine the Catholic Church's response to modern

atheism and secularism, paying special attention to Pope Leo XIII's 1879 encyclical

Aeterni Patris and the Thomistic revival that ensued. Finally, I will discuss briefly de

Lubac's dissatisfaction with the neo-scholastic character of the Thomistic revival.

1949, though it was not published until the time of his forced silence. See Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 74-76.

[9] Cf., Joseph Komonchak, "Theology and Culture at Mid-Century: The Example of Henri de Lubac," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 579-602.

[10] In his memoir, de Lubac describes the nature of the renewal that he worked for. He writes that, "without claiming to open new avenues to thought, I have sought rather, without any antiquarianism, to make known some of the great common areas of Catholic tradition. I wanted to make it loved, to show its ever-present fruitfulness. Such a task called more for a reading across the centuries than for a critical application to specific points; it excluded any overly preferential attachment to one school, system, or definite age; it demanded more attention to the deep and permanent unity of the Faith, to the mysterious relationship (which escapes so many specialized scholars) of all those who invoke the name of Christ, than to the multiple diversities of eras, milieux, personalities and cultures. So I have never been tempted by any kind of "return to the sources" that would scorn later developments and represent the history of Christian thought as a stream of decadences; the Latins have not pushed aside the Greeks for me; nor has Saint Augustine diverted me from Saint Anslem or Saint Thomas Aquinas; nor has the latter ever seemed to me either to make the twelve centuries that preceded him useless or to condemn his disciples to a failure to see and understand fully what has followed him, Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 143-144.

Atheist Humanism and Social Crisis

As mentioned above, de Lubac lived and worked during some of the most violent

and confused years in modern European history. In addition to the losses caused by the

several wars that ravaged Europe, the violent events of the early twentieth century led to

an acute emotional and intellectual anxiety for many citizens of the continent. The First

World War, in particular, brought European confidence in unending technological and

moral progress to a halt.[11] In 1922, the French poet Paul Valéry wrote,

> The Storm is over, and yet we are still uneasy . . . anxious . . . as though it were just
> now going to break. Nearly all human affairs are still in a state of terrible
> uncertainty. We ponder on what is gone, we are almost ruined by what has been
> ruined; we do not know what is to come, and have some reason to fear it. We hope
> vaguely, but dread precisely; our fears are infinitely clearer than our hopes; we
> recognize that pleasurable living and abundance are behind us, but confusion and
> doubt are in us and with us.[12]

Although war and atrocity are not recent inventions, there was something

distinctive, and even surprising, about the violence witnessed during the European wars

of the past century. On the one hand, people were surprised by the scale of those wars.

Modern technology, which held such promise in agriculture, communications, medicine,

travel, and more, also enabled the production of much deadlier weapons than previous

eras had known, and the millions of soldiers and civilians killed during the first half of

the twentieth century were unprecedented.[13] On the other hand, the World Wars were

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[11] Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 2000), 1-3.

[12] Jackson Matthews, ed., *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, vol. 10, History and Politics (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1962), 54.

[13] In a fascinating book entitled *Century's End: A Cultural History of the Fin De Siecle from the 990s through the 1990s*, Hillel Schwartz has documented, through newspaper articles, popular magazines, personal letters, sermons, graduation speeches, and much more, the strikingly optimistic attitude that captivated much of western

shocking because they "contrast[ed] with the expectations, at least in Europe, with which

the twentieth century began," expectations of unrestrained social progress.[14] Those

expectations were inspired, in large part, by a philosophical revolution that took place

during the nineteenth century.

Whereas European civilization during the middle-ages was remarkably organic in

terms of religion, government, law, art, literature, etc., the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries witnessed the unraveling of the old order and a revolt against its authorities and

institutions. In France, for example, the role of clergy and nobility were forever

diminished with the revolution of 1789.   Then in the nineteenth century, philosophers set

out to construct a modern replacement for the older organic civilization.[15]   They did not

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civilization at the close of the nineteenth and the dawning of the twentieth centuries.
Like many other commentators, Schwartz paints a picture of late nineteenth and early
twentieth-century civilization obsessed with the promise of the future. He writes that
"Classical Liberals, Social Darwinists, Progressives, Syndicalists, Anarchists, Marxists,
and Socialists of many stripes had sharp disagreements over present intimations of the
future, what could be done to shape it or square oneself with it, and who must be its
avant-garde," [Hillel Schwartz, *Century's End: A Cultural History of the Fin de Siecle
from the 990s through the 1990s* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1990), 175].

[14] Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, 3. On page six,
Glover adds that "At the start of the century there was optimism, coming from the
Enlightenment, that the spread of a humane and scientific outlook would lead to the
fading away, not only of war, but also of other forms of cruelty and barbarism. They
would fill the chamber of horrors in the museum of our primitive past. In the light of
these expectations, the century of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and Saddam Hussein was likely
to be a surprise. Volcanoes thought extinct turned out not to be."

[15] The French Revolution, in particular, inspired several social movements that
were intended to replace the old organic society of the middle ages. Charles Fourier,
formulated a plan for a kind of utopian civilization built around small communities of
about 1800 persons each. For the most complete account of his teachings, see Francois
Marie Charles Fourier, *Le Nouveau Monde Industriel Sociétaire*, 2 vols. (Paris, France:
Bossange, 1829-1830). Another important figure was Claude Henri de Rouvroy de Saint-
Simon, founder of Saint-Simonism, who sought to "restore social and political order by
rebuilding society on the basis of a scientific truth (reduction of the whole body of
science to the Newtonian law of gravitation) as well as of a religious truth (the Christian

look to theology and metaphysics, however, as a foundation for modern European

society. Rather, they embraced the Enlightenment's turn to the subject, in the spirit of

Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, and endeavored to make a new society, built upon the

methods of empirical science and the moral capacity intrinsic to human nature, in which

there would be no need for the Christian religion.

The nineteenth was the century of Auguste Comte, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl

Marx, Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche and others. It was a century characterized by

a great optimism in the ability of humankind to forge its own destiny, unencumbered by

the weight of religious authority and superstition. The nineteenth century was the zenith

of the great intellectual adventure that began with the European Enlightenment, and its

philosophers had a significant influence on the growing secularization of Europe, on

expectations of social progress, and on the increasing marginalization of the church. In

the pages that follow, I will offer an analysis of the thought of Auguste Comte, Ludwig

Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche – all atheistic philosophers who,

according to de Lubac, had a significant influence on European civilization.

Auguste Comte

Auguste Comte, the founder of French Positivism who worked very consciously

in the shadow of the French Revolution, sought to establish a philosophical system that

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law of charity understood as a purely natural truth)." See Etienne Gilson, Thomas
Langan, and Armand A. Maurer, eds., *Recent Philosophy: Hegel to the Present*, ed.
Etienne Gilson, A History of Philosophy (New York, NY: Random House, 1962), 266.
Saint-Simon's complete works have been published, along with the works of his
successor Enfantin, as follows: Claude Henri de Rouvroy de Saint-Simon, *Oeuvres de
Saint-Simon et D'enfantin*, 47 vols. (Paris, France: Dentu and Leroux, 1865-1878).

would bring unity, order, and prosperity to Europe. [16]   For Comte, the revolution of 1789

and the continuing inability of the French people to find an alternative other than populist

revolt or dictatorship were a consequence of the intellectual disorder that had replaced the

harmonious system of Medieval Christendom.[17]

Although he could envision no return to the ordered society of the past, Comte

believed that a new society grounded on scientific knowledge rather than Christian

metaphysics would soon arise. Indeed, he believed that a new order would emerge as the

"necessary consequence of the progress of society."[18] In the introduction to *The Positive*

Philosophy (1830-1842), Comte outlined the three stages of "a great fundamental law"

that, he claimed, explains the "development of human intelligence."[19] He suggests that

"the law is this: - that each of our leading conceptions – each branch of our knowledge –

passes successively through three different theoretical conditions: the theological, or

fictitious; the Metaphysical, or abstract; and the Scientific, or positive."[20]

Comte believed that just as the theological stage gave way to the metaphysical

with the rediscovery of nature in the twelfth century so must the metaphysical stage give

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[16] For his own, in-depth analysis of Comte's atheism, see Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 131-167.

[17] Etienne Gilson explains that "Comte admitted that there had existed a really organic society in the middle ages, and that the social bond had then been provided by the common acceptance of one single system of ideas, namely, Christian theology." Gilson, Langan, and Maurer, eds., *Recent Philosophy: Hegel to the Present*, 267.

[18] Auguste Comte, "Operations Necessary for Reorganizing Society," in *Auguste Comte and Positivism: The Essential Writings*, ed. Gertrud Lenzer (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1975), 10-11.

[19] Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy*, trans. Harriet Martineau, 1974 ed. (New York, NY: AMS Press, 1855), 25.

[20] Comte, *The Positive Philosophy*, 25.

way to the scientific now that humankind has come to understand the laws of nature, such as "Gravitation."[21] However, Comte suggested that the ascendance of the positive stage would come only when society was freed from the grip of theologians and metaphysicians who seemed to have a monopoly "in all treatment of social subjects."[22] Since "ideas govern and revolutionize the world," and "the whole social mechanism ultimately rests upon opinions," it was necessary to replace the former metaphysical understanding of society with a new scientific/positive view. According to Comte, "Now that the human mind has grasped celestial and terrestrial physics – mechanical and chemical; organic physics, both vegetable and animal – there remains one science, to fill up the series of sciences of observation – Social physics. This is what men have now must need of."[23]

Accordingly, Comte endeavored to establish a "social physics," or a science of society that he named, "sociology."[24] Whereas the natural sciences tended toward greater and greater specialization and fragmentation, sociology would be at once a science and a philosophy. Sociology would thus serve to systematize all of the other sciences and ensure that they were employed for the betterment of humanity as a whole. Etienne

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[21] Comte, *The Positive Philosophy*, 26.   For an interesting collection of essays dealing with the "rediscovery of nature" in the twelfth century, see Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century; Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

[22] Comte, *The Positive Philosophy*, 30. In his final major work, Comte wrote that "although theology is now palpably on the decline, yet it will retain in principle at least, some legitimate claims to the direction of society so long as the new philosophy fails to occupy this important vantage-ground."

[23] Comte, *The Positive Philosophy*, 30.

[24] Comte, *The Positive Philosophy*, 444.

Gilson explains that, for Comte:

> The notion of a 'social physics' then assumed a decisive importance, for indeed, to him, that was exactly what 'sociology' actually was. It became the keystone of his philosophy. His ultimate goal was to provide mankind with a system of ideas capable of uniting all men in a common assent to it; the substance of that system had to be borrowed from science; for that very reason, the philosophical bond of all men could not be formulated before the system of the sciences had been completed; by completing the system of the sciences, then, the discovery of sociology was making it possible to terminate the revolution. By the same token, it was answering the question: on the basis of what system of ideas can a truly organic society be organized in modern terms? Positive philosophy was the answer, and since only the foundation of sociology as a science had made it possible, the vocation of Comte as a social reformer was one in his own mind with his vocation as a creative genius in the field of science.[25]

Comte believed that with the establishment of the positive science, which would include the unification and systemization of all other sciences, humanity would be able, once again, to benefit from a truly organic system leading to universal agreement on both intellectual and moral issues. Moreover, Comte believed that social physics would enable humankind to grasp the laws of society and human behavior to such an extent that the formulation of social policy would become a matter of scientific prediction, experimentation, and eventual mastery. Thus would European civilization take charge of its own destiny and move forward into a more prosperous and peaceful future.[26]

Interestingly, Comte stressed not only the importance of empirical investigation but also the importance of imagination and sentiment. The positive philosophy was to benefit humankind, and because humans are driven by sentiment and not only by facts, it must address the religious dimension of human existence. Whereas *The Positive*

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[25] Gilson, Langan, and Maurer, eds., *Recent Philosophy: Hegel to the Present*, 270.

[26] Gilson, Langan, and Maurer, eds., *Recent Philosophy: Hegel to the Present*, 270-271.

Philosophy (1830-1842) was focused largely on the creation of a philosophical system that could unify the sciences, the *System of Positive Philosophy* (1851-1854) extended the positivist project into a more thorough treatment of human affections since "the proper function of the intellect is the service of the social sympathies."[27] In the *System of Positive Philosophy*, Comte developed the idea of a "religion of humanity," which he had already begun to consider in the 1920s.[28] In chapter two of the fourth volume, Comte makes the surprising claim that worship, rather than theory, must be the first issue of concern for the positive program. He explains that the previous arrangement, which had given preference to the belief system, contradicted,

> the fundamental formula of Positivism, in which love precedes order, as order precedes progress; and love is the domain of the worship, order that of the doctrine, progress of the life. In the second place, it is contradicted by the general theory of human nature, which puts feeling above intelligence and activity, the two indispensable servants of feeling. Lastly, it is at variance with the regular course of Positive education, in which the succession is: the education of feelings, the education of the intellect, and the education of our active powers.[29]

Comte was convinced that true social cohesion would never be attained on the basis of the positive belief-system alone. According to Mary Pickering, since Comte was "convinced that a general doctrine and institutional networks were not sufficient to ensure social cohesion, [he] believed that his religion would provide the moral adhesive

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[27] Auguste Comte, *System of Positive Philosophy*, trans. John Henry Bridges, Reprint ed., vol. 4 (New York, NY: Burt Franklin, 1973), 10-12.

[28] In order to prove his "complete continuity of thought," Comte added an appendix to the *Système*, which included all of his earliest published essays. Included in that appendix is an 1826 essay entitled "Considerations on the Spiritual Power," which stresses the importance of unifying the temporal and spiritual concerns of humanity in one organic system [Auguste Comte, "Considerations on the Spirutal Power," in *System of Positive Philosophy* (New York, NY: Burt Franklin, 1973), 618-653].

[29] Comte, *System of Positive Philosophy*, 76.

necessary to hold society together."[30] Thus, he formulated a thorough plan for the

positive religion, which would be administered by "priests of humanity" and would

include a liturgical cycle complete with nine sacraments. Andrew Wernick explains that

indoctrination into the religion

> would begin at home with Mother, continue in the schools with a revamped
> curriculum under (male) teacher-priests, and persist in the sermons and ceremonies
> which Positive Religion would install in a systematic and pervasive ritual round.
> Prominent among the latter were the sacraments (*présentation, initiation,
> admission, destination, marriage, maturité, retraite, transformation, incorporation*)
> which were to accompany each stage of the life course, and through which each
> servant of Humanity would solemnly rededicate himself (or herself) to a life of
> service.[31]

In his *Positivist Catechism* (1852) Comte outlined a plan for the total reorganization of

European society on the basis of the religion of humanity. According to his plan, France

alone would need 200 regional parishes with one priest for every 6,000 citizens, a

multitude of positivist churches and cemeteries, a detailed liturgical calendar, and an

established hierarchy. As the religion grew, it would spread beyond Europe, and would

be maintained by national and regional councils under the guidance of 7 metropolitans

led ultimately by a primate located in Paris.[32]

The main purpose of Comte's religion of humanity would be to direct citizens

towards consistent works of charity in order to improve the condition of society as a

whole. Although his positivist program was clearly anti-theistic, he used the word

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[30] Mary Pickering, "Auguste Comte," in *The Blackwell Companion to Major Classical Social Theorists*, ed. George Ritzer (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2003), 22.

[31] Andrew Wernick, *Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity: The Post-Theistic Program of French Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.

[32] Auguste Comte, *Catéchisme Positiviste*, Reprint ed. (Paris, France: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966).

"religion" intentionally in order to emphasize the fact that he was offering an alternative

to Catholicism.[33] Consistent with his three stages of human progress, Comte believed

that the Catholic Church's time had come and gone and that it must be replaced by

something better.

Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx

Whereas Comte was convinced that theistic religion had served a necessary and

positive role in society, Ludwig Feuerbach had a somewhat more critical perspective.[34]

According to Feuerbach, God is an invention of human beings.[35] God, he explained, is

simply an objectification of human self-consciousness. In his most famous work, *The*

Essence of Christianity (1841), he suggested that

> Religion, at least the Christian, is the relation of man to himself, or more correctly
> to his own nature (*i.e.,* his subjective nature); but a relation to it, viewed as a nature
> apart from his own. The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or,
> rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made

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[33] Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, ed. Pierre Arnaud Paulo E. de Berrêdo Carneiro, Paul Arbousse-Bastide, and Angele Kremer-Marietti, 8 vols., vol. 5 (Paris, France: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1973-1990), 22.

[34] This is not to suggest that Feuerbach saw no role for religion in the development of human self-consciousness. Van A. Harvey explains that for Feuerbach, "Christianity is a religion proffering salvation but which alienates humanity; nevertheless, Christianity is instrumental to salvation because its doctrine of redemption expresses the truth that mankind is more important than deity; religion is the great educator of mankind but, like all educators, must be left behind in the interests of maturity." Van A. Harvey, "Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx," in *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West* ed. John Clayton Ninian Smart, Steven Katz, and Patrick Sherry (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 301.

[35] For de Lubac's commentary on the thought of Feuerbach and Marx, see Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 19-42.

objective – *i.e.* contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature.[36]

Feuerbach claimed that all of God's perfections: love, justice, compassion, mercy, etc., really belong to human nature.[37] It is natural, he argued, for humans to desire love, justice, compassion, and mercy, but when they attribute these qualities to a being outside of themselves they are making a mistake with serious consequences. By projecting the qualities that we most cherish onto a non-existent God, claimed Feuerbach, we are depriving ourselves of the very qualities that we most need as humans. He wrote that

> the consciousness of the absolutely perfect moral nature, especially as an abstract being separate from man, leaves us cold and empty, because we feel the distance, the chasm between ourselves and this being; - it is a dispiriting consciousness, for it is the consciousness of our personal nothingness, and of the kind which is the most acutely felt – moral nothingness.[38]

Far from seeing Christianity as a positive force, Feuerbach claimed that religion is the "disuniting of man from himself; he sets God before him as the antithesis of himself. God is not what man is – man is not what God is. God is the infinite, man the finite being; god is perfect, man imperfect. . . God almighty, man weak; God holy, man sinful." However, "in religion man contemplates his own latent nature," so what is most needed is

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[36] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 14.

[37] Feuerbach writes that "God as a morally perfect being is nothing else than the realized idea, the fulfilled law of morality, the moral nature of man posited as the absolute being; man's own nature for the moral God requires man to be as he himself is: Be ye holy for I am holy; man's own consciousness, for how could he otherwise tremble before the Divine Being, accuse himself before him, and make him the judge of his inmost thoughts and feeling?" (Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 46).

[38] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 46.

for humankind to embrace that nature which is mistakenly attributed to God. [39]

Feuerbach goes even further in his denunciation of Christianity when he suggests that,

> The Christian religion is a religion of suffering. The images of the crucified one which we still meet with in all churches, represent not the Saviour, but only the crucified, the suffering Christ. Even the self-crucifixions among the Christians are, psychologically, a deep-rooted consequence of their religious views. How should not he who has always the image of the crucified on his mind, at length contract the desire to crucify either himself or another?[40]

Christianity thus projects all human perfections onto a non-existent God and then endorses the imitation of a crucified savior, thus denying persons the possibility of joy in this life. Feuerbach claims that "man negates himself, but only to posit himself again" in heaven. Christians, he argues, deny themselves joy in this life in order to receive it in the next. Accordingly, they "sacrifice the thing in itself to the image."[41]

According to Feuerbach, humans will never be "true" or "complete" until they stop sacrificing what is real for what is only imagined. Human fulfillment must be found in this, the material world, not in an imagined heaven. However, as we have already seen with Comte, Feuerbach saw no need to give up explicitly religious language in order to describe the human future. Whereas Comte proposed a religion of humanity, Feuerbach endorsed an anthropotheism in which humans are the highest being. "The new philosophy," he writes, "makes man – with the inclusion of nature as the foundation of

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[39] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 33.

[40] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 62. De Lubac believed that many of these atheistic insights were legitimate critiques of a Christian civilization in need of constant renewal. See Henri de Lubac, "Apologetics and Theology," in *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius 1989), 97.

[41] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 182.

man – the unique, universal and highest object of philosophy."[42] The goal of Feuerbach's

religious criticism was to enable the relinquishing of God so that humanity would more

fully embrace its own best nature. He explains that

> The more subjective God is, the more completely does man divest himself of his
> subjectivity, because God is, per se, his relinquished self, the possession of which
> he however again vindicates to himself. As the action of the arteries drives the
> blood into the extremities, and the action of the veins brings it back again, as life in
> general consists in a perpetual systole and diastole; so is it in religion. In the
> religious systole man propels his own nature from himself, he throws himself
> outward; in the religious diastole he receives the rejected nature into his heart
> again.[43]

According to Feuerbach God must be done away with to ensure that the diastolic

dimension of human religiosity functions properly. Humans must not "divest' their

subjectivity only to lose it to an imagined God. Rather, it must be acknowledged that

"Man has his highest being, his God, in himself; not in himself as an individual, but in his

essential nature, his species."[44] Thus, it is only natural that individuals be self-conscious

or contemplative of their own limitations and that they aspire for something above and

beyond their individual nature. However, persons will only achieve what they

contemplate if they look for it in their species, in humanity as a whole.[45]

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[42] Ludwig Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Manfred H. Vogel (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 70.

43 Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 31.

[44] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 281.

[45] Feuerbach writes that "No individual is an adequate representation of his species, but only the human individual is conscious of the distinction between the species and the individual; in the sense of this distinction lies the root of religion. The yearning of man after something above himself is nothing else than the longing after the perfect type of his nature, the yearning to be free from himself, i.e., from the limits and defects of his individuality." Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 31.

With the publication of *The Essence of Christianity* in 1841, Feuerbach became an immediate sensation.[46] Among his admirers were Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels who suggested that with Feuerbach, philosophy had finally come to an understanding of human nature. Although Marx eventually came to the conclusion that Feuerbach's emphasis on the contemplative dimension of human nature and religiosity was inadequate for a materialist philosophy, there is little doubt that Feuerbach's critique of religion had a lasting influence on Marx. As Van A. Harvey explains, "Although it was Feuerbach who enabled Marx to appropriate Hegel's view of Spirit as self-creative activity, this appropriation, in turn, was to provide the basis for Marx's final break with Feuerbach."[47]

According to Marx, Feuerbach's materialism falls short because it never moves beyond the realm of theory. "Feuerbach," writes Marx, "resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the essence of man is not abstraction inhering in each single individual. In its actuality it is the ensemble of social relationships."[48] Marx takes the critique of religion further and suggests that even the religious feeling, which Feuerbach secularizes, is a "social product" belonging "to a particular form of society." Whereas Feuerbach suggested that religion, and specifically the Christian religion, "alienates" humans from themselves, Marx argues that it is society in general, and religion only as a product of society, that causes human alienation. Religion is not created by the

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[46] In the introduction to his *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, Manfred Vogel notes that "Feuerbach's critique hit the German philosophical-theological community of the 1840's like a thunderbolt. As David Friedrich Strauss once remarked, the decade belonged to Feuerbach. But, like a thunderbolt, he soon passed into oblivion," (Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, xxvii).

[47] Harvey, "Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx," 305.

[48] Karl Marx, Loyd David Easton, and Kurt H. Guddat, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 402.

individual contemplating his own nature. Rather, religion is the product of a social

system that alienates people from their true nature. Marx adopts Feuerbach's language of

alienation but locates the source of this alienation in society, i.e. in social conditions that

oppress and exploit humans. Marx's critique of religion is similar to Feuerbach's, but

Marx attributes less importance to religion. In the following quotation, both Marx's

dependence on and development of Feuerbach's thought are evident. Marx writes that,

> Man makes religion; religion does not make man. Religion is, in fact, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet gained himself or has lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man, the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, which is an inverted world-consciousness, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritualistic *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human being because the human being has attained no true reality. Thus, the struggle against religion is indirectly the struggle against that world of which religion is the spiritual aroma.[49]

According to Marx, in order for people to achieve their "true happiness," they must

abolish religion as their "illusory happiness"[50] and engage in the revolutionary work of

changing the social conditions that produce the illusion of religion in the first place.

Marx, like Comte, envisioned an all-encompassing program, requiring "hand-to-hand

combat" if necessary, through which the people would restructure society completely,

including all of its social and economic institutions, in order to achieve true human well-

being.[51] The influence of Marx's thought on twentieth century European society is well

known and needs no elaboration here.

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[49] Karl Marx and Joseph J. O'Malley, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 131.

[50] Marx and O'Malley, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, 131.

[51] Marx and O'Malley, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, 133.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Although he claimed to hold Feuerbach in low esteem, Friedrich Nietzsche

offered a critique of religion quite similar to those of Feuerbach and Marx, though he

took his attack much further than previous philosophers had taken theirs.[52] Nietzsche

believed that the Christian religion is a creation of humankind that destroys people by

keeping them from achieving their true potential. Like Feuerbach and Marx, he believed

that human beings have great potential but that they squander this potential by ascribing

power and goodness to God rather than themselves. In the unfinished work that was to

be his magnum opus, *The Will to Power*,[53] Nietzsche declared:

> Man has never dared to credit *himself* with his strong and startling moods, he has
> always conceived them as "passive," as "imposed upon him from outside":
> Religion is the offshoot of a doubt concerning the entity of the person, an alteration
> of the personality: in so far as everything great and strong in man was considered
> superhuman and foreign, man belittled himself, - he laid the two sides, the very
> pitiable and weak side, and the very strong and startling side apart, in two spheres,
> and called the one "Man" and the other "God."[54]

For Nietzsche, humans must forget about God and assume the power that is within them.

The consequence of not doing so, according to Nietzsche, is nihilism. Like Comte,

Feuerbach, and Marx, he realized that the organic civilization of the middle ages had

forever disappeared, but he despaired that a new world had not yet emerged to take its

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[52] De Lubac has provided an in-depth analysis of Nietzsche's thought in several sections of *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, including a comparison with Dostoevsky.

[53] *Der Wille Zur Macht*, or *The Will to Power*, was published posthumously from the extensive notes left by Nietzsche. For more on the development of *Der Wille Zur Macht*, see the "Translator's Preface" in Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Will to Power: An Attempted Transvaluation of All Values*, trans. Anthony Mario Ludovici, 2 vols., The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche in 18 Vols. (New York, NY: Russell & Russell, 1964), vii-xiv.

[54] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power: An Attempted Transvaluation of All Values*, 115-116.

place. Thus, he felt responsible for proclaiming a reality that others might not be ready to

hear, "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."[55]

In proclaiming the death of god, Nietzsche was merely calling attention to what,

for him, was a cultural fact. With the death of the old world, which was held together by

a thoroughly theological understanding of reality, God too had ceased to exist. For

Nietzsche, however, the death of God was necessary in order for humans to overcome the

nihilism inherent in Christianity. He believed that European society was declining into a

state of decadence, and he thought that Christianity itself was the cause of the problem.

He argued that the Christian conception of God, exemplified in Christ, is "the declaration

of war against life, against nature, against the will to live!. . . the deification of

nothingness, the will to nothingness pronounced holy!"[56]

Nietzsche argued that the Christian religion had lead to nihilism because

Christians, following the Jews, had long ago perverted the truth about what is good,

beautiful, and noble. In *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887), he claimed that because Jews

and Christians were a weak and conquered people in the ancient world. They produced,

out of their own desire for revenge as well as for power and mastery over life, a

conception of morality and goodness that praised weakness and powerlessness. He

suggested that

> It was the Jew who, with frightening consistency, dared to invert the aristocratic
> value equations good/noble/powerful/beautiful/happy/favored-of-the-gods and
> maintain with the furious hatred of the underprivileged and impotent, that 'only the
> poor, the powerless, are good; only the suffering, sick and ugly, truly blessed.' But

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[55] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, "The Gay Science," in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1962), 95.

[56] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, "The Antichrist," in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1962), 585-586.

you noble and mighty ones of the earth will be, to all eternity, the evil, the cruel, the avaricious, the godless, and thus the cursed and the damned.[57]

Christian morality was, for Nietzsche, the reason why the masses of people accepted their lives of suffering and despair. From his perspective, European culture in the nineteenth century was in decline because society had become thoroughly "Judaized or Christianized, or mobized. . . . The progress of this poison throughout the body of mankind cannot be stayed."[58] In *The Antichrist* (written 1888, published 1895), he takes his attack to extremes, declaring,

> I condemn Christianity. I raise against the Christian church the most terrible of all accusations that any accuser ever uttered. It is to me the highest of all conceivable corruptions. . . . Parasitism is the *only* practice of the church; with its ideal of anemia, of 'holiness,' draining all blood, all love, all hope for life; the beyond as the will to negate every reality; the cross as the mark of recognition for the most subterranean conspiracy that every existed – against health, beauty, whatever has turned out well, courage, spirit, graciousness of the soul, against life itself. . . . I call Christianity the one great curse . . . the one great instinct of revenge. . . . I call it the once immortal blemish of mankind.[59]

In order to move beyond this "great curse," Nietzsche called for a reexamination of everything considered good, noble, and beautiful, including a reconsideration of time itself. He was horrified that the Western calendar began with the great curse of Christianity. "Why not" remake the calendar so that time will begin instead "after [Christianity's] last day. After today? Revaluation of all values!"[60]

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[57] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing, 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 167-168.

[58] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, 170.

[59] Nietzsche, "The Antichrist," 655-656.

[60] Nietzsche, "The Antichrist," 656.

Nietzsche rejected the idea that the crucified Christ or the Christian saint epitomizes the ideal human, so he prophesied the emergence of the "*Übermensch*" or the "overman," a superior man. Although he rejected the idea of necessary "progress," Nietzsche did believe that the overman would emerge from the chaos caused by the realization that God had died.[61] He claimed that the overman would be the successor of both God and humankind imprisoned by their allegiance to God. In his most popular work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the prophet Zarathustra explained that whereas "once one said God when one looked upon distant seas . . . now I have taught you to say: overman. God is a conjecture; but I desire that your conjectures should not reach beyond your creative will. Could you create a god? Then do not speak to me of any gods. But you could create the overman."[62]

Nietzsche's overman was to rise above the weakness and passivity idealized by Christianity. The overman would be strong and disciplined. He would find joy in self-conquest and would be kind to others not out of impotence but out of duty. For Nietzsche, the Christian insistence that salvation would come to humans only by the grace of God was nihilistic. He proposed, instead, that humans are driven by a "will to power" that can lead to self-mastery and human flourishing. Nietzsche, like Comte, Feuerbach, and Marx, was captivated by a religious vision that denied the reality and power of God and placed all hope for a more peaceful and prosperous future squarely on

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[61] Nietzsche's perspective on progress was quite different from that of Comte and other nineteenth century thinkers who believed that humankind was naturally evolving upward out of the theistic past. He claimed that "progress is a merely modern idea . . . . further development is altogether not according to any necessity in the direction of elevation, enhancement, or strength" (Nietzsche, "The Antichrist," 571).

[62] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1962), 197-200.

the shoulders of humankind. Nietzsche considered himself a prophet, heralding the death of God and the death of a world whose sense of goodness, nobility, and beauty were theologically and metaphysically defined.

Of course, Auguste Comte, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche were not the only late modern thinkers convinced that European society had moved beyond its theological and metaphysical heritage. John Stewart Mill, Charles Darwin, Bertrand Russell, George Bernard Shaw, and many others expressed similar convictions. According to Jean Laxroix, in the nineteenth century "the storm of atheism . . . burst upon the history of humanity. This atheism is both absolute and positive; absolute, for it truly denies God himself; positive, for it is an authentic anti-theism. It is an atheism which demands total commitment, and which would change the face of the earth. It appears as a radical humanism, as a tremendous effort on man's part to possess his humanity completely."[63]

Indeed, all of the above mentioned thinkers had in common a profound confidence in human nature. They placed all hope for the future in humankind's ability to take control, to improve society and to achieve intellectual and moral self-mastery. Although it would be unfair to exaggerate the direct influence of these atheist humanists on the average European during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there is good reason to believe that the above mentioned philosophers were able to make explicit a pervasive cultural *élan*.   In their philosophical works, thinkers such as Comte, Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche gave words to a common spirit of the age. De Lubac makes a similar observation in the preface to his *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (1944):

Contemporary atheism is increasingly positive, organic, constructive. Combining a mystical immanentism with a clear *perception of the human trend*,[64] it has three principal aspects which can be symbolized by three names: Auguste Comte, Ludwig Feuerbach (who must share the honor with his disciple, Karl Marx) and Friedrich Nietzsche. Through a number of intermediaries, and with a number of accretions, admixtures and, in many cases, distortions, the doctrines of these three nineteenth-century thinkers are, even today, the inspiration of three philosophies of life (social and political as well as individual) that all exercise a powerful attraction. . . . Positivism is an immense edifice of scientific philosophy and practical politics; that Marxism, which has received its Summa if not its Bible in *Das Kapital*, is a vast and powerful system of political and social economy; and that Nietzsche's ideas offer an extraordinary profusion of pedagogic resources (in the profoundest sense of the term).[65]

In the early twentieth century, the social, political, and individual lives of Europeans were shaped by these "philosophies of life." Whether Marx and communist revolution in Russia, Comte and *L' Action française* in France, or hope for a distorted kind of Nietzschean overman in Nazi Germany,[66] the influence of atheist humanism was profound and tragic. Yet, a godless humanism seems to have been the preferred option in early twentieth century Europe. Science and technological innovation appeared then, as they do now, to offer endless possibilities for individual and social improvement. Thus, the hopes and dreams of modern people were wedded to the promises of an emerging

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[63] Jean Lacroix, *The Meaning of Modern Atheism*, trans. S.J. Garret Barden (New York, NY: Macmillan Company, 1966), 31.

[64] Emphasis mine.

[65] Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 11-12.

[66] It is well known that Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was a favorite of Hitler's. Hitler distorted Nietzsche's vision of an overman in support of his own Aryan agenda, and Nietzsche's vision of a unified Europe was distorted in support Nazi military campaigns. For more on this subject, see Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992). Also Jacob Golomb and Robert Wistrich, eds., *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism? On the Uses and Abuses of a Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

technological civilization.[67] For this reason, the calamity of world wars, revolutions, and

mass genocide created a profound emotional and intellectual crisis for many. In light of

the violence and devastation witnessed in early twentieth century Europe, technological

utopia and human self-mastery seem to have been an illusion, but where else could

persons look for answers to the social ills plaguing modern industrial civilization? Why

not the Church? According to de Lubac, the Catholic Church was ill prepared to offer the

gospel as an alternative to atheist humanism because it had retreated into a kind of

spiritual ghetto. In the words of Joseph Komonchak, early twentieth century Catholicism

was in exile.[68] In the following section, I will describe some of the historical and

intellectual events that led to this exile.

The Catholic Response to Atheist Humanism

The atheist humanism described above was inspired, as mentioned previously, by

the vacuum created with the collapse of the old order in the eighteenth century, and

especially in the wake of the French Revolution. Importantly, the collapse of the old

order also forced the Catholic Church to redefine itself in opposition to the various trends

of secularization. Indeed, all of the pontiffs of the nineteenth century, whether major or

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[67] Notably, of all the philosophers mentioned above, Nietzsche is the least
enthralled with the promise of science and technology. For Nietzsche, "science is not a
finished and impersonal system," whose truths can be mastered and technologically
applied in order to overcome societal problems. Rather, Nietzsche believed that science
is a "passionate quest for knowledge . . . a way of life" not recently discovered and
incapable of improving fundamentally, human nature. See Walter A. Kaufmann,
Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University
Press, 1950), 68-69, 111.

[68] Komonchak, "Theology and Culture at Mid-Century," 579-602.

minor, had to contend with Catholicism's increasing loss of authority and with the

growing threats of liberalism, materialism, socialism, and atheism in general.[69]

Collapse of the Ancien Régime

At the beginning of nineteenth century Catholic resistance to secularization came

as a response to the French Revolution and its aftermath. During the Revolution, the

papacy hoped that the problem of liberalism would be limited to France and thus did very

little to oppose it. Indeed, there was broad support for many bourgeois causes among the

French clergy prior to the revolution, but when the new government drafted the "Civil

Constitution of the Clergy," which made "the French Catholic Church a division of the

French government," tensions between the Church and the state in France began to

grow.[70] Although many French clergy and laity had long embraced Gallicanism,[71] the

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[69] The atheist humanism that swept Europe in the nineteenth century was merely the latest in a long line of challenges to Catholicism's once authoritative role in European society. For many nineteenth century Catholics, the process of European secularization had moved through three decisive stages: "beginning with Christian heresy in the Reformation, next as developing into a secular philosophy with the Enlightenment, and finally as mobilizing a revolt of the masses in the French revolution and in its subsequent ideological expansion throughout Western Europe." Joe Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2003), 33. Cf. Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1970). In the next chapter I will show that de Lubac places at least part of the blame upon the shoulders of Catholic theologians.

[70] Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 37.

[71] Gallicanism was a French tradition of resistance to papal authority and control. Beginning in the seventeenth century, French clergy claimed that local bishops had greater authority in local matters than the pope did. Advocates of Gallicanism preferred a conciliarist approach in matters of Catholic authority and tended to support the sovereignty of local princes, and nobles in secular matters. In addition to French Gallicanism, there was a tradition of Josephinism in Austria which began when Emperor Joseph II worked to subordinate the Church to his own imperial authority. For a concise treatment of the Catholic church-state developments that began with the Reformation, see

changes made in the aftermath of the revolution led to an increase in loyalty to the pope

for many Catholics.

Consequently, French Catholicism became increasingly associated with the

counterrevolution movement, and this led to anti-clerical persecution and the execution,

imprisonment, and exile of thousands of clergy. The persecution continued until

Napoleon signed a concordant with Pope Pius VII in 1801 recognizing that Catholicism

was "the religion of the great majority of the French people."[72] The concordant

guaranteed salaries for clergy and gave the pope the right to remove bishops, a right that

popes did not have in the Gallican era of the *ancien régime*. This agreement became a

model for relations between the Catholic Church and secular governments in the

nineteenth century, and it had several important consequences. Namely, as governments

became increasingly secular, ecclesial authority was moved in the direction of the

papacy, thus establishing a trend towards the ultramontanism that would flourish later in

the century.[73] Moreover, the papacy became increasingly bureaucratic, mirroring the

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Gerald A. McCool, *Nineteenth-Century Scholasticism: The Search for a Unitary Method* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1989), 21-23.

[72] Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 38.

[73] The word Ultramontanism comes from Latin and means literally, "beyond the mountains." The term is used to describe a nineteenth century Catholic movement that took place in France, Germany, Spain, and England, all countries for whom Rome was "beyond the mountains (the Alps)." The movement worked for the consolidation of power in the papacy as a way to combat liberalism as well as atheistic philosophical and scientific trends. With the anti-clericalism that followed the French Revolution, and with the growing problem of nation states stripping power away from the church, the Ultramontanist movement became quite popular and was influential in the development of papal primacy and infallibility at Vatican Council I. For more on Ultramontanism, see Jeffrey Paul Von Arx, *Varieties of Ultramontanism* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997).

developing independent nation-states and interacting with sovereign nations through

diplomatic processes.

With the continuing spread of liberalism throughout Europe, the papacy embraced

the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815), which was essentially a "reactionary counterattack

by means of a continental coalition attempting to restore the Old Regime."[74] The *ancien*

régime, was an aristocratic system of the pre-revolutionary period within which clergy

and nobility controlled all of society with an authority founded upon a highly developed

theological/metaphysical understanding of reality.[75] With the Congress of Vienna,

Austria's Prince Metternich endeavored to restore the *ancien régime* by force, installing

the Bourbon monarchy in France and supporting monarchical rule in Austria, Prussia,

Russia, and Great Britain.[76] However, the rise of liberalism could not be held back, and a

wave of revolutions swept Europe in 1830. As Hobsbawm explains:

> The revolutionary wave of 1830 . . . marks the definitive defeat of aristocratic by
> bourgeois power in Western Europe. The ruling class of the next fifty years was to
> be the "grande bourgeoisie" of bankers, big industrialists, and sometimes top civil
> servants, accepted by an aristocracy which effaced itself or agreed to promote
> primarily bourgeois policies, unchallenged as yet by universal suffrage.[77]

Although the restorations of Prince Metternich were maintained temporarily in the

Austrian Empire and in the Papal states, the triumph of liberalism was secured fully with

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74 Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 33.

[75] For a concise treatment of the ancient regime (a term used only after the French
Revolution), see William Doyle, *The Ancien Regime* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities
Press International, 1986). For a more thorough treatment, see Pierre Goubert, *The
Ancien Régime: French Society, 1600-1750*, 1st Harper torchbook ed. (New York, NY:
Harper & Row, 1974).

[76] Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 40.

[77] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848* (New York, NY: New
American Library, 1969), 139.

the revolutions of 1848 and with the loss of the Papal States in 1870. At this point, "the

papacy retreated to the spiritual ghetto of a religious counterculture."[78]

Interestingly, the decline of papal authority and influence in European secular

affairs was accompanied by a consolidation of ecclesial power in the papacy. Gerald

McCool suggests that "to make up for its weakened diplomatic and political position in

relation to the national governments the Holy See began to play a more direct and

aggressive role in the political and intellectual life of the individual national Churches

than it had played under the *ancien régime*."[79] This more active role was perceived as a

necessary approach in order to preserve Catholic unity in the face of increasing state

influence in areas such as charitable service and education. As Joe Holland explains:

> As . . . ultramontanism became the all-embracing papal strategy, the Western
> Catholic Church was pressured by Vatican officials to become ever more Roman.
> Just as the Vatican bureaucracy had gained control over the episcopacy, so now it
> sought a standardized Roman model for all of Western Catholicism. The papal
> bureaucracy promoted a standardized Roman liturgy in the name of liturgical
> reform and the training of future bishops in Roman seminaries. It also promoted
> Roman devotions like Forty Hours, Roman clerical dress, expansion of Roman
> colleges for foreign seminarians, and extensive granting among priests of the
> Roman clerical title monsignor (an honorary aristocratic appellation meaning "my
> lord," a title normally used at the time for aristocrats, including aristocratic
> bishops).[80]

The papacy also became increasingly involved in setting the direction of Catholic

theology in the universities and seminaries. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic

wars had left Catholic institutions in shambles, and this was particularly devastating in

relation to the education of clergy. Accordingly, at the beginning of the nineteenth

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[78] Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 33.

[79] McCool, *Nineteenth-Century Scholasticism: The Search for a Unitary Method*, 25.

[80] Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 53.

century, Catholic philosophy and theology were characterized by a quite diverse set of

options.[81] According to James Hennesey, "Eclecticism prevailed," [82] since many

Catholics had been influenced by Enlightenment thought and there was no authoritative

voice insisting upon unity. Thus, the thought of John Locke was taught in a number of

French Jesuit schools. Likewise, "Cartesianism had a wide following, and so did

traditionalism and fideism growing out of romanticism." German theologians, in contrast

were often heavily influenced by "rationalism and historical method," and Ontologism

was popular at *Louvain* in France as well as in Italy under the direction of Gioberti and

Rosmini. It was only in Spain among the Dominicans that the thought of Thomas

Aquinas was taught with enthusiasm.[83] This widespread disunity resulted in a large

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[81] P. J. Fitzpatrick, "Neoscholasticism," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism, 1100-1600*, ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony John Patrick Kenny, and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 838-851.

[82] S.J. James Hennesey, "Leo XIII's Thomistic Revival: A Political and Philosophical Event," *The Journal of Religion* 58 (1978): 190.

[83] James Hennesey, "Leo XIII's Thomistic Revival: A Political and Philosophical Event." Gerald McCool has also written on the disunity of early nineteenth century Catholic thought. He explains that "during the Catholic renaissance after the French Revolution, the philosophy taught in the Catholic schools of France, Belgium, and Italy was of two kinds. There was that associated with Felicite Robert de Lammennais (1782-1854), Joseph Maistre (1752-1821), or Joseph Bonald (1754-1840), whose characteristic thinking is sometimes called 'traditionalism." This was a reaction to eighteenth century rationalism and it stressed the importance of faith as opposed to reason.   Secondly, there was the approach associated with Vincenzo Gioberti (1801-1852) or Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855), commonly called 'ontologism.' This claimed its ancestry in the writings of Plato and Augustine and held that all human knowledge implies an immediate intuition of uncreated Truth (i.e. God). The resurgent Catholic theology in Germany during the first half of the century looked to Post-Kantian idealism rather than to traditional scholasticism for its philosophical resources. Even in the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), after its restoration in 1814, scholastic philosophy did not make an immediate return, and, as late as 1850, the General of the Jesuits, John Roothan, complained to the Provincial of Lyons about the ontologism being taught to students of his Province." Gerald A. McCool, *The Neo-Thomists* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1994), 25.

number of theological disputes, and the papacy became increasingly active in resolving

them. McCool explains that the papacy,

> beginning with the pontificate of Gregory XVI, began to play a dominant role in
> the internal direction of Catholic theology through a series of disciplinary decrees
> and formal condemnations. The direction of speculative theology and the pursuit
> of the Holy See's political designs were increasingly united in the papal response to
> the intellectual and political challenges to the pope's authority during the embattled
> pontificate of Pius IX. Rome intervened in almost every serious theological
> controversy during the nineteenth century, and in almost every case, the
> intervention was influenced by the Church-state tensions.[84]

"Aeterni Patris" and the Neo-Scholastic Revival

Roman intervention regarding the direction of Catholic theology reached a new

height with the papacy of Leo XIII, who "wanted . . . to realize ultramontane goals

unrealized under Pius IX by intellectualizing the combat with modernity, by providing a

theoretical underpinning for his policies." Leo XIII sought to "restore in the world an

objective and immutable order, with the church as its most effective guardian. Renewal

of Thomistic philosophy was the tool essential to his purpose."[85]

By the middle of the nineteenth century there were already a number of Catholic

theological centers advocating a revival of the teachings of Thomas Aquinas. In Spain,

Jaime Balmes and Ceferino Gonzalez were influential Thomists, while Joseph Kleutgen

and Matthias Scheeben taught in Germany. Maurice D'Hulst was an important French

contributor to the movement, and Vincenzo Buzzetti inspired a thomistic revival in Italy.

The revolutions of 1848 and the loss of the Papal States in 1870 provided the movement

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[84] McCool, *Nineteenth-Century Scholasticism: The Search for a Unitary Method*,
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[85] James Hennesey, "Leo XIII's Thomistic Revival: A Political and Philosophical
Event," 190.

heightened momentum, and a Jesuit journal, *La civiltà cattolica*, was "founded with the expressed purpose of restoring in the modern world the role played by the church in medieval Christendom." The journal's orientation was decidedly Thomistic.[86]

The revival begun by Vincenzo Buzzetti in Italy was influential and attracted a number of important disciples, including the bishop of Perugia, Cardinal Gioacchino Pecci. Cardinal Pecci offered a "Lenten charge" in 1877 through which he made three suggestions for "the restoration of society: (1) only reintegration of religious values will correct social ills; (2) natural law is the foundation of civil morality and power; and (3) the church is the indispensable guarantor of this power and judge of its extension and limits."[87] When Cardinal Pecci became Pope Leo XIII the following year, he embarked on an aggressive program to apply his Lenten suggestions to the entire Catholic Church.

His first step, which came only a week after his election, was to make the writings of Thomas Aquinas a mandatory part of the curriculum at the Apollinare Seminary in Rome. Similar pressure was exerted in other Roman schools such as the Urban College of the Propaganda and especially at the Gregorian University in Rome where the influential Thomistic scholar, Joseph Kleutgen was put in charge of studies.[88] This

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[86] James Hennesey, "Leo XIII's Thomistic Revival: A Political and Philosophical Event," 191. For a more thorough treatment of the history of Leo XIII's Thomistic revival, see Roger Aubert, "Aspects Divers," in *Die Kirche in der Gegenwart*, ed. et al. Roger Augert, Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte (Freiburg, Germany: Herder, 1973), 133-227.

[87] James Hennesey, "Leo XIII's Thomistic Revival: A Political and Philosophical Event," 192. Cf. Pierre Thibault, *Savoir et Pouvoir: Philosophie Thomiste et Politique Cléricale au XIX Siècle*, Histoire et Sociologie de la Culture (Québec, Canada: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1972), 138-39.

[88] James Hennesey, "Leo XIII's Thomistic Revival: A Political and Philosophical Event," 192.

"Roman revival" was expanded to include the entire church when Leo XIII gave his

famous encyclical, *Aeterni Patris* (August 4, 1879). The encyclical is unambiguous in its

assertion that a philosophical revival is necessary to cure social ills. The second

paragraph suggests that

> Whoso turns his attention to the bitter strifes of these days and seeks a reason for
> the troubles that vex public and private life must come to the conclusion that a
> fruitful cause of the evils which now afflict, as well as those which threaten us, lies
> in this: that false conclusions concerning divine and human things, which
> originated in the schools of philosophy, have now crept into all the orders of the
> State, and have been accepted by the common consent of the masses. For since it is
> in the very nature of man to follow the guide of his reason in his actions, if his
> intellect sins at all his will soon follows; and thus it happens that false opinions,
> whose seat is in the understanding, influence human actions and pervert them.[89]

When Leo XIII speaks of the "evils of society," his remarks are directed especially at the

problems of socialism, communism, and nihilism, and he believes these to be a direct

consequence of anti-theistic philosophy that denies the church her authority.[90] These

"deadly plague[s], creeping into the very fibers of human society,"[91] he writes, are born

of secular philosophies divorced from Christian theology.

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[89] Pope Leo XIII, "Aeterni Patris," in *The Papal Encyclicals*, ed. Claudia Carlen (Wilmington, NC: McGrath Publishing Company, 1981), 17.

[90] Leo XIII's first encyclical, *Inscrutabili Dei Consilio* (April 1878) specifically addressed what he called the "evils of society" and claimed that "the source of these evils lies chiefly, We are convinced, in this, that the holy and venerable authority of the Church, which in God's name rules mankind, upholding and defending all lawful authority, has been despised and set aside." Pope Leo XIII, "Inscrutabili De Consilio," in *The Papal Encyclicals*, ed. Claudia Carlen (Wilmington, NC: McGrath Publishing Company, 1981), 5. In his second encyclical, *Quod Apostolici Muneris* (December 1878), Leo XIII identifies the source of society's ills as "socialists, communists, or nihilists." Pope Leo XIII, "Quod Apostolici Muneris," in *The Papal Encyclicals*, ed. Claudia Carlen (Wilmington, NC: McGrath Publishing Company, 1981), 11.

[91] Leo XIII, "Quod Apostolici Muneris," 11.

Aeterni Patris was, in a sense, a call for the Catholic Church to engage in the difficult work of apologetics. Indeed, it charges Catholics with "the duty of religiously defending the truths divinely delivered, and of resisting those who dare oppose them."[92] For Leo XIII, and the scholastics who helped him draft *Aeterni Patris*, the philosophy of St. Thomas employs natural reason in order to prove and justify the claims of Christian revelation. Thomistic philosophy is thus a "handmaid to revealed truth."[93] According to Leo XIII, human reason is prone to error if it is not supported by faith. "Faith," he writes, "frees and saves reason from error, and endows it with manifold knowledge." On the other hand, "philosophy, if rightly made use of by the wise, in a certain way tends to smooth and fortify the road to true faith, and to prepare the souls of its disciples for the fit reception of revelation."[94]

Philosophy also serves theology by helping it to "assume the nature, form, and genius of a true science. For in this, the most noble of studies, it is of the greatest necessity to bind together, as it were, in one body the many and various parts of the heavenly doctrines, that, each being allotted to its own proper place and derived from its own proper principles, the whole may join together in a complete union."[95] Philosophy and theology (reason and faith), for Leo XIII, are thus separate but complimentary, and no figure in the history of the Church has been more successful in wedding them together than the Angelic Doctor, Thomas Aquinas. Leo continues in *Aeterni Patris*, explaining

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[92] Leo XIII, "Aeterni Patris," 19.

[93] Gerald A. McCool, *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1989), 7.

[94] Leo XIII, "Aeterni Patris," 20.

[95] Leo XIII, "Aeterni Patris," 19.

that Thomas Aquinas, "clearly distinguishing, as is fitting, reason from faith, while happily associating the one with the other . . ., both preserved the rights and had regard for the dignity of each; so much so, indeed, that reason, borne on the wings of Thomas to its human height, can scarcely rise higher, while faith could scarcely expect more or stronger aids from reason than those which she has already obtained through Thomas."[96]

Because Thomas offers the greatest approach to joining philosophy and theology and because he is "the chief and master" of all the "scholastic doctors," Leo XIII called on the clergy to "furnish a generous and copious supply to studious youth of those crystal rills of wisdom flowing in a never-ending and fertilizing stream from the fountainhead of the Angelic Doctor." "We exhort you" he continues, "in all earnestness to restore the golden wisdom of St. Thomas and to spread it far and wide for the defense and beauty of the Catholic faith, for the good of society . . . . [which is] exposed to great danger from this plague of perverse opinions." Society, he explains "would certainly enjoy a far more peaceful and secure existence if a more wholesome doctrine were taught in the academies and schools – one more in conformity with the teaching of the Church, such as is contained in the works of Thomas Aquinas."[97]

According to Gerald McCool, the Catholic bishops responded to the recommendations of *Aeterni Patris* positively.[98] The social ills described in the encyclical were problems that most Catholics acknowledged, and the lack of a unified philosophical response to the various secular and atheistic philosophies associated with,

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[96] Leo XIII, "Aeterni Patris," 23.

[97] Leo XIII, "Aeterni Patris," 25.

[98] McCool, *The Neo-Thomists,* 35.

for instance, socialism and communism, was a frustration. Accordingly, the Thomistic

revival that had begun slowly in the early nineteenth century gained a great deal of

momentum after 1879.

The Thomism that emerged in the immediate wake of *Aeterni Patris*, especially in

Rome, was a coherent and closed system of philosophy and theology intended to provide

the Catholic truth in opposition to the systems of modern secular thinkers.[99] In the words

of William Eric Brown, neo-scholasticism in the last decades of the nineteenth century

was

> a close-knit system of metaphysics leading up to arguments to demonstrate the
> existence of God, while in theology the dogmas were articulated to a coherent
> scheme of the relations of man to God, and the reasonable grounds of each of them,
> of analogy or suitability, were developed. The instrument of enquiry was
> Aristotelian logic, and the structural completeness and intellectual beauty of
> Thomism gave its students confidence in that instrument as great as that of
> scientists in their own methods.[100]

From 1879 until the end of the nineteenth century, neo-scholasticism changed

very little. It was above all a "clerical enterprise," and the books that were produced

were principally school manuals designed to offer a clear and systematic exposition of

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[99] Some of de Lubac's most important and most controversial works criticized neo-Thomists for, what he perceived as, their failure to appropriate the thought of Aquinas properly. See especially Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études Historiques*, Coll. Théologie, 8 (Paris, France: Aubier-Montaigne, 1946). This early, highly controversial work was revised and published later as Henri de Lubac, *Augustinisme et Théologie Moderne*, Coll. Théologie 63 (Paris, France: Aubier-Montaigne, 1965). It was accompanied by a companion volume, Henri de Lubac, *Le Mystère Du Surnaturel* (Paris: Aubier, 1965). Chapter three of this work will explain the thesis of these works and discuss the neo-Thomistic response to them.

[100] William Eric Brown, *The Catholic Church in South Africa: From Its Origins to the Present Day*, ed. Michael Derrick (London, UK: Burns & Oates, 1960), 278.

revealed scholastic doctrines. Their purpose was not "the stimulation of original

thought."[101] Thomas O'Meara explains that neo-scholastic theology was

> An austere linking of clear abstract terms in Latin propositions . . . [which] avoided
> coming too close to Scripture or to any particular theologian. . . . Its ability to
> inspire Christian life or to address concrete moral issues was limited. . . . Christian
> teaching was a timeless metaphysics . . . [in which] every facet of ecclesiastical
> thinking and life had its place.[102]

However, as a number of scholars have pointed out, the Thomistic revival that

followed *Aeterni Patris* did not succeed in establishing a totally unified approach in

Catholic philosophy. McCool explains that "when the Society of Jesus 'returned to the

Angelic Doctor, most Jesuits, although not all, did so as Suarezians; and Franciscans

could feel that Bonaventure and Scotus, as Scholastic Doctors, were representative of the

common scholastic tradition."[103] Alasdair MacIntyre makes the same point when he

suggests that, although Leo XIII had intended a singular and integrated Thomistic revival,

"what he succeeded in generating were a number of different and rival Thomisms."[104]

MacIntyre contends that a diversity of Thomisms arose in the years after *Aeterni Patris*

because of Joseph Kleutgen's strong influence both on the drafting of *Aeterni Patris* and

on the scholastic revival that followed.

Although Kleutgen was correct to see that a breach had taken place in the western

philosophical tradition that separated the ancients from the moderns, he "mislocated the

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[101] McCool, *The Neo-Thomists*, 38.

[102] Thomas O'Meara, *Church and Culture: German Catholic Theology, 1860-1914* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 189-190.

[103] McCool, *The Neo-Thomists*, 39.

[104] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 73.

rupture" and failed to see that Thomas' "immediate successors" were not able to

overcome "the limitations of previous Augustinianism and previous Aristoteleanism" in

the same way that the Angelic Doctor had. Kleutgen mistakenly identified the thought of

the later scholastics, and especially Francisco Suarez, with the thought of Aquinas when

in fact Suarez "was already a distinctively modern thinker, perhaps more authentically

than Descartes."[105] Because he assumed that Suarez was faithful to the thought of

Aquinas, Kleutgen failed to see that his own philosophical work was more indebted to

Suarez than it was to Thomas. This is evident in light of the fact that Kleutgen tended,

following Suarez, "to make epistemological concerns central" to his philosophical system

in ways that Aquinas never did.[106]

MacIntyre contends that the emphasis on epistemology in Thomistic philosophy

after *Aeterni Patris* "doomed Thomism to the fate of all philosophies which give priority

to epistemological questions: the indefinite multiplication of disagreement." [107]

According to MacIntyre,

> Thomism, by epistemologizing itself after *Aeterni Patris*, proceeded to reenact the
> disagreements of post-Cartesian philosophy. Thus there were generated in turn a
> number of systematic Thomisms, each in contention *both* with whatever particular
> erroneous tendencies in modern secular philosophical thought *that* particular
> Thomism aspired to confront and overcome *and* with its Thomistic rivals. Often
> enough these two kinds of contest were closely connected. So Maréchal . . . made
> out of Aquinas a rival and a corrector of Kant, the work of interpretation being
> inseparable from that of philosophical apologetics. So Rousselot in very different
> fashion responded to the French academic philosophy of his day, producing a
> correspondingly different view of Aquinas. And so Maritain at a later date would
> formulate what he mistakenly took to be a Thomistic defense of the doctrine of
> human rights enshrined in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, a

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[105] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*.

[106] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 75.

[107] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 75.

quixotic attempt to present Thomas as offering a rival and superior account of the same moral subject matter as do other modern nontheological doctrines.[108]

Thus, rather than producing a single, unified Christian philosophy to combat the reigning secular philosophies of the day, the late nineteenth century Thomistic revival produced several divergent Thomisms that combated each other as much as they did any secular or atheistic philosophical system. This is not to suggest however, that the Thomistic revival was a failure. On the contrary, Leo XIII can be credited with inspiring a much more energetic Catholic engagement with secular thought., and the development of the systematic Thomisms of Rousselot, Maréchal, and Maritain in the twentieth century, combined with the historical Thomisms of Gilson, Chenu, and others, confirms that the Thomistic revival bore much fruit.

More important still is the fact that the revival sought by Leo XIII was social rather than epistemological. It must be remembered that his *Aeterni Patris* (itself intended as a response to the social consequences of secular philosophies) was preceded by *Inscrutabili Dei Consilio* and *Quod Apostolici Muneris* (two encyclicals devoted exclusively to addressing social ills) and was followed by a number of social encyclicals including four on politics (*Diuturnum*, 1881; *Immortale Dei* 1885; *Libertas*, 1888; and *Sapientiae Christianae*, 1890) and his famous *Rerum Novarum* of 1891, which addressed the conditions of labor and the plight of the working poor.[109] When combined with his sustained efforts to address the social problems of modern secular society, Leo XIII's

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[108] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 76.

[109] Beginning with Leo XIII, papal encyclicals became a more frequent tool for pontiffs to direct the cultural and intellectual life of the Catholic Church. See Joseph Komonchak, "The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism," *CCICA Annual: Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs* (1985): 44-46.

Thomistic revival must be credited not only with inspiring a more energetic engagement with secular thought, but a more energetic engagement with secular society in general.

Holland suggests that the ultimate aim of the Leonine revival, which continued largely unchanged in the pontificates of Pius X and Pius XI, was to restore the old Christian civilization "with modifications adapted to the new bourgeois context."[110] Significantly, unlike his immediate predecessors, Leo XIII went beyond simply condemning modernism and liberalism. Indeed, taken together, his encyclicals offered a sweeping vision for a positive new relationship between the Catholic Church and modern secular society. According to Holland, the Leonine strategy had three basic elements. First, bishops and clergy were to promote "the hierarchically organic teachings of Thomism as the philosophical ground for church and society." [111] Bishops and clergy were charged with the responsibility "to teach and to educate men."[112] The content of this teaching was the close-knit metaphysical system of the Latin manuals, such as those used at the Gregorian University in Rome and elsewhere. The pope believed that the theological truths supported by neo-scholastic philosophy, if they were accepted by all men, would unite the various classes "in the bonds of friendship, but also in those of

[110] Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 198. Jospeh Komonchak explains that, during this period, "the Catholic church constructed a new sociological form in which to give expression to its ancient Christianity. While in many respects, this Roman Catholicism had deep roots in earlier periods of history, nevertheless it represented a distinct and specifically modern phenomenon. It differed from the Catholicism of the *ancien régime*, of the Counter-Reformation, and of medieval Christendom, at least as much as each of these differed from its predecessors." Joseph Komonchak, "The Ecclesial and Cultural Roles of Theology," *Catholic Theological Society of America: Proceedings* 40 (1985): 16.

[111] Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 197.

[112] Pope Leo XIII, "Rerum Novarum," in *The Papal Encyclicals*, ed. Claudia Carlen (Wilmington, NC: McGrath Publishing Company, 1981), 248.

brotherly love. For they will understand and feel that all men are children of the same common Father, who is God; that all have alike the same last end, which is God Himself, who alone can make either men or angels absolutely and perfectly happy."[113] The neo-scholastics, according to the Leonine strategy, were responsible for clearly and systematically articulating the truths of Thomism and offering apologetic arguments in the service of epistemological justification.

The second element of the Leonine strategy was to offer "external diplomatic acceptance of moderately liberal democratic regimes and careful internal pastoral mobilization of lay Catholics to pressure these regimes in the direction of Catholic teaching."[114] Unlike his immediate predecessor, Pius IX, whose ambition was nothing less than the total restoration of the *ancien régime*, Leo XIII was willing to accept the relative autonomy of liberal democratic states. However, he sought to influence the direction of liberal democracies and to combat the growing threat of state totalitarianism by supporting lay movements intended to safeguard Catholic piety. During the pontificates of Leo XIII's successors, Pius X, Benedict XV, and Pius XI, Catholic lay movements blossomed throughout Europe and in North America.[115]

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[113] XIII, "Rerum Novarum," 247.

[114] Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 197.

[115] Among the many movements that flourished during this time, some of the more popular were the National Council of Catholic Men and Women, the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD), the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin, Serra International, the Catholic Interracial Councils, as well as a host of independent movements like the Catholic Worker and the Christian Family Movement. See Komonchak, "The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism," 41-42.

The final element of the Leonine strategy involved a commitment by the Vatican to support worker's rights, unions, and limited governmental policies designed to provide the working class with "moderate social-welfare" programs. [116] This strategy was employed through diplomatic concordances much like the one worked-out with Napoleon Bonaparte in the early nineteenth century. This strategy remained largely unaltered during the pontificates of Pius X and Benedict XV, which immediately followed Leo XIII, but with the growing threat of atheistic communism, Vatican diplomatic efforts in the 1930s and 1940s came increasingly to eschew any political movement with socialist leanings and to offer *limited* support to fascist regimes, including the one governing Nazi Germany, "in return for promises of governmental cooperation with the papacy to reestablish Christian civilization."[117] Holland explains that

> the fascists had been willing through concordants to grant official status to the Catholic Church in public life, so apparently in [Pope Pius XII's] view they provided the legal ground out of which Christian civilization could one day be restored and the modern world could thereby be healed of its systemic ills. . . . Neither liberals nor socialists had been willing even to consider such official public restoration, and so, presumably again in his view, these other political streams prohibited the restoration of Christian civilization and thus prohibited the Christian resolution of what he saw as the root crises of modern liberal culture.[118]

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[116] Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 197. In Rerum Novarum, Leo XIII writes, concerning institutions designed to protect workers, that "the most important of all are workingmen's unions." Leo XIII, "Rerum Novarum," 253.

[117] Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 207.

[118] Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 215. There have been several book-length studies on the complex relationship between the Vatican and the fascist governments of the mid-twentieth century. There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that both Pius XI and Pius XII made considerable effort to offer refuge to European Jews during the holocaust, but they also engaged in a highly controversial effort to maintain diplomatic relationships with the governments of Italy and Germany. For a balanced and scholarly investigation, see Anthony Richard Ewart Rhodes, *The Vatican in the Age of the Dictators, 1922-1945* (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973). For a more sensational and less scholarly account of Pius XII's diplomatic efforts, see John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (New York, NY: Viking, 1999).

In hindsight, the Vatican's diplomatic relationships with fascist regimes were clearly misguided. The initial hope for a reestablishment of "Christian civilization" was squelched as the regimes in Italy and Germany committed an increasing number of social atrocities, the Catholic Church was attacked rather than empowered, and an idolatrous nationalism became the prevailing ideology. It seems that the Leonine strategy, though well-intentioned, was incapable of restoring a modified modern version of the *ancien régime.* Despite all of the Vatican's diplomatic efforts, and despite the many lay movements intended to unite citizens "in the bonds of friendship," early twentieth century European civilization became increasingly secular and the Catholic Church became increasingly marginalized.

Conclusion

According to Henri de Lubac, the Catholic Church was at least partly responsible for its own increasing marginalization. He believed that neo-scholastic theologians had failed to engage directly with the atheistic philosophies that were having such a strong and dangerous influence on European society.[119] Among the earliest of his works was an article published in 1930 entitled "Apologetics and Theology."[120] Originally delivered in

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[119] It would be wrong, however, to view de Lubac as opposed to the Leonine revival. Rather, de Lubac's theological program offered one particular way of enacting Leo XIII's vision of a new relationship between Catholicism and culture. Importantly, De Lubac was considered, and considered himself, a Thomist when he began his teaching career. Throughout his life, he always tried to remain faithful to what he believed, was an authentic Thomism. For his own reflections on the subject, see Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 143-146.

[120] Henri de Lubac, "Apologétique et Théologie," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 57 (1930): 364-365. De Lubac explains that, "apart from a few earlier, insignificant lines," *Apologétique et Théologie* "was my first article." Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 15. An English translation of the article, which I will cite in this chapter, appeared in a collection of essays published in 1989. See, Lubac, "Apologetics and Theology," 91-104.

1929 as his inaugural lecture in fundamental theology at the *Faculté de théologie*

catholique in Lyon, the article is a call for a reinvigoration of Catholic theology and

apologetics, and thus a more earnest engagement with secular thought by Catholic

scholars. From de Lubac's perspective, the neo-scholastic theology that prevailed after

Aeterni Patris was too narrow in its outlook and too separated from apologetics. The

result of this separation was an extrinsic theology and an apologetics cut off from the

content of Christian faith. According to de Lubac, "the error," for the theologian,

"consists in conceiving of dogma as a kind of 'thing in itself,' as a block of revealed truth

with no relationship whatsoever to natural man." Clearly, de Lubac's criticisms were

aimed at the kind of neo-scholastic theology contained in the Latin manuals and used

widely for the education of clergy.   The prevailing neo-scholastic approach, he goes on

to explain, "confines dogma to the extremities of knowledge and, hence, isolates it."[121]

In a later article, written during the Second World War, de Lubac compared neo-

scholastic theology to museum work. He suggested that Catholic theologians

> 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 a
> mystery, at least we know exactly where it is to be placed, and we point to this
> precisely defined site. . . . Thus, for us, theology is a science a bit like the others,
> with this sole essential difference: its first principles were received through
> revelation instead of having been acquired through experience or through the work
> of reason.[122]

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[121] Lubac, "Apologetics and Theology," 93-94.

[122] Henri de Lubac, "Internal Causes of the Weakening and Disappearance of the
Sense of the Sacred," in *Theology in History* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius 1996), 233.
The Canadian theologian, George Grant, makes a similar criticism of modern humanities
research in general. He suggests that humanities research and writing is too often
"oriented today towards a 'museum culture,' not to knowledge necessary to human
existence." He uses the term museum culture "because museums are places where we

With regard to apologetics, de Lubac claimed that Catholic apologists were captivated by "a kind of unavowed rationalism, which had been reinforced for a century by the invasion of positivist tendencies."[123] Although "the apologist" during the heydays of neo-scholasticism, "was being reduced to a humiliated condition, he was being granted, within narrow limits, an excessive power that was bound to be disappointing."[124] That power was to offer a justification of the Christian faith by means of rational, and purely extrinsic, epistemological argumentation.[125] According to de Lubac, Christian apologists had adopted the rationalism and positivism of the age and embraced "the common prejudice that recognized no certitude or even intelligibility that was not scientific."[126] All the while, apologists had lost sight of the most important "reasons for believing" as they worked tirelessly to prove the factuality of revealed dogma. In de Lubac's view, an extrinsic theology coupled with a scientific apologetics falls very far short of the Church's great tradition. Boldly, he declared that

> Small-minded theology that is not even traditional, separated theology, tagging behind a separated philosophy – it is no more the theology of the Fathers than it is that of St. Thomas, and the worthless apologetics that it shaped in its image is no closer to the apologetics whose model has been given to us across the centuries: *Speeches and Letters* of St. Paul, Justin's *Apologia*, St. Augustine's *De vera*

observe past life as object" with little consideration of how knowledge of the past might be meaningful for our lives today. See George Grant, *Technology and Justice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 97-98.

[123] Lubac, "Apologetics and Theology," 93.

[124] Lubac, "Apologetics and Theology," 93.

[125] Bernhard Körner, "Henri Lubac and Fundamental Theology," *Communio* 23 (1996): 714.

[126] Lubac, "Apologetics and Theology," 93-94.

religione, St. Thomas' *Contra gentes*, Savonarola's *Triumphus Crucis*, Pascal's *Pénsees*.[127]

Against those who would defend such "small-mindedness," de Lubac argued that theology must "constantly maintain apologetical considerations" or become "deficient and distorted." Likewise, in order for apologetics to be authentic and "fully effective," it "must end up in theology."[128] At the heart of the issue is the question of whether or not Christian theology has something meaningful to say to the human condition. De Lubac believed that neo-scholastic theologians had turned "dogma into a kind of 'superstructure,' believing that, if dogma is to remain 'supernatural,' it must be all the more divine." This kind of theology, he explains, acts "as though the same God were not the author of both nature and grace."[129]

De Lubac believed that theology is superficial if it fails to show how Christian dogma is a "source of universal light," that makes the world both more comprehensible and more beautiful. Thus theologians cannot allow secular philosophies to have the last, or only word on any matter that pertains to the human condition, matters involving economics, politics, marriage, the family, etc. According to de Lubac, the theologian must work to illuminate everything that pertains to human nature in the light of grace. In order to do so, however, the theologian must become an apologist, since the "most formidable adversaries of the Faith, who are also the most interesting, have a conception of the world and a doctrine of life that they deem to be superior to ours."[130] The

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[127] Lubac, "Apologetics and Theology," 95.

[128] Lubac, "Apologetics and Theology," 96.

[129]Lubac, "Apologetics and Theology," 94-95.

[130] Lubac, "Apologetics and Theology," 97.

challenge for the Church, from de Lubac's perspective, is thus to engage the reigning

secular and atheistic philosophies head-on in order to expose their internal contradictions

and inherent nihilism and also to offer the Catholic faith as an alternative and more

beautiful vision and way of life. In the following chapter, I will show that de Lubac's

major theological works were inspired by a vision of a more fruitful Catholic engagement

with secular culture.

CHAPTER THREE

Engaging the Secular in De Lubac's
Work on Ecclesiology, Ontology, and Exegesis

Introduction

In *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (1943) de Lubac does the work that he

recommends in "Apologetics and Theology." That is, he engages the reigning secular

philosophies head-on in order to expose their inherent nihilism. He writes in the preface

of *The Drama* that positivist humanism, Marxist humanism and Nietzschean humanism

have a "common foundation in the rejection of God [that] is matched by a certain

similarity in results, the chief of which is the annihilation of the human person."[1] In the

previous chapter, we saw that several of the nineteenth century's most influential atheist

philosophers were compelled to reject the Christian faith because of a conviction that

humankind is oppressed, held back, and negated by such faith. The irony, according to

de Lubac, is that the experience of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europeans

suggests the opposite.   Having witnessed, several decades earlier, the devastation of "the

Great War" and writing in the midst of the Nazi terror of World War II, de Lubac

suggests that "the 'death of God' was bound to have fatal repercussions. Thus we are

confronted with what Nicholas Berdyaev . . . has rightly called 'the self-destruction of

humanism.' We are proving by experience that 'where there is no God, there is no man

either.'"[2]

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[1] Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 12.

[2] Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 65.

For de Lubac, once the world is understood from an atheistic perspective, humankind loses all value and meaning.[3] Regarding the work of figures like Comte, Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche, he asks,

> What has actually become of the lofty ambitions of this humanism, not only in fact but in the very way of thought of its initiates? What has become of man as conceived by this atheist humanism? A being that can still hardly be called a 'being' – a thing that has no content, a cell completely merged in a mass that is in process of becoming: 'social-and-historical man,' of whom all that remains is pure abstraction, apart from the social relations and the position in time by which he is defined. There is no stability or depth left in him, and it is no good looking for any inviolable retreat there or claiming to discover any value exacting universal respect. There is nothing to prevent his being used as material or as a tool either for the preparation of some future society or for ensuring, here and now, the dominance of one privileged group. There is not even anything to prevent his being cast aside as useless.[4]

These words were published not long after the communist revolution in Russia and at the height of the Jewish Holocaust in Western Europe. For de Lubac, there was a clear and obvious connection between nineteenth century atheist humanism and twentieth century European totalitarianism. With regard to the lasting influence of Comte, for example, he suggests that "the positivist formula spells total tyranny." "Auguste Comte," he explains, "the worshipper of Humanity, profoundly misjudged human nature."[5] The same, of course, can be said of Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche who, in their attempts to rescue and redeem humankind, achieve only a negation.[6]

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[3] For a recent work arguing that the world can have value and meaning in a universe without God, see Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005). I will address and dispute Wielenberg's thesis in chapter six of this work.

[4] Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 66.

[5] Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 263-267.

[6] Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 70-71.

In contrast to the various atheist philosophies described above, de Lubac claims that authentic Christianity offers a vision and way of life that is truly humanistic.[7] In other words, it is Christianity and not atheist humanism that understands human nature most profoundly. For de Lubac, it is the Christian gospel in contrast to atheistic philosophies, which offers the ultimate and only lasting hope for humankind. The thesis of this chapter is that de Lubac's major works on ecclesiology, ontology, and exegesis were motivated by a desire to see Catholicism engage in a more robust competition with secular thought and culture concerning the nature and destiny of humankind and that these works are best understood in light of this overarching agenda.[8]

The chapter is divided into four parts. Section one will consider the grand vision outlined in de Lubac's first and most programmatic book, *Catholicism* (1938), and specifically his claim that the logic and mission of the Church is "essentially social" and humanistic in the truest sense. The following three parts will focus on de Lubac's efforts to uncover and challenge theological and philosophical obstacles undermining the Church's self-understanding and mission in the modern secular world. Thus, section two will describe the context and practical implications of de Lubac's *Corpus Mysticum*

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[7] In describing the "spiritual battle" between Christianity and atheist humanism, de Lubac suggests that "Christianity must be given back its strength in us, which means, first and foremost, that we must rediscover it as it is in itself, in its purity and its authenticity." Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 127.

[8] Commenting several years after the council on the Vatican II Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, de Lubac suggests that "the main doctrinal task to which the Constitution . . . summons and stimulates us is a confrontation with contemporary atheism. . . . In other words we Christians want to show by a sort of peaceful competition, in deeds as well as words, that 'we also, we Christians, we, more than anyone else have the cult of man' . . . To the extent that we respect the man who speaks to us, and take his ideas seriously, dialogue once begun quickly becomes a confrontation." Henri de Lubac, "Nature and Grace," in *The Word in History*, ed. Patrick Burke (New York, NY: Sheed and Ward, 1966), 26-27.

(1944). Next I will examine his work on nature and grace, which was intended to

"eliminate one basic obstacle" (ontological dualism) inhibiting the engagement of

"Catholic theology with contemporary thought."[9] In the fourth and final section I will

argue that de Lubac's work on patristic and medieval exegesis complements his

ecclesiological and ontological studies and advances his effort to strengthen

Catholicism's engagement with secular thought and culture.

Catholicism

De Lubac's first book, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*

(1938)[10] was a programmatic work that offered a bold vision of the Church's inherently

social and universal character. The book was intended "to show the simultaneously

social, historical and interior character of Christianity, this threefold mark conferring on it

that character of universality and totality best expressed by the word 'catholicism.'"[11]

De Lubac had no desire for novelty; rather, his purpose was "simply to bring out clearly

certain ideas that are inherent in our faith: ideas so simple that they do not always attract

attention, but at the same time so fundamental that there is some risk of our not finding

time to ponder them."[12]

A compilation of previously written essays, *Catholicism* is divided into three

major sections that correspond to the "threefold mark" mentioned above.[13] Section one

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[9] Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 36.

[10] Lubac, *Catholicism*.

[11] Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 27.

[12] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 18.

[13] Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 27.

addresses the social nature of Christianity, section two the historical, and section three the

interior or personal. *Catholicism* was, according to Hans Urs von Balthasar, "intended to

be and actually became a major breakthrough." Von Balthasar suggests that nearly all of

de Lubac's subsequent publications were anticipated in this early work and "grew from

its individual chapters much like branches from a trunk."[14] I will argue in subsequent

sections of this chapter that, while this original programmatic work set out a bold vision

for a revitalized church, de Lubac's more technical and genealogical works that followed

were intended to expose and challenge theological and philosophical obstacles keeping

the Church from living up to the vision outlined in *Catholicism*.

The Social Character of Catholicism

The thesis of section one of *Catholicism* is that humanity was created for unity

with God and other persons, that this unity was destroyed with the fall from grace, and

that it is restored through Christ and specifically through his body – the Church. In

contrast to the atheist humanists who saw in Christianity only an "opiate," keeping people

from realizing a just and peaceful society on earth, de Lubac argued that the Church's

mission is inherently social and political.

The section begins with a discussion of dogma and endeavors to show that "the

unity of the Mystical Body of Christ, a supernatural unity, supposes a previous natural

unity, the unity of the human race." To support this claim, de Lubac offers copious

examples showing that, for the Church Fathers, the doctrines of creation, fall, and

redemption presuppose an originally unified human race "shattered into a thousand

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[14] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1991), 35.

pieces" with the fall and brought back together with redemption.[15] "Let us abide by the

outlook of the Fathers," he suggests, so that "the redemption being a work of restoration

will appear to us by that very fact as the recovery of a lost unity – the recovery of

supernatural unity of man with God, but equally of the unity of men among

themselves."[16]

Accordingly, this unity (between humans and God and among humans) lies at the

heart of the Church's character and mission. De Lubac explains that

> The Church which is "Jesus Christ spread abroad and communicated" completes –
> so far as it can be completed here below – the work of spiritual reunion which was
> made necessary by sin; that work which was begun at the Incarnation and was
> carried on up to Calvary. In one sense the Church is herself this reunion, for that is
> what is meant by the name of Catholic by which we find her called from the second
> century onward. . . . The Church is not Catholic because she is spread abroad over
> the whole of the earth and can reckon on a large number of members. She was
> already Catholic on the morning of Pentecost, when all her members could be
> contained in a small room, as she was when Arian waves seemed on the point of
> swamping her; she would still be Catholic if tomorrow apostasy on a vast scale
> deprived her of almost all the faithful. For fundamentally Catholicity has nothing
> to do with geography or statistics. . .Catholicity is primarily an intrinsic feature of
> the Church.[17]

Citing figures such as Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Alexandria, Origen,

Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, and a host of other well-known Fathers as well as more

obscure writers – ancient, medieval, and modern - de Lubac argues that the Church has

always understood itself, paradoxically, as not "an entirely invisible reality" but

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[15] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 24-35.

[16] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 35. Cf. "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: Lumen Gentium," in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, ed. Austin Flannery (Dublin, Ireland: Dominican Publications, 1996), 1.

[17] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 48-49.

nevertheless "as a mystery surpassing its outward manifestations."[18] The Church, he

suggests, "is at the same time both the way and the goal; at the same time visible and

invisible; in time and in eternity; she is at once the bride and the widow, the sinner and

the saint."[19]

The unity of the Church, for de Lubac, is tied to the eschatological unity of the

human race in Christ, and the sacraments are instruments of this unity, since they make

the eschatological reality actual in the present. Baptism, for example, is entry into the

Church and thus "is essentially a social event" in that individuals enter into the fraternity

of the visible church. Baptism is also a mystical and spiritual event, however, "because

the Church is not a purely human society: whence comes the 'character' conferred by

baptism. . . . So it is that by being received into a religious society one who has been

baptized is incorporated in the Mystical Body."[20] Thus, Christian baptism entails entry

into the society of the visible church whose true nature and ultimate end is derived from

the eschatological unity of the whole human race in Christ. De Lubac cites Irenaeus of

Lyon, who understood baptism in this way:

> The Holy Spirit came down on the Apostles that all nations might enter into Life.
> And so they are gathered together to sing a hymn to God in all tongues. In this way

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[18] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 64.

[19] De Lubac goes on to suggest that "In the interest of refuting such chaotic concepts as those which see a divine Church only in a "Church of the saints," an entirely invisible society which is nothing but a pure abstraction, we must not fall into the contrary error. The Church 'so far as visible' is also an abstraction, and our faith should never make separate what God from the beginning has joined together. . . . Nor do we claim to prove this union by an explanation of it, for the mystery of the Church is deeper still, if that were possible, than the mystery of Christ, just as that mystery was more difficult to believe than the mystery of God." Lubac, *Catholicism*, 74. Cf. Henri de Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1969), 34-39.

[20] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 83-84.

the Holy Spirit brought the scattered peoples back to unity, and offered to the Father the first fruits of all nations. Indeed, just as without water no dough, not a single loaf, can be made of dry flour, so we who are many cannot become one in Christ without that water that comes from heaven. That is why our bodies receive by baptism that unity which leads to life incorruptible, and our souls receive the same unity through the Holy Spirit.[21]

The eschatological unity of the human race in Christ is also (and especially) made actual, according to de Lubac, in the sacrament of the Eucharist where the body and blood of Jesus are broken and shed and consumed in order that all who partake are united with Christ and with each other in Christ.[22] Here again, de Lubac offers abundant quotations from the Church's tradition. The following from Cyril of Alexandria is characteristic:

> To merge us in unity with God and among ourselves, although we have each a distinct personality, the only Son devised a wonderful means: through one body, his own, he sanctifies his faithful in mystic communion, making them one body with him and among themselves. Within Christ no division can arise. All united to the single Christ through his own body, all receiving him, the one and indivisible, into our own bodies, we are the members of this one body and he is thus, for us, the bond of unity.[23]

For the Fathers of the Church, the sacrament of the Eucharist was that instrument through which Christians were transformed into the body of Christ. The Eucharist, according to de Lubac, is the sacrament through which the church is made as Christians are

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[21] Tranlated and cited in Lubac, *Catholicism*, 85-86.

[22] For de Lubac, the Eucharist is "the sacrament in the highest sense of the word – *sacramentum sacramentorum, quasi consummation spiritualis vitae et omnium sacramentorum finis* – the sacrament 'which contains the whole mystery of our salvation,' the Eucharist, is also especially the sacrament of unity: *sacramentum unitatis ecclesiasticae*." Lubac, *Catholicism*, 88-89.

[23] Translated and cited in Lubac, *Catholicism*, 91.

transformed into the actual body of Christ.[24] Accordingly, "true Eucharistic piety . . . is

no devout individualism. It is 'unmindful of nothing that concerns the good of the

Church.' With one sweeping, all-embracing gesture, in one fervent intention it gathers

together the whole world. . . . it cannot conceive of the action of the breaking of bread

without fraternal communion."[25]

De Lubac completes part one of *Catholicism* with a discussion of eternal life.

Having already shown the fundamentally social nature of Christianity as expressed in the

Church's dogmas, claims to catholicity, and sacramental constitution, he asks now: "how

can we go on talking of the social character of a doctrine which teaches the survival of

the individual soul?"[26] The answer to this question is obvious enough given all that has

been said thus far. Eternal life, according to de Lubac, is a life lived in communion with

God and others. It was for this reason that the "Christian tradition has always looked on

heaven under the analogy of a city" where the joy of the saints is "derived from their life

in community."[27] While de Lubac's focus on the fundamentally social nature of the

Church was meant to challenge Christianity's philosophical detractors, it was also

intended to challenge the pietistic and individualistic tendencies of early twentieth

century Christians who had all but abandoned the social and political world to the forces

of secular humanism.

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[24] In *Corpus Mysticum* (1944), de Lubac describes a process, beginning in the twelfth century, when the traditional understanding of the Eucharist as a sacrament through which Christians are transformed into the real body of Christ began to wane. I will discus the thesis and implications of *Corpus Mysticum* in the following section.

[25] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 109-110.

[26] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 112.

[27] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 113.

The Importance of History

In part two of *Catholicism*, de Lubac considers what the social character of the Church and salvation means for a Christian understanding of history. He begins with the claim that "Christianity, by those doctrinal aspects that we have just emphasized as well as by others, brought something absolutely new into the world." That something new is an understanding of salvation that is not escapist. The Christian hope is that the will of God will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and this hope provides the basis for the Church's unique mission. The Christian view, according to de Lubac is that the history of humankind has purpose and meaning; it has "both direction and significance." Instead of claiming that this world will one day pass away and that history will come to an ending, de Lubac suggests that the biblical portrait is of a world passing from time into eternity – a transformation of historical existence into eternal. "The resurrection," he explains, "which shall indicate the passing of time into eternity, will be a definitive transformation of the universe."[28]

According to de Lubac, the transformation of time into eternity has already begun, since God has entered into the historical process. Moreover, he suggests that "God acts in history and reveals himself through history. Or rather, God inserts himself in history and so bestows on it a 'religious consecration' which compels us to treat it with due respect."[29] Again, it is important to place de Lubac's comments in context. He wrote

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[28] These early remarks on history anticipate de Lubac's later work in two areas: Buddhism and the thought of Teilhard de Chardin. While the suggestion that time will pass into eternity is a controversial statement, de Lubac offers a host of citations from Scripture (from Paul and from Revelation) and from the Fathers (Jerome, Augustine, Maximus, Methodius, etc.) to support his claim. Lubac, *Catholicism*, 142-144 & fn. 24.

[29] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 165.

these words at the height of Hitler's power when it seemed that totalitarian and fascist

governments had a firm grasp on the unfolding history of Europe and when citizens saw

the Church as an institution concerned, primarily, with preparing individual souls for an

escape from history. This section of *Catholicism* was meant to recall the fact that the

logic of incarnation necessitates a Christian commitment to history. In chapter five I will

argue in greater detail that patristic and medieval exegesis was, according to de Lubac,

structured to enable the Church to participate in the ongoing redemptive work of the

Spirit *in history*.

After addressing the relationship of Scripture to history, de Lubac examines the

claim that the Church is necessary for salvation. Here again, the fundamentally social

and historical nature of Christianity is key. Rather than argue for the superiority of

Christianity on the basis of a superior objective and rationalistic system of doctrine, de

Lubac argues that the Church, with all of its dogmas, sacraments, etc., has an

indispensable and necessary role in history.

For de Lubac, the claim that outside the Church there is no salvation does not

mean that other peoples and religions have no place in the final salvation. What it means

is that the final, ultimate salvation of the human race is dependent upon the success of

Jesus' mission in and through his body, the Church. Indeed, de Lubac writes that

unbelievers "can be saved because they are an integral part of that humanity which is to

be saved." He suggests that,

> as unbelievers are, in the design of Providence, indispensable for building the Body
> of Christ, they must in their own way profit from their vital connection with this
> same Body. By an extension of the dogma of the communion of saints, it seems
> right to think that though they themselves are not in the normal way of salvation,

they will be able nevertheless to obtain this salvation by virtue of those mysterious bonds which unite them to the faithful.[30]

By "mysterious bonds," he means the intricate social and historical connections which tie all people together.[31] Israel and the Church did not appear out of nowhere, but were themselves the products of long and complex historical processes. Each, in a multitude of ways, borrowed ideas and aspirations from the cultures and religions that preceded and surrounded them.[32]

De Lubac's inclusive approach to the issue of Christian salvation does not undermine the exclusive claims of the Church regarding the christological and ecclesiological character of redemption. For de Lubac, the Church's necessary role in God's economy of grace is made even more profound, since the ultimate salvation of humanity is tied up with the success of the mission of Christ in and through his body – the Church. He holds that the Church is not only necessary for salvation but is in fact predestined in Christ. Moreover, humankind, and indeed the entire universe, is

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[30] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 233.

[31] Importantly, de Lubac is not advocating a kind of progressive historical universalism. Indeed, he qualifies this discussion by explaining that "no more than for St. Paul or the Fathers do we wish to use this providential role to explain away any "infidelity" of paganism. The part of actual evil in the latter is manifestly immense, and it was not at all inevitable. From this viewpoint, what is truly progress can sometimes appear to be deterioration: the corruption of a particular period or society, for example, may be bound up with a development of civilization and a deepening of moral conceptions that are, in themselves, true progress. . . . Not that history allows us to establish a law of inversely proportionate progress, the development of material and intellectual civilization having its counterpart in a movement of religious and moral decadence. . . . But human progress renders the possibilities for evil more and more formidable. Culture can become an obstacle to grace . . . and within culture, we include 'religious culture' itself" (Lubac, *Catholicism*, 231, fn. 41).

[32] "God, desiring that all men should be saved, but now allowing in practice that all should be visibly in the Church, wills nevertheless that all those who answer his call should in the last resort be saved through his Church" (Lubac, *Catholicism*, 234).

predestined in Christ and his body, the Church. De Lubac writes that "the Church is nothing less than humanity itself, enlivened, unified by the Spirit of Christ. She was willed by God 'in order to give life to creation.'"[33] Completing part two of Catholicism, de Lubac suggests that Catholicism is "the only ark of salvation, within her immense nave she must give shelter to all varieties of humanity." Moreover, Catholicism "is the form that humanity must put on in order to finally be itself."[34]

Catholicism and the Individual

In the final and shortest section of *Catholicism,* de Lubac begins to address the reality that the vision laid out in the first two sections – a vision of a Church whose nature is fundamentally social and historical – is not widely embraced in his own day. Rather, the Catholic Church seems to have embraced the individualism of the enlightenment to its own detriment. Thus, rather than see salvation as the ultimate reunification of humans with God and each other "many could see salvation only in a complete severance between the natural and the supernatural"- as a kind of individualistic escape from this socially and historically embodied life to something altogether different. [35] De Lubac believed that this individualistic and escapist understanding of Christian salvation was, at least in part, responsible for the Church's silence and complacency in the face of atheistic

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[33] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 279. Hans Urs von Balthasar suggests that de Lubac's chapter on predestination "anticipates Barth's famous doctrine of predestination (K.D. II, 2), in which he inserts a weighty chapter on the election of the Church between the election of Christ and the election of the individual" (Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac*, 41).

[34] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 296-298.

[35] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 313.

philosophies that promised their own versions of social salvation and often had no regard

for the dignity of individual humans.

De Lubac believed that Christianity holds the greatest promise for society as a

whole and that it does so without disregarding the dignity of persons since *individuals* are

completed and fulfilled as they are recreated in the image of the Trinity. He writes:

> That image of God, the image of the Word, which the incarnate Word restores and
> gives back to its glory, is "I myself;" it is also the other, every other. It is that
> aspect of me in which I coincide with every other man, it is the hallmark of our
> common origin and the summons to our common destiny. It is our very unity in
> God.[36]

This clearly distinguishes de Lubac's vision of a social Catholicism from various

socialisms that would willingly sacrifice individuals for the sake of the greater good. For

de Lubac, the communion of Christ's body enables *individuals* to achieve their greatest

happiness. This is a social vision that affirms, without hesitation, the dignity and

supernatural destiny of individuals. Also in contrast to other social visions, and Marxism

in particular, Christianity is not focused on humanity. According to de Lubac, "it is only

by abandoning all idea of considering itself as its own end that mankind can be gathered

together." The state of sin that characterizes humankind means that redemption is

possible when human desire transcends what is humanly possible. According to de

Lubac, the ultimate end and aspiration of the church transcends human nature, since it is

God himself. Christianity, for de Lubac, is not mere humanism because "humanism is

not itself Christian. Christian humanism must be a *converted humanism*," a humanism

that seeks its final resting place only in a transcendent God. It is the nature of the Church

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[36] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 340.

as the body of Christ to serve human history by worshiping the Triune God, since "there is definitive brotherhood only in a common adoration."[37]

In *Catholicism*, de Lubac offers a holistic vision of the Church, as the body of Christ, mediating between time and eternity – consecrating the present and directing it towards its ultimate end in the Divine economy. In the following sections, I will argue that C*orpus Mysticum* describes an important transformation in the life of the Church when the holistic vision, as outlined in *Catholicism*, begins to wane and the temporal realm is increasingly conceived as autonomous - separated from the sacred. Then, I'll show that de Lubac's work on nature and grace is intended to challenge the philosophical justification of this separation, while his work on spiritual exegesis offers, if only implicitly, a constructive and traditional means for the church to embrace more fully its Christological mission as mediator between time and eternity.

Overcoming Challenges: Corpus Mysticum

As mentioned previously, *Catholicism* was a programmatic work that outlined a bold vision for a revitalized Church whose own self-understanding would necessitate a greater engagement with secular culture. De Lubac understood well, however, that the vision of *Catholicism* was not widely shared. Indeed, there were many obstacles – both philosophical and theological – that stood in the way of a more widespread embrace of *Catholicism's* vision. De Lubac's second book, *Corpus Mysticum* (1944),[38] like his later

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[37] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 367-368.

[38] Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: L'eucharistie et L'eglise au Moyen Âge. Étude Historique*, Coll. Théologie, 3 (Paris, France: Aubier-Montaigne, 1944). In his Memoirs, de Lubac explains that the text of *Corpus Mysticum* was almost finished in 1938, though its publication had to be postponed because of the war. See Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 29.

works on the relationship between nature and grace, was intended to challenge a major

obstacle inhibiting the Church's engagement with secular society.[39] My argument is that

there is significant continuity between *Corpus Mysticum* and *Surnaturel* (1946) since

twelfth century ecclesiological developments discussed in *Corpus Mysticum* served as a

prelude to the sixteenth century development of the idea of pure nature and the

emergence of an ontological dualism described in de Lubac's major works on nature and

grace.

The Thesis of Corpus Mysticum

Whereas *Catholicism* offers a comprehensive vision of the Church's inherently

social character and mission, *Corpus Mysticum* is focused narrowly on the historical

development of several phrases identified with Eucharistic piety. However, the thesis of

Corpus Mysticum is consistent with the overall vision outlined in the earlier work and

was anticipated in its chapter on the sacraments. According to de Lubac, the body of

Christ was conceived in three different ways before the twelfth century. First,

theologians spoke of the historical body of Jesus of Nazareth. Second, the sacramental

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[39] Although de Lubac was already discussing the nature/grace problem in his first published work, *Apologetics and Theology* (1930), his first major treatment of the issue was published in 1946. See Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études Historiques*. In 1949 he reworked some of the conclusions found in *Surnaturel* and published them as follows: Henri de Lubac, "Le Mystère Du Surnaturel," *Recherches de science religieuse* (1949). The English translation of this essay is available in Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural." *Surnaturel* was later revised, expanded, and published in 1965 as Lubac, *Augustinisme et Théologie Moderne*. The English translation, which I will cite henceforward, is Henri de Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2000). The essay from 1949, "Le Mystère Du Surnaturel," was also revised, expanded, and published in book form under the same title in 1965. See Henri de Lubac, *Le Mystère Du Surnaturel*, Coll. Théologie 64 (Paris, France: Aubier-Montaigne, 1965). For the English translation, see Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1998).

body referred to the elements of the Eucharist, and third, the Church was designated the ecclesial body.[40] Importantly, before the twelfth century the sacramental elements were called *corpus mysticum* while the church was the *corpus Christi verum*. At some point during the middle of the twelfth century these terms were reversed, and the church came to be called *corpus mysticum* while the Eucharistic elements were designated *corpus Christi verum*.[41]

The reasons for this change are not entirely clear, but the shift may have come, in part, as a response to the eleventh century heresy of Berengar of Tours who denied the real presence of Christ in the elements. Berengar believed that he was preserving the symbolic mindset of the patristic tradition, but he failed to consider that the Fathers consistently maintained that the real presence of Christ existed in the sacramental elements (*corpus mysticum*) *as well as* in the Church (*corpus Christi verum*). De Lubac suggests that Berengar's challenge led his opponents to a greater emphasis on the real presence in the sacramental elements than had existed at anytime in previous eras.[42] Before long, the Patristic way of referring to the elements as both "mystical body" and "real presence" *at the same time* was lost, and medieval theologians came to believe that the two terms contradicted each other. In other words, theologians after the twelfth century believed that to call the sacramental elements *corpus mysticum* was equivalent with denying the real sacramental presence of Christ within them. Thus, after the twelfth century, the bread and the wine on the altar were designated *corpus Christi verum* while

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[40] Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 34-39.

[41] Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 13-19.

[42] Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 162-166.

the Church was designated *corpus Christi mysticum*.[43] This tendency took hold to such

an extent that the designation, *corpus Christi mysticum*, was almost completely lost by

the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[44]

The change in usage of the terms *corpus verum* and *corpus mysticum* may have

also been supported by a growing desire in the twelfth century to identify the historical

body of Jesus of Nazareth with the sacramental elements present on the altar. According

to Gerhart Ladner, there was a desire at that time to "connect the Church as closely as

possible with the Eucharistic life in the liturgy."[45] However, it seems that as the

historical body of Christ was increasingly identified with the sacramental body in the

elements, the ecclesial body was neglected in Eucharistic piety. Before the twelfth

century the Church (*corpus Christi verum*) and the historical body of Jesus of Nazareth

were brought together mystically through the performance of the Eucharist. According to

de Lubac, the ancient teaching was that, while the Church makes the Eucharist, it is also,

and perhaps more profoundly, true that "*L'Eucharistie fait l'Eglise*."[46]

There was a strong connection, prior to the twelfth century, between sacramental

theology and ecclesiology, since the mystical body in the performance of the Eucharist

served the purpose of making, with each celebration, the true body of Christ, the

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[43] Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 229-230.

[44] Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 285-286.

[45] Gerhart B. Ladner, "Aspects of Medieval Thought," *The Review of Politics* 9 (1947): 414-415.

[46] "The Eucharist Makes the Church," Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 103. For more on de Lubac's eucharistic ecclesiology, and for a comparison of de Lubac's work with that of John Zizioulas, see Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1993).

Church.[47] In the biblical epistles, and in the Church Fathers, the Eucharist was a deeply

social/communal event. The celebration of the Eucharist meant that individuals were

incorporated into the Body of Christ and thus into the communion of saints – a real social

body embedded in while also transcending both space and time. However, as the

elements came to be designated *corpus verum,* and the Church was called *corpus*

mysticum, the elements and the historical body of Jesus were more closely united while

the Church's connection to the historical body of Jesus became vague – "mystical" in the

sense of something hidden or less than real and knowable.[48] De Lubac explains that, as

soon as the ecclesial body becomes the *corpus mysticum*, Eucharistic piety is separated

from ecclesial unity.[49] The Eucharist becomes a matter, primarily, of individual piety,

and the Church's identity is tied increasingly to the present, visible institutional structures

and less to the sacramental mystery that links the present church to its origin in the person

of Jesus and its destiny in the ascended Christ.

Corpus Mysticum is primarily an historical investigation focused on the usage of

several Eucharistic phrases, and de Lubac acknowledges that twelfth century historical

circumstances may have necessitated a new emphasis on the real presence in the

sacramental elements.   However, it is also clear that de Lubac was uncomfortable with

the separation between Eucharistic practice and the church's sacramental and social

identity. In deemphasizing the sacramental character of the Church, theologians began to

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[47] Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 162-188.

[48] Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 82-83.

[49] Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 275-277.

loose site of the fact that the Church is a mediator and participant in the ascent of

humankind to God.[50]

Corpus Mysticum and Corpus Verum in Historical Context

Although de Lubac did not consider, in any great detail (at least not in writing),

the implications of this change in sacramental nomenclature for the relationship between

the Catholic Church and secular society, several later commentators did. For example,

Ladner explains that the church

> adopted the formula *Corpus Christi Mysticum* at a critical moment in Church
> history, when there was some danger of too much stress being laid on the
> institutional, corporational side of the Church. At the moment, in other words,
> when, with the eclipse of the functional concept of the state and with the re-
> emergence of the state as body politic and, a little later, as self-sufficient
> community, the Papacy, too, in a world of nascent sovereign powers had to
> emphasize the role of the Roman Church as "corporation", supreme among all the
> bodies politic because of its spiritual foundation and divine institution, but not less
> concrete than they on the political and sociological level.[51]

To make sense of this statement, it will be helpful to review, briefly, the history of

the relationship between the Catholic Church and civil authorities prior to the twelfth

century. Whereas the early church was an often persecuted minority in the Roman

Empire of the first through the fourth centuries, dramatic changes came with the reign of

Constantine (d. 337). Suddenly, Christianity was officially tolerated within the empire

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[50] Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 263-265.

[51] Ladner, "Aspects of Medieval Thought," 415. Ernst Kantorowicz explains that "under the pontifical maiestas of the pope, who was styled also "Prince" and "true emperor," the hierarchical apparatus of the Roman Church tended to become the perfect prototype of an absolute and rational monarchy on a mystical basis, while at the same time the State showed increasingly a tendency to become a quasi-Church or a mystical corporation on a rational basis. Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 193-194.

except for a brief period during the reign of Emperor Julian in the mid-fourth century.

Then, with the reign of Theodosius I (379-395), pro-Nicene Christianity became an

official religion, and several forms of paganism were banned.[52] With the establishment

of the church in the Roman Empire, Christianity spread even more rapidly throughout

Europe. Thus, with the gradual disintegration of the Roman Empire in the fifth century,

leaders of the new kingdoms that arose in the resulting political vacuum had already

embraced Christianity on a significant scale.[53]

The breakup of the Roman Empire, like the Constantinian shift that preceded it,

brought important changes in the relationship between the church and civil authorities,

especially in the West.[54] Namely, whereas the early Christian churches constituted

several relatively unimportant communities within the vast and powerful Roman Empire,

western Christianity after the fifth century existed in a context characterized by numerous

smaller political authorities. With the dissolution of the Roman Empire, the classical

political treatises, such as Aristotle's *Politics*, began to lose interest as a more

Augustinian understanding of politics gained popularity both in the church and among

civil rulers. Ladner explains the difference between the Aristotelian and Augustinian

views as follows:

> St. Augustine's concept of the City of God is a specifically Christian ideal of
> community life. Its true nature appears very clearly if it is confronted with

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[52] John A. Thompson, *The Western Church in the Middle Ages* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

[53] Thus, "the early geographical basis of the Church was in the lands which had been part of the Empire." Thompson, *The Western Church in the Middle Ages*, 6.

[54] The political unity of the Roman empire remained more intact in the east, since the tribal invaders of Rome tended to bypass Byzantium. Thompson, *The Western Church in the Middle Ages*, 6.

> Aristotle's famous definition of the state at the beginning of the first book of Politics: "The state or political community which is the highest of all and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good." For Aristotle, then, the state is the form of community life which aims at the highest good. For Augustine the community which pursues the highest good, that is God, is not a state, but a supra-natural society, mixed on this earth, it is true, with the earthly or worldly society, but, nevertheless, extending beyond, to embrace its members in heaven.[55]

The claim that the influence of classical treatises on the nature of the state waned in the early Medieval era is supported by the observation that the "literary genus" of the period dealing with political theory "consists not of works on the state such as Plato's *Republic* or Aristotle's *Politics*, but of works on government: that is true especially for the long series of 'Mirrors of Princes' or ruler's manuals of the early Middle Ages."[56]

Indeed, the various principalities and kingdoms of early medieval Europe were not considered sovereign political territories. Rather, they were conceived as *governments* with various civic responsibilities. Moreover, governance was the responsibility of both ecclesialastical and civil rulers. This distinction dates from at least the time of Pope Gelasius I (492-496). It would be mistaken, however, to argue that Gelasius affirmed a strict separation between the sacred and the secular, because "his sense of salvation history imposed a restraint" on such a dualistic outlook. According to Gelasius, Christ was the last true priest-king. No other human could fill both roles, so for Gelasius, "the distribution of functions in Christendom is an eschatological sign, ensuring that everyone is humble, acknowledging that the priestly-royal character of the church is not for one individual alone to reflect but depends on mutual service" - at least until all

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[55] Ladner, "Aspects of Medieval Thought," 403-404. Obviously, Ladner's description of community life in Augustine's *City of God* sounds a great deal like the ecclesial vision found in de Lubac's *Catholicism*.

[56] Ladner, "Aspects of Medieval Thought," 405.

things are fulfilled in Christ.[57]   Ladner explains that "from the fifth to the late eleventh

century this concept of the state . . . which we might call the *functional* concept,

prevailed." For example, when Charlemagne and latter Otto the Great were crowned by

the Pope, neither of them obtained more territory or subjects. Rather, they were granted

new functions of government, the most important of which was the responsibility for "the

protection of the Universal Church, and especially of the Roman Church, that is to say, of

the Papacy." [58]

Indeed, whereas the Church was an established institution within the Roman

Empire in the fourth century, by the ninth century, the state was conceived as existing

within the Catholic Church.[59] Ladner explains that "this was the great political idea of

Christian unity in the Carolingian age, and on the whole, in the succeeding centuries

down to the era of St. Gregory VII." Kingdoms during the Carolingian era and in the

Holy Roman Empire of Otto the Great were "in the Church, not beside the Church" or

over the Church. During this time of the *functional* state, rulers were not so concerned

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[57] Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought, 100-1625* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 178.

[58] Ladner, "Aspects of Medieval Thought," 405-406. Cf. John Neville Figgis, *The Political Aspects of S. Augustine's 'City of God'* (London, UK: Longmans, 1921), 85.

[59] Lander explains that "while for Pope Gelasius [fifth century] priestly authority and kingly power had been two forces or principles by which the world is ruled, in the Carolingian age this neutral concept of the world is firmly and clearly replaced by that of the Church which, as the Body of Christ, is the only possible all-embracing community milieu in which government temporal, that is political, as well as spiritual can function." Ladner, "Aspects of Medieval Thought," 407.

with the maintenance of a nation or territory. Rather, the function of a ruler was the

maintenance of justice in a world ultimately ordered to God.[60]

From the eighth through the late eleventh century, Kings served dual roles. They

were commonly referred to by titles such as "Vicar of Christ" and "King and Priest."

Their governmental function within the universal church was inscribed with

Christological and liturgical import.[61] Ernst Kantorowicz recalls a "little story inserted in

a homily wrongly ascribed to John Chrysostom," which sums up the liturgical character

of medieval kingship. The story comes from a Palm Sunday sermon focusing on the role

played in the salvific economy by the donkey that carried Christ into Jerusalem before his

passion. The unknown speaker says,

> It is true, the animal after having made its entrance into Jerusalem Judea, was
> returned to its owner; but the prophecy, related to the animal, remained in Judea.
> For of that animal, Christ had needed not the visible, but the intelligible nature; that
> is, not the flesh, but the idea. Hence, the flesh was returned, but the idea retained:
> *caro remissa est, ratio autem retenta est*.[62]

The prophecy of course was from Isaiah 62:10 and Zechariah 9:9. This story was

related to medieval kingship where the ruler, like the donkey, served Christ in the

temporal realm and was therefore incorporated into the eternal economy of salvation.

Kantorowicz explains that the "ass's messianic sempiternal body, however, its ratio or

idea or prototype, as well as the prophetic vision it stood for helped fulfill: these were

indisputable within the course of salvation and inseparable from the image of the

Messiah. Thus, the animal's immortal 'body politic' remained in the Holy City with the

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[60] Ladner, "Aspects of Medieval Thought," 408.

[61] For a multitude of examples, see Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 42-86.

[62] Translated and cited in Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 85.

Messiah: it was 'haloed,' enveloped by the divine light of its Rider." Indeed, medieval

art often depicted the King with a halo surrounding his head. This halo was intended to

communicate the idea that the King participated in the divine economy.[63]

The period of the functional state in which kings were seen as "Priest and King"

did not last, however, since well-balanced relationships between ecclesiastical and

political rulers were hard to maintain.[64] Trouble began when, for various often legitimate

reasons, Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) envisaged the king as a layman and nothing

more, certainly not a "Vicar of Christ." There eventually developed a conflict with King

Henry IV of Germany over the investiture of bishops and abbots.[65] The investiture

controversy (1075-1122) with the Holy Roman Empire signaled the beginning of a

transformation in the medieval understanding of the state.

Beginning with Gregory VII, kings and other secular rulers came to be seen less

and less as functionaries of the Church.[66] As the popes, beginning with Gregory VII,

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[63] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 61-86.

[64] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 204.

[65] Thus, "lay investiture of ecclesiastical offices was only one of the complex issues at stake: fundamental questions were addressed concerning sovereignty in the Christian community, the relationship between temporal and spiritual power, the nature of kingship, and the status of Episcopal authority as regards that of the pope and secular rulers" [Joseph Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought, 300-1450* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 88].

[66] O'Donovan and O'Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, 240-249. Ladner explains that the popes of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Made it increasingly clear that for them rulers were simply leaders of peoples and holders of territories. These Popes tried to tie to themselves in addition to the membership of all Christians in the universal Church by connecting them with the Roman Church through a special bond which might assume various forms, but most effectively the feudal relation of vassal to Lord. In the case of the Holy Roman Empire, too, they tried to make the Emperor's protection of the Roman Church exclusively a matter of duty gradually eliminating all

rejected the earlier medieval synthesis of Church and state, a new understanding of the nature of the state emerged – one more akin to the classical thought of Aristotle than to Augustine.[67] One of the earliest medieval political treatises to treat the state as a political body apart from the Church comes from John of Salisbury (b. c.a. 1115) and his eight book, *Policraticus*. Clearly a student of Aristotle, Salisbury conceived of the state as a "body politic" comprised of a sociological community including sovereign and subjects. Although it was not his intention to limit the powers of the church, Salisbury "proclaimed the autonomy of the forms of nature, of the methods of the mind, and of the laws of society."[68] Indeed, Salisbury is an early proponent of a kind of "pure nature" theory, and Marie-Dominique Chenu explains that "he was surely the 'modern' one in the twelfth century."[69]

However, the fact that the papacy had already begun to regard kings and their principalities as though they were ordered to a lower end that that of the church is perhaps more important than the novelty of John of Salisbury's political theory. It shows

imperial claims of control over the papacy. Between Gregory VII and Innocent III a vast system of states subject to the Roman Church was built up. To this system belonged at one time or another almost every kingdom of Europe and also some of the city communes which began to develop political forms of their own at that time. Ladner, "Aspects of Medieval Thought," 409-410.

[67] "Gregory VII himself, in a dramatic text, describes kingship as an invention of violent men ignorant of God, and cites Satan's promise to Jesus (Matt. 4:9) as the genealogy of all secular authority." O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 205.

[68] Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching, 37 (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press in association with the Medieval Academy of America, 1997), 196. Cf. O'Donovan and O'Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, 277-296.

[69] Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century*, 197.

that the theory of pure nature that would develop in the sixteenth century with the work

of Cajetan was preceded not only by political philosophers but also by the diplomatic

practices of the papacy. The result of this change in the relationship between the Church

and civil authorities is that the papacy increased in power and prestige within the Catholic

Church. Whereas the doctrine of papal primacy originated in the patristic era, during the

eleventh and twelfth centuries the entire universal Church is identified increasingly with

its head, the bishop of Rome – who in earlier times had been considered "first among

equals." During this era, the Catholic Church became increasingly "corporational."

According to Ladner, the rise of the papacy and the increasingly corporational character

of the Church may have been necessitated by the efforts to "lower the status of the rulers

as half-clerical functionaries of the Church." He writes further that

> It would . . . have been impossible to eliminate [the king's] influence upon the
> churches in their kingdoms. There was only one Church which could attempt to
> effect this great change, that was the Church of the Pope, the Roman Church, which
> being at the same time universal and territorial (anchored in the Papal States), at the
> same time the Body of Christ and the "corporation" of the clergy, could more easily
> meet the nascent political bodies, that is to say the rising territorial and national
> states, on their own ground. Thus, the Roman and Universal Church began to enter
> into a new type of relation with the states as political bodies.[70]

In other words, as the popes began to treat secular rulers as though they served a

purely temporal role, the church had to begin engaging the various kings and princes

diplomatically. By secularizing the state, the Church became increasingly secular in its

political dealings and increasingly corporational in its structure.[71] Kantorowicz observes

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[70] Ladner, "Aspects of Medieval Thought," 412-413.

[71] There were a number of highly complex eleventh century developments that
encouraged the trend towards a more corporational Church and a more autonomous
secular realm. For more on this subject, see S. McQuillan, *The Political Development of
Rome: 1012-85* (New York, NY: University Press of America, 2002).

that when, in the twelfth century, the Church declares itself to be the *corpus mysticum*,

rather than the *corpus verum*, the "secular world sector proclaimed itself as the 'holy

Empire.'" He comments further that "this does not imply causation, either in one way or

the other. It merely indicates the activity of indeed interrelated impulses and ambitions

by which the spiritual *corpus mysticum* and the secular *sacrum imperium* happened to

emerge simultaneously – around the middle of the twelfth century."[72]

Importantly, the concept of the *corpus mysticum* as a designation for the ecclesial

body evolved into a primarily sociological designation.[73] The Church came less and less

to be conceived as the body of Christ created daily in the performance of the Eucharist.

Rather, the term *corpus mysticum* began simply to designate a political body of Christians

in the temporal realm.[74] Thus, Lucas de Penna could write in 1582 that "the Church

compares with a political congregation of men, and the pope is like to a king in his realm

on account of his plentitude of power."[75]

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[72] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 197.

[73] Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 129-135.

[74] Writing on the development of Conciliar theory in the fifteenth and following centuries, one commentator explains that when the "Conciliarists spoke of the Church as the *corpus Christi* or the *corpus Christi mysticum* those expressions had lost for them the rich sacramental associations present in the earlier Patristic usage and had acquired in their place corporative and political connotations. Instead of the parallel being drawn with the sacramental body of Christ and *corpus mysticum* being taken to denote the incorporation of the faithful with Christ in a mysterious community of salvation, the analogy was drawn now from natural bodies or bodies in general and the expression taken to denote a 'moral and political [as opposed to a real or physical] body" [Francis Oakley, "Natural Law, the *Corpus Mysticum*, and Consent in Conciliar Thought from John of Paris to Mattias Ugonius," *Speculum* 56 (1981): 795].

[75] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 203-204.

This sentiment is carried to an even greater extreme in the following statement by Hermann of Schilditz, who writes that "just as all the limbs in the body natural refer to the head, so do all the faithful in the mystical body of the Church refer to the head of the Church, the Roman Pontiff." Consider also the following statement from Alvarus Pelagius, who said that "the Church, which is the mystical body of Christ . . . and the community of Catholics . . ., is not defined by the walls [of Rome]. The mystical body of Christ is where the head is, that is, the pope."[76] As the term *corpus mysticum* was used increasingly to describe the Church as a sociological entity, a "body politic," the secular state "strove for its own exaltation and quasi-religious glorification."[77] Thus, the phrase *corpus mysticum* was eventually adopted by political theorists as a designation for secular political bodies. For example, "the late medieval jurist, Antonius de Rosellis (b. 1386), enumerated . . . five *corpora mystica* of human society – the *corpus mysticum* of each: village, city, province, kingdom, and world."[78]

Whereas prior to the twelfth century, European civilization was conceived as essentially unified with the king (and his subjects) occupying a functional and liturgical role within the divine economy, after the twelfth century secular governments were ordered increasingly to a strictly temporal order and judicial end separate from the end to

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[76] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 203. Interestingly, the Conciliarists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in opposition to precisely this kind of papal teaching, argued that the mystical body of Christ is not with the pope, but rather with "the general council . . . whereas the Church which is ruled by the pope as its monarchical head is but a collection of particular churches and individual members and is described as a political body . . . regarded like any other community or political society, lacking the influx of divine grace or the special influence of Christ in so far as it depends on human judgement" (Oakley, "Natural Law," 803).

[77] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 207.

[78] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 209-210.

which the church is ordered. Kantorowicz explains that during this era "a new halo descended from the works of Aristotle upon the corporate organism of human society, a halo of morals and ethics different from that of the ecclesiological *corpus mysticum*."[79]

The implications of this transformation from a functional and liturgical understanding of government towards a secular view cannot be overstated. As a result of the transformation that began in the twelfth century, no longer did the church look upon rulers and subjects as though every aspect of their lives were intricately woven into the divine economy narrated in Scripture and enacted in the liturgy.[80] Rather, after the twelfth century, Europeans began increasingly to imagine that the state and not the church, was the fundamental sociological organism within which the drama of life is played out. Interestingly, one of de Lubac's concerns in *Corpus Mysticum*, was that the Eucharist had become a mere spectacle for the laity rather than the sacrament that binds members of the church to the historical body of Christ and to the entire communion of the saints – living and dead. Michel de Certeau explains that, as the sacramental elements come to be called *corpus verum* (real body) they act "as the visible indicator of the proliferation of secret effects (of grace, of salvation) that make up the real life of the

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[79] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 211.

[80] In the words of a prominent scholar discussing life in medieval England, not only the clergy, but also "the laity were able to appropriate, develop, and use their repertoire of inherited ritual to articulate their experience of community and their own role and status within it, their personal hopes and aspirations, and their sense of the larger order and meaning of the world in which they lived and out of which they would one day die." Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, C.1400-C.1580* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 7. For a more concise introduction to this issue, see Robert W. Jensen, "How the World Lost Its Story," *First Things* 36 (1993).

Church."[81] From this point forward, the Church of the laity is a mystical or "hidden"

reality while the secular realm is increasingly real. William Cavanaugh writes that

"rather than linking the present with Jesus' first – and, we should add, second – coming,

the mystical is now cordoned off from historical space and time. At this point in

Christian history the temporal is beginning to be constructed not as the time between the

times, but as an increasingly autonomous space which is distinct from spiritual space."[82]

As mentioned previously, de Lubac's *Corpus Mysticum* was a historical

investigation focused on a transformation in Eucharistic language that occurred between

the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. De Lubac did not discuss, in *Corpus Mysticum*, the

coming of the modern secular state or the increasingly corporational nature of the

Catholic Church after the twelfth century. However, it is clear that he preferred the pre-

twelfth century Eucharistic identification of the Church with the *corpus verum*, because

this identification entailed a conceptualization of the church as having its beginning in the

historical Jesus and its telos in the ascended Christ. To call the Church *corpus verum* was

to recognize its indispensable role as mediator between time and eternity – between fallen

creation and divine economy. De Lubac, throughout his career, advocated a return to the

sources of the great Patristic tradition and a theological approach that understood all of

creation as though it were ultimately ordered to God, that is, sacramentally.[83]

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[81] Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 84.

[82] William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 213. De Certeau writes that "from the thirteenth century on, a new formula prevails in which the positivity of an apostolic authority (the historical body) and that of a sacramental authority (the Eucharistic body) are linked to one another and split off from the Church, which is their hidden extension." Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 83.

[83] Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 263-264.

It is also important to note, however, that de Lubac was in no way recommending a return to a pre-twelfth century theopolitical landscape (with liturgical kingships, etc.). In a lecture delivered during the dark days of World War II when there must surely have been a great deal of Catholic nostalgia for better times, de Lubac suggested that

> Medieval Christianity was not a perfect success, far from it. It had its weaknesses and its tares. All was not absolutely Christian. . . . The dreams of reaction or of restoration are utopias that are as vain and as pernicious as the dreams in the opposite direction. In making an effort to rediscover the spiritual sources of our civilization we will not forget, then, that it could not be a matter for us of borrowing ready-made solutions from the past but of rediscovering an ever-open truth so as to set ourselves to work. [84]

Rather than interpret de Lubac as advocating a return to the past, the conclusion to be drawn from *Corpus Mysticum* and other works is that de Lubac sought to retrieve the patristic and medieval approach to theology, which was, as in the above quotation, "ever-open." That is, it left no space untouched. Prior to the twelfth century, the Church envisioned no such thing as civil authority with its own secular end. Rather, everything was ultimately ordered to God and thus lay within the Church's realm of interest, influence, and imagination. The church prior to the twelfth century was not complacent with regard to social and political realities because it affirmed that the natural world, and especially the world of humans, finds its completion and fulfillment only in God. When, in 1946, he published his highly controversial book, *Surnaturel*, de Lubac challenged the metaphysical dualism that emerged in the 16th century to provide a philosophical justification for the autonomy of the secular realm that had begun to take hold in the twelfth century.

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[84] Henri de Lubac, "Christian Explanation of Our Times," in *Theology in History* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius 1996), 445-446.

Overcoming Obstacles: Nature and Grace

The Theory of Pure Nature in Historical Context

According to de Lubac, the theoretical separation of the natural and the supernatural orders that occurred in the sixteenth century allowed for the development of secular philosophies based upon the idea that human nature is ordered to a natural end.[85] His work in the twentieth century was focused on challenging those earlier theological and philosophical developments that created the vacuum within which liberalism and secularism emerged. De Lubac saw a direct correlation between naturalistic and atheistic philosophies and the various nineteenth and early twentieth century socio-political movements such as the Marxist revolution in Russia and the totalitarian regimes of Western Europe. All of these political movements were based on positivistic philosophies that denied the necessity of religion in sociopolitical life. In France, Charles Maurras' *Action française* was a social philosophy and a political movement based upon the positivism of Auguste Comte. *Action française* saw no need for religious and ethical intervention in politics, and it gained the support of a majority of Catholic intellectuals, including Jacques Maritain, before Pope Pius XI forbade Catholic participation in the movement.[86]

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[85] Cavanaugh takes de Lubac's work further and illustrates how the vacuum left by Catholic theologians was filled by enlightenment philosophers like Locke, Hobbs, and Rousseau. He suggests that religion, after the sixteenth century, was primarily concerned with extrinsic, supernatural ends, so political philosophers stepped in to offer immanent solutions to problems of social and political life [William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 2002), 19-20].

[86] Jean-Yves Calvez, "The French Catholic Contribution to Social and Political Thinking in the 1930s," *Ethical Perspectives* 7 (2000): 312.

For de Lubac, *Action française* and other secular social and political movements were able to thrive because theologians had long ago endorsed a theology that separated nature from the supernatural.[87] For many Catholics the Church's mission was to save souls and nothing more. Therefore, people turned to secular philosophers, politicians, and scientists to solve society's problems. Theologians, in contrast, were occupied with the systemization and clarification of revealed truths. According to de Lubac, early twentieth century Catholic theology, often indifferent to social issues, tended to treat the revelation of God as though it were an extrinsic and objective given. He writes:

> How little mysterious, then, is this very word "revelation" for us: God has spoken: What could be simpler? He said this and this and also this: that is clear. Consequently, one can deduce from that this and this and also this. Scripture, Tradition are only points of departure: their contribution is at times judged to be a bit rudimentary, without anyone daring to say it too loudly. . . . If doctrine increases in a way with the centuries, all is still explained wonderfully well: a major part faith, a minor part reason bring about a theological conclusion. The theologians lay in a stock of them, and they hand them over to the Magisterium, which will solemnly define those it judges appropriate according to the need. They are the proprietors of sacred doctrine. An elementary catechism teaches the rudiments, then there are more and more complete expositions at greater and greater depth, up to the large theological treatise, which comprises the science in its entirety. . . . Lord, Lord! There we have what men make of your Mystery![88]

Following the lay Catholic philosopher, Maurice Blondel, de Lubac referred to this kind of theology as extrinsicism because it was separated from the concerns of everyday life. Theology was a science unto itself, and its objects of study were ancient texts and creeds which, when understood correctly, yielded the truth in the form of clear propositions and historical facts. De Lubac remarked facetiously that the only real difference between the dominant neo-scholastic theology and other sciences was that

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[87] Lubac, "Nature and Grace," 32-33.

[88] Lubac, "Internal Causes of the Weakening," 233-234.

theology's "first principles were received through revelation instead of having been acquired through experience or through the work of reason."[89]

According to de Lubac, the way to overcome this extrinsicism was to show that nature is incomplete apart from the supernatural and that grace reaches down into nature to lift it up towards its intended end. He thus set out to demonstrate that the true teaching of the Church, and especially of St. Thomas and St. Augustine, is that grace completes nature. De Lubac, as already mentioned, was inspired by Blondel, who in his doctoral dissertation, *L'Action* (1893), dealt specifically with the insufficiency of secularizing philosophies that placed total confidence in the ability of human reason to understand reality without reference to the transcendent.[90] Although Blondel's work was groundbreaking and had a tremendous impact upon the young de Lubac, the reigning neo-scholastic theology was largely unaffected.[91] In 1984, de Lubac explained that

> Latin theology's return to a more authentic tradition has taken place – not without some jolts, of course – in the course of the last century. We must admit that the main impulse for this return came from a philosopher, Maurice Blondel. His thinking was not primarily exercised in the areas proper to the professional theologians, nor did it base itself on a renewed history of tradition. Still, he is the one who launched the decisive attack on the dualist theory which was destroying Christian thought.[92]

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[89] Lubac, "Internal Causes of the Weakening," 233.

[90] Maurice Blondel, *L'action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* (Paris, France: F. Alcan, 1893), 300-302.

[91] Blondel's doctoral dissertation has been called "the boldest exercise in Christian thought of modern times." John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Signposts in Theology (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991), 217.

[92] Henri de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius 1984), 37-38.

Although Blondel was the pioneer on the nature/grace issue, the traditionalism of the

Church meant that the most effective way to change minds was through a successful

reconsideration of authoritative figures such as Augustine and Aquinas.[93] With his 1946

publication, *Surnaturel*, de Lubac began the process of making the historical argument

necessary to convince the professional theologians, and he completed the project with the

twin publications in 1965 of *Augustinisme et théologie moderne* and *Le Mystère du*

Surnaturel.[94] In these works, he traced the development of the idea of "pure nature" in

order to show that the dualistic perspective emerged long after the time of Thomas

Aquinas. Although de Lubac was met with a great deal of resistance after publishing

Surnaturel, by 1965 his position was clearly taking hold. In a letter to de Lubac, Etienne

Gilson remarked: "*Le Mystère du Surnaturel*, which I have just thoroughly enjoyed

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[93] Peter J. Bernardi, "Maurice Blondel and the Renewal of the Nature-Grace Relationship," *Communio (US)* 26 (1999): 822-845.

[94] The publication of *Surnaturel* brought de Lubac a great deal of trouble from neo-scholastic theologians. It was the publication of this book, perhaps more than any other factor, which led to de Lubac's years of forced silence mentioned at the beginning of chapter two of this work. Indeed, it was believed widely that the 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis* condemned de Lubac's position in *Surnaturel*. However, as de Lubac has pointed out, the encyclical actually vindicated his position. He has explained that "as for the Encyclical, it was . . . very different from what some had anticipated: it even caused in them some disappointments that I need not explain here. 'Disappointment' is, moreover, an understatement: as one good, very learned theologian recorded at the time, it was a 'boomerang' for them. (The details of this story would be very picturesque) In what concerns me, one can, if one wishes, pick out two illusions in *Humani generis*. . . . The second illusion relates to the supernatural: far from containing any blame or any reservation in my regard, it borrows a phrase from me to express the true doctrine, and it is not by chance that it avoids any mention of the famous "pure nature" that a number of highly placed theologians were accusing me of misunderstanding and which they wanted to have canonized. . . . Quite the contrary of a reproach, I have never had to make, either in writing or even orally, either in public or in private, the least particular act of submission or retraction on any point" (Lubac and Scola, *Entretien Autour de Vatican II: Souvenirs et Réflexions*, 13-14). Translated and cited in Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," 281.

reading from cover to cover, is absolutely perfect. I really have the impression, not that

the question is closed, because people always have to muddle things up, but that it ought

to be."[95]

The Historical Thesis

According to de Lubac, the patristic and medieval Fathers affirmed consistently

and unfailingly that persons are created in the image of God with a natural desire to be

transformed by the vision of his glory. All of creation was, for the Fathers, ordered to a

supernatural end in the Triune God. There was no conception of a realm of "pure nature"

with its own natural telos. It was only in the sixteenth century, with the work of Cajetan,

that the traditional view began to wane, though by the late nineteenth century and into the

twentieth century, to reject the dualistic conception of the natural and the supernatural

meant a danger to one's career. Cajetan's contribution to the idea of "pure nature"

emerged from his interpretation of St. Thomas' teaching concerning the natural desire for

the beatific vision. Cajetan insisted that when St. Thomas spoke of a natural desire to see

God, he was thinking as a theologian of the desire that comes in response to a destiny that

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[95] Etienne Gilson and Henri de Lubac, *Letters of Etienne Gilson to Henri de Lubac* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988), 91. Denys Turner has initiated a new discussion on the interpretation of Thomas Aquinas regarding reason and faith. Although Turner does not engage de Lubac's exegesis of Aquinas directly and does not suggest that de Lubac's genealogical work was mistaken, he does challenge a number of contemporary thinkers such as Fergus Kerr and John Milbank who have drawn conclusions from de Lubac's work regarding the relationship between faith and reason. In particular, Turner challenges the idea that reason, unaided by faith, is incapable, according to Aquinas, of achieving the knowledge of God. In the end, Turner simply redefines "reason" theologically, in order to suggest that reason, properly conceived, can know God without rejecting the claim that such knowledge retains an apophatic dimension [Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason, and the Existence of God* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004)].

is revealed by God.[96] Although Cajetan was widely criticized in his own time for this

interpretation, there was a growing need in sixteenth century theology to overcome the

naturalistic teachings of Michael Baius (1513-1589) and Cornelius Jansen (1510-1576) in

defense of a supernatural gratuity.[97] De Lubac explains in *The Mystery of the

Supernatural* that "one of the chief motives that have led modern theology to develop its

hypothesis of 'pure nature' to such an extent that it has become the basis of all

speculation about man's last end has been the anxiety to establish . . . the supernatural as

being a totally free gift."[98] Fergus Kerr suggests, moreover, that Cajetan needed a

distinction between human nature as such and human nature as called to union with God

in Christ, partly, no doubt, to maintain the rights of (Aristotelian) philosophy over against

(Lutheran) theology, but mainly to defend the order of creation over against what seemed

obliteration by Protestant exaltation of the dispensation of grace."[99]

As it turned out, a dualistic ontology placing persons in a state of "pure nature"

separated from the supernatural realm of God proved convenient for a variety of reasons.

It allowed theologians to simultaneously maintain that humanity is created with (1) a

natural end in accord with its own abilities and (2) an extrinsic, supernatural end that can

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[96] Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*, 114.

[97] Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*, 1-86. Baius and Jansenius both tended to disregard the supernatural order, claiming that the vision of God is the natural end of human nature.

[98] Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," 53.

[99] Fergus Kerr, "French Theology: Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David Ford (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1997), 114.

be achieved only by the grace of God.[100] This simple move was intended to safeguard

the idea of God's supernatural gratuity from a naturalistic philosophy that rejected any

notion that humans could be constituted by a natural desire for something yet not

naturally equipped to attain it. In other words, the scholastic theologians feared that

ascribing to human nature a "supernatural end" would be to suggest that God is somehow

obligated to grant the beatific vision. Accordingly, the scholastics insisted that there is

only one end intrinsic to human nature – a natural end. The beatific vision, on the other

hand, is a supernatural end added to human nature as a kind of bonus.

    According to de Lubac, Francisco Suarez, following Cajetan, became an

important proponent of the theory of pure nature in the late sixteenth and early

seventeenth centuries. Unlike Cajetan, however, Suarez seemed to realize that the

theory's dependence upon the work of St. Thomas was questionable. De Lubac suggests

that "Suarez . . . had no illusions regarding its [the theory of pure nature] antiquity. . . .

He strained his ingenuity to discover proof of it in St. Thomas by the use of interpretive

exegesis, but only to find himself bound to declare modestly: It is the common assertion

of theologians, I think, although they suppose it more than they dispute it.'"[101] De Lubac

summarizes Suarez's position, arguing that he

> starts from the idea that man, being a natural being must normally have an end
> within the limits of his nature, since according to a principle of Aristotle all natural
> beings must have an end proportionate to them. 'It is necessary that every natural
> substance have some co-natural final end toward which it might strive.' The end of
> a natural being is always in strict proportion to its means. For Suarez this is an
> absolute principle, and its application to the case of man is no less absolute, no less
> undeniable. By virtue of his creation man is therefore made for an essentially
> natural beatitude. If we suppose that in fact he is called to some higher end, strictly

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[100] Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 68-69.

[101] Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*, 158.

speaking this could only be super-added. . . . It is therefore contradictory to envisage an end which would be, according to the maxim adopted by Soto, Bellarmine and Toletus, 'natural with respect to appetite, supernatural with respect to attainment.'"[102]

Soon after the time of Suarez, de Lubac explains, the idea of "pure nature" was almost universally affirmed. Even though there remained many different Catholic schools of thought, there was "an alliance in this particular field, thus disposing . . . of the Baianist question, so that they could contend with greater ease on another field. . . . The controversy on the mode of efficacy of grace and predestination."[103] It is no surprise, therefore, that nineteenth century neo-scholastics responded to Leo XIII's call for a Thomistic revival largely as Suarezians and continued to maintain the distinction between a natural and a supernatural end.

The Theological Thesis

The Dignity of Humankind. When de Lubac challenged the neo-scholastic doctrine of "pure nature" in the middle of the twentieth century his primary concern was not, like Cajetan, with preserving a sense of supernatural gratuity, although this did remain an important and fundamental part of his doctrine. Rather, he believed that the neo-scholastic dualism needed to be challenged in order to preserve the dignity of creation, and humankind in particular, against the nihilism of atheist humanism. The neo-scholastics claimed, following Cajetan, Suarez, and others, that there are two distinct ends, one natural and the other supernatural, to which humans can be ordered. This

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[102] Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*, 158-159. For a contemporary demonstration of the theory of pure nature, see Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Beatitude: A Commentary on St. Thomas' Theological Summa, 1a, Iiae, Qu, 1-54*, trans. O.S.B. Patrick Cummuns (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Company, 1956), 127-291.

[103] Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*, 183.

distinction was called the *duplex ordo*, and it allowed theologians to posit that human

nature is fully capable of attaining the natural end, while the supernatural end is

achievable only by the extrinsic *superadditum* of God's grace. "There is the hypothesis,"

De Lubac explains, "that seeks to posit a 'purely natural' universe, in which man could

claim 'natural' happiness from God. Now, alongside this another universe is imagined –

our own in fact – in which man still requires happiness from God, this time

'supernatural.'"[104]

De Lubac is dissatisfied with this perspective because it allows for a conception

of human nature – moral and intellectual – as fully autonomous and "self-sufficient."[105]

The neo-scholastics taught that humans, by the powers of natural reason and moral law,

could achieve a well ordered society within which justice could be maintained and a

"natural" beatitude could be attained. In other words, de Lubac criticized the neo-

scholastic dualism because it allowed for the development of "purely natural

philosophy," which found no place for mystery and paradox, and a self-sufficient social

order.[106] Because this dualistic perspective allowed for the development of natural

(separated) philosophy, de Lubac felt that it was responsible, at least in part, for the

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[104] Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," 62. Against such a view, de Lubac quotes the famous words from Augustine's *Confessions*: "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

[105] Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," 34.

[106] Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," 37. For more on the insufficiency of natural reason, see Henri de Lubac, "On Christian Philosophy," *Communio (US)* 19 (1992). Cf. Peter Henrici, "On Mystery in Philosophy," *Communio (US)* 19 (1992). Another commentator suggests that "two results of the *duplex ordo* which de Lubac found unacceptable were the separation of philosophy from theology and the separation of politics from the supernatural" [Robert F. Gotcher, *Henri de Lubac and Communio: The Significance of His Theology of the Supernatural for an Interpretation of Gaudium et Spes*, Graduate School (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University, 2002)].

development of the atheistic philosophies that emerged in the nineteenth century and

flourished within communist and fascist governments responsible for widespread

violence and repression in the twentieth century. Likewise, de Lubac found in the *duplex*

ordo, which affirmed a self-sufficient social order, the justification for Catholic support

of secular fascist political movements like *Action Française* and the Nazi controlled

Vichy regime.[107]

One problem with the *duplex ordo*, according to de Lubac, was that it ignores the

profound consequences of sin on human nature.[108] He suggests that, because of original

sin, the human intellect is itself limited and insufficient. Indeed, humans cannot

understand themselves, much less God. This is why he affirms that "the revelation of

God is also the revelation of man" to himself.[109] This is the basis of his discussion in

Catholicism, which maintains that the Church's primary role in society is to offer the

world a vision of its own true self, healed and transformed in the image of Christ. He

suggests that

> Nothing is more superficial than the charge made against her [the church] of losing
> sight of immediate realities, of neglecting man's urgent needs, by speaking to him
> always of the hereafter. For in truth the hereafter is far nearer than the future, far
> nearer than what we call the present. It is the Eternal found at the heart of all
> temporal development which gives it life and direction. It is the authentic Present
> without which the present itself is like dust which slips through our hands. If

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[107] After the Germans defeated the French army in 1940, the country was divided into two parts with the south governed by Germany and the North governed by a puppet government led by a former military hero, Marshal Pétain, and whose power was centered in the town of Vichy. For more on the complicity of the Vichy regime in relation to the holocaust, see Michael Robert Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

[108] Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," 48. Cf. Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, 128-148.

[109] Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, 131.

modern men are so absent from each other, it is primarily because they are absent from themselves, since they have abandoned this Eternal which alone establishes them in being and enables them to communicate with one another.[110]

The Church, as the body of Christ is thus the medium of God's transcendent and supernatural grace through which humanity is revealed to itself and redeemed.[111] De Lubac maintains that humankind, and all of nature, is created incapable of reaching its true *telos*, of discovering itself in God, apart from the supernatural grace of God, which completes and fulfills nature. According to de Lubac, early 20th century Catholic theology was relatively disinterested and irrelevant regarding the problems of European society because it had long ago endorsed the view that nature, including human nature and civilization, is self-sufficient and that grace is an extrinsic addition to nature, a kind of added bonus not needed for the proper functioning of societies.[112]

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[110] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 362.

[111] He writes that "by revealing the Father and by being revealed by him, Christ completes the revelation of man to himself. By taking possession of man, by seizing hold of him and by penetrating to the very depths of his being Christ makes man go deep down within himself, there to discover in a flash regions hitherto unsuspected. It is through Christ that the person reaches maturity, that man emerges definitively from the universe, and becomes conscious of his own being. Henceforth, even before that triumphant exclamation: *Agnosce, O Christiane, dignitatemtuam* [recognize, O Christian, your dignity] it will be possible to praise the dignity of man: *dignitatem conditionis humanae* [the dignity of the human condition]" (Lubac, *Catholicism*, 339-340).

[112] In a short essay on nature and grace, written after Vatican II, de Lubac explained that, because of the theory of pure nature, "the supernatural gift henceforth appeared as a superimposed reality, as an artificial and arbitrary superstructure. The unbeliever found it easy to withdraw into his indifference in the very name of what theology was telling him: if my very nature as a man has its end in itself, what should oblige or even arouse me to scrutinize history in the quest for some other vocation perhaps to be found there? Why should I listen to a Church which bears a message having no relation to the aspirations of my nature? Should not the intrusion of some outside supernatural even be rejected as a kind of violence? (Lubac, "Nature and Grace," 32. Cf. Lubac, "Internal Causes of the Weakening," 230-232).

A Supernatural End. As I have already mentioned, Cajetan's pure nature theory

was motivated by his desire to protect a supernatural gratuity against the claims of Baius

and others who posited that, within human nature, there are sufficient resources to

achieve the beatific vision. The scholastics thought that to admit, as de Lubac did, a

positive "natural desire" for the beatific vision was to admit a "natural ability" to attain it.

Rather than affirm a "natural desire" for a supernatural end within human nature, the neo-

scholastics referred to the Thomistic phrase, "obediential potency" in order to explain

how persons are created with the capacity to receive supernatural grace even though they

are positively oriented only toward a natural end. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange defines

obediential potency (here translated as obediential power) as follows:

> There is in any subject a passive power which is not natural, since it does not affirm
> an order to a natural agent, but is a passive power that affirms an order to a
> supernatural agent which it obeys so as to receive from it whatever it may wish to
> confer. . . . Therefore the obediential power, by its formal reason, is not a positive
> ordination of the nature of the human soul or its faculties toward a supernatural
> object, and signifies nothing more than a simple non-aversion, or capacity, to
> receive whatever God may will. However, by reason of its subject and materially,
> it is completely identified with the essence of the soul and its faculties, whether
> passive or active, which can be elevated to the order of grace. . . . Thus, these gifts
> of grace are, at one and the same time, completely gratuitous, in no sense due to us,
> and perfectly becoming to our nature, with a fitness which is not, however, natural
> but supernatural, at once most sublime, most profound, and gratuitous.[113]

For Garrigou-Lagrange and other neo-scholastics, humans are not naturally

inclined toward a supernatural end. Rather, humans are naturally oriented toward a

natural end, though as we read in the above quotation, they have within them a capacity

that is merely a "non-aversion" towards an extrinsic supernatural end offered according

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[113] Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Grace: Commentary on the Summa Theologica of St. Thomas, Ia, IIae, Q. 109-114*, trans. The Dominican Nuns Corpus Christi Monastery, Menlo Park, California (St. Louis, MO: Herder Book Co., 1952), 307-309.

to God's grace. Anything stronger than a non-aversion, according to the neo-scholastics,

would suggest that God is compelled to grant the beatific vision.

Importantly, de Lubac does not reject the contention of Garrigou-Lagrange and

others who say that the obediential potency is a "passive aptitude." However, he has no

problem ascribing to human nature a *longing* to accompany this aptitude.[114] Indeed, he

writes that the "natural 'capacity,' to which the natural 'longing' corresponds, is not a

'faculty;' it is no more than a 'passive aptitude.'[115] In his early works on nature and

grace de Lubac seeks to show that for Aquinas, as for Augustine before him, human

nature has only one end – the supernatural, and he is comfortable with words like

"desire" and "inclination" for God because he does not believe that a natural desire

necessarily implies a natural ability to attain the beatific vision. He writes that

> If therefore the desire is truly a 'natural inclination,' it is not by that fact a
> 'sufficiently;' or, in other words, as in the case of free will left to itself, so this
> desire is unable to strive 'suitably' or 'efficaciously;' to put it yet another way, it is

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[114] It is important to note that when de Lubac finally produces a relatively
systematic work on nature and grace (for Catechetical purposes), he moves beyond the
Thomistic language that tends to dominate his historical investigations. Whereas in the
earlier works, supernatural grace is often portrayed as enabling humankind to ascend
upwards toward its supernatural destiny, in A *Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, de
Lubac describes the effects of grace in more dichotomous terms as "conversion" and
"transformation." Susan Wood suggests that these different ways of describing the
effects of grace are mutually exclusive. See Susan Wood, "The Nature-Grace
Problematic within Henri de Lubac's Christological Paradox," *Communio (US)* 19 (1992):
389-403. Op. cit. Susan Wood, *Spiritual Exegesis and the Church in the Theology of
Henri de Lubac* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 120. However, such a conclusion
seems unnecessary. The difference, as de Lubac mentions himself in *A Brief Catechesis*,
pg. 122, derives from the fact that Thomas tended to focus on human nature in the
abstract, apart from the fall, while Augustine (and the later de Lubac as well) was
concerned with human nature in its current state – fallen and sinful. Humans in bondage
to sin will only ascend to God (their one and only natural end) on the basis of a radical
conversion enabled by the crucified Christ. De Lubac's later emphasis on conversion
does not necessarily contradict his earlier work – it merely complements and improves it.

[115] Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," 85.

not the source of any 'sufficient activity' which would make it, however minimally, of itself 'a certain inchoative possession.'[116]

There is thus a "desire" for the vision of God that is natural to humankind, but "it is sanctifying grace, with its train of theological virtues, which must order the subject to his last end; at least, it alone can order him 'sufficiently' or 'perfectly' or 'directly.'"[117]

God's grace is not compelled – In light of the above discussion, it is clear that, for de Lubac, one can affirm a natural desire or longing for God within human nature while also claiming that human nature is incapable of attaining the beatific vision apart from God's grace. De Lubac summarizes the thesis of his historical studies on nature and grace when he writes that

> all tradition, in effect – taking the word in its widest sense – passing from St. Irenaeus, by way of St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure, without distinction of school, presents us with the two affirmations at once, not in opposition but as a totality: man cannot live except by the vision of God – and that vision of God depends totally on God's good pleasure. One has no right to weaken either, even in order to grasp the other more firmly.[118]

De Lubac believed that the neo-scholastic tradition, following Cajetan and Suarez, had fallen short because they did not affirm both sides of the paradox. They weakened the claim that "man cannot live except by the vision of God," and this led to an extrinsic theology and an exiled church, and de Lubac's persistent work on the relationship between nature and grace was motivated by his desire to see the church reengage the world with the gospel. It is not insignificant that one of his fiercest critics was the

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[116] Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," 86.

[117] Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," 85.

[118] Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," 179.

famous Dominican theologian cited above, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange (1877-1964).

According to Fergus Kerr,

> Garrigou-Lagrange was among the first to attack *Surnaturel*. Although remaining in his university post in Rome during the war, he did not conceal his support for the Vichy regime nor his longstanding sympathies with *Action française*. He was a close associate of the Vichy ambassador to the Vatican, who assured his government in a notorious dispatch that the Holy See had no objections to the Vichy anti-Jewish legislation, even providing supporting citations from Aquinas which de Lubac at least believed to have been contributed by "Thomists."[119]

It was precisely this kind of Catholic complacency in the face of social and political evil that de Lubac hoped to challenge.[120] He envisioned a Church fully engaged with the world around it. Thus, towards the end of *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, he states that in the absence of a dualistic perspective "'the beatific vision' is no longer the contemplation of a spectacle, but an intimate participation in the vision the Son has of the

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[119] Kerr, "French Theology," 112. Another commentator explains that "Garrigou-Lagrange . . . had long supported the *Action française*, and his defense of Vichy had reached the point of accusing anyone who supported de Gaulle of mortal sin" [Komonchak, "Theology and Culture at Mid-Century," 601. For his own reflections on Catholicism and Anti-Semitism during the Second World War, see Henri de Lubac, *Christian Resistance to Anti-Semitism: Memories from 1940-1944* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1988)].

[120] Regarding his initial attempt to make the historical argument in *Surnaturel*, de Lubac writes of the neo-scholastic opposition: "they happened to perceive, better perhaps than I had, what was at stake in the dispute. This is because I believe I showed, particularly in the second part, the composition of which is rather strict, that since various schools of modern Scholasticism had abandoned the traditional systematic (and already a bit compromised) synthesis in the work of Saint Thomas, they could only wear themselves out in sterile combats, each being both right and wrong, against the others, while withdrawing from living thought into an artificial world, leaving the field open to all ups and downs of a 'separated philosophy.' The work thus constituted a sort of attempt to reestablish contact between Catholic theology and contemporary thought, or at least to eliminate one basic obstacle to that contact . . . not with a view to any 'adaptation' whatsoever to that thought, but rather with a view to engaging in dialogue with it – which, as always when it is a question of serious ideas, could only be a confrontation, a combat" (Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 36).

Father in the bosom of the Trinity."[121] By "contemplation of a spectacle" he is referring

to an understanding of revelation as an extrinsic system of truth propositions.[122] In *La*

Révélation Divine (1983), his commentary on Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on

Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, de Lubac suggests that

> To reflect in Christ or, as one says, "to do theology," does not only mean to
> "organize truths," to systematize them or draw new conclusions from the revealed
> "premises;" it is more to "demonstrate the explanatory power" of the truths of faith
> in relation to the changing context of the world. It is to strive to understand the
> world and man, his nature, his destiny and his history, in the most diverse
> situations, in the light of those same truths. It is to attempt to see all things in the
> mystery of Christ. For the mystery of Christ is an illuminating mystery, and in
> considering it in this way, one really deepens it without removing its mysterious
> character. Thus, the enterprise of a "theology of history" must not be considered as
> a merely marginal phenomenon; every theologian must be, more or less, a
> "theologian of history." In no way does all of this mean, however, that history as
> such is the medium of revelation or salvation: on the contrary. Whether it is a
> matter of secular history or the history of the Church: by themselves, historical
> events bring us no increase in supernatural revelation. They remain always
> "ambiguous" and come "in anticipation," and it is they that must be illuminated for
> us by the light that comes from the Gospel (my translation).[123]

De Lubac is not speaking here of historical analysis. A surface analysis of

temporal unfolding can tell us nothing about the involvement of God in creation. For de

Lubac, the theologian must look, with faith, for the spirit that guides history – for the

motivations and aspirations of the characters within salvation history. Moreover, he

suggests that theologians must enter into history through the Church in order to bring

illumination to the world where reality is experienced as a temporal unfolding. The

theologian is to serve the Church in its incarnational engagement in history. This

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[121] Lubac, "The Mystery of the Supernatural," 228.

[122] While not the "contemplation of a spectacle," the beatific vision entails, for de
Lubac, the illumination of all things in the light of Christ. I will investigate, in greater
detail, his understanding of divine revelation in the fifth chapter of this work.

[123] Lubac, *La Révélation Divine*, 100-101.

incarnational engagement is a participation in the very life of the Triune God; it is a

participation in salvation history. The idea of salvation history means that there can be,

for the Church, no separation between nature and the supernatural. Rather, in the end, all

must become supernatural because through Christ's atonement, nature and history are

transformed and completed by grace.

<div align="center">*Patristic and Medieval Exegesis*</div>

Critique of Scientific Exegesis

It was, at least in part, this interest in the relationship between theology and

history that inspired de Lubac's voluminous work on patristic and medieval exegesis. De

Lubac was attracted to the way that the spiritual exegesis of the patristic and medieval

Church entailed an engagement with the world. Indeed, the methods of spiritual exegesis

served to stretch Scripture so that it was able to incorporate, continually, the unfolding of

history into its plot. Spiritual exegesis was not museum work focused on the

classification and systemization of abstract truths. Rather, spiritual exegesis facilitated

the Church's continuing engagement in history – guiding it with a thoroughly

christological vision of reality. De Lubac believed that, if the Church hoped to reengage

historical reality, it could learn important lessons from the spiritual exegesis of the

patristic and medieval Church. Thus, his voluminous work on spiritual exegesis, like his

work in the areas of ecclesiology and ontology, was intended to help the church reengage

the world with the gospel.

As with the relationship between nature and grace, the work of Maurice Blondel was highly influential here.[124]   In his doctoral dissertation, *L'Action* (1893), Blondel began his critique of the modern sciences and their positivist spirit which sought total knowledge of reality through empirical investigation. According to Blondel, the kind of scientific knowledge that could be gained through the examination of physical or historical "facts" was insufficient for a true understanding of historical reality and human existence in particular.[125]

In a series of essays published in 1904, entitled *Histoire et dogme: Les lacunes philosohiques de l'exégèse moderne,* Blondel took his more general critique of scientific knowledge and applied it to biblical exegesis.[126] Writing at the time of the Catholic modernist controversy, he suggested that two dangers confront biblical exegetes. The first danger is "extrinsicism" and the other is "historicism."[127] Extrinsicism, according to

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[124] For more on Blondel's influence on de Lubac's critique of scientific exegesis, see Marcellino G. D'Ambrosio, *Henri de Lubac and the Recovery of the Traditional Hermeneutic* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1991), 262-265.

[125] Blondel, *L'action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique*, 78, 438-439.

[126] All citations will come from the English translation, Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics, and History and Dogma*, trans. Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1965).

[127] "*Extrinsicism* and *historicism* offer two answers – each in their way incomplete, but equally dangerous to faith." Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics, and History and Dogma*, 225. The modernist controversy was a struggle between Catholic scholars who felt that the Church should embrace the historical-critical methods of modern biblical scholars and those who opposed them. Blondel's critique of "historicism" is directed at modernists such as Alfred Loisy. His critique of "extrinsicism" is directed at the neo-scholastics who tended to oppose modernism. For a recent series of essays on the modernist controversy, including an essay on Blondel and Loisy, see Darrell Jodock, ed., *Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Blondel, characterizes the neo-scholastic tendency to treat theology as an abstract system

of interrelated propositions given by divine revelation. "The logical procedure of an

exegete nourished on such thoughts," he tells us, "is therefore to take the texts literally

and to subject any critical study to the sovereign demand of a dogmatic ideology: the

ageless facts are without local colour, vanish as the result of a sort of perpetual

docetism." The biblical exegete given to extrinsicism has no need of historical

investigation because his ahistorical truth "is guaranteed *en bloc*, not by its content, but

by the external seal of the divine: why bother to verify the details?" [128]

In contrast to extrinsicism, we have the danger of "historicism," whose object is a

kind of "scientific history" made up of "abstractions."[129] The historicist approach is

focused only upon the phenomena of history – the observable outer events or "historical

facts." Moreover, these facts

> will be given the role of reality itself; and an ontology, purely phenomenological in
> character, will be extracted from a methodology and a phenomenology. A sort of
> dialectical evolutionism is deduced from this scientific determinism which claims
> to have penetrated the spiritual secret of the living chain of souls because it has
> verified the external joints of the links which are no more than its corpse.[130]

Whereas extrinsicism has no need of historical investigation because it has received the

truth *en bloc* as a revelation from God, the historicist tends to reduce revelation to the

discoveries of scientific history. Blondel writes that "it should never be supposed

therefore that history by itself can know a fact which would be no more than a fact, and

that would be the whole fact: each link in the chain, and the chain as a whole, involve the

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[128] Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics, and History and Dogma*, 229.

[129] Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics, and History and Dogma*, 239.

[130] Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics, and History and Dogma*, 240.

psychological and moral problems implied by the least action or testimony. . . . Real

history is composed of human lives; and human life is metaphysics in act."[131]

Contra the extrinsicists, Blondel believes that biblical interpreters must be

concerned with history, but not exclusively with the "critical history" of the historicists,

which goes no deeper than the observable facts.[132] In contrast to an exclusive embrace of

either of these options, Blondel suggests that biblical exegesis must be concerned in the

end with "real history" – with the spiritual dynamism that animates and motivates

humankind within history.

When de Lubac critiques scientific exegesis, he echoes Blondel, suggesting that

the problem of the limitations of critical exegesis

> is the problem of the relation of history as science to history as reality, and it is at
> the same time the problem of history and dogma or, as one would have said of old
> . . . the problem of history and allegory. This problem cannot be reduced to the
> question of knowing what literal sense ought to be recognized in this or that text, as
> it could sometimes seem to be. It is of a much more general and fundamental
> order. And one recognizes it as much regarding the Gospel as regarding Prophecy,
> as regards all spiritual history. How should we understand the reticence of
> criticism? Does it really deny, and in this case has it the right to deny, all that
> which the scientific examination of texts does not permit it to affirm? Do other
> methods exist which will permit, under certain conditions, anything more to be
> affirmed (my translation)?[133]

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[131] Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics, and History and Dogma*, 237.

[132] Importantly, Blondel does not discount the relevance and importance of crucial history. He believes, simply, that critical history is limited and must recognize its inability to penetrate the depths of human experience. He writes that although "the historian has, as it were, a word to say in everything concerning man, there is nothing on which he has the last word." Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics, and History and Dogma*, 236.

[133] Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse Médiéval: Les Quatre Sens de L'écriture*, Théologie No. 42, vol. 2/1 (Paris, France: Aubier, 1961), 366. The above quotation comes from the untranslated third volume of de Lubac's four volume series on medieval exegesis. Throughout this work, I use English translations of de Lubac's works whenever possible and offer my own translations whenever I quote passages that are as yet untranslated.

It is important to note that, like Blondel, de Lubac believed scientific exegesis had much

to offer.[134]   However, he wanted to be sure that the proponents of scientific exegesis

were aware of their own presuppositions and that they understood the limits of their

science. In the preface to the first volume of *Medieval Exegesis* (1959), de Lubac affirms

that proponents of the modern exegetical methods

> should be applauded, inasmuch as they felt 'the pressing need to undertake the
> research that is always being propelled further along in its course by the most
> rigorous of modern techniques.' And, in their right and proper place, these
> techniques may, without undue pride, be construed as an instance of enormous
> progress. The key phrase here is 'in their right and proper place.' Without this
> provisio, there can be no real progress. And the Ancients can still help us to situate
> this right and proper place within the context of a whole picture that gives it its true
> measure and significance. The Ancients do not have an explanation for everything,
> as many have the tendency to suppose. This is because they lived in a precritical
> age. Nevertheless, 'beyond the methods that have become strange to us,' we often
> find 'a profoundly thought out theology' in their work.[135]

The Importance of Spiritual Exegesis

Having illustrated persuasively the traditional understanding of the relationship

between nature and grace, de Lubac endeavored to explain and recommend the "spiritual

exegesis" of the Church Fathers.[136] Once the philosophical divide between nature and

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[134] For more on de Lubac's affirmation and critique of modern scientific exegesis,
see Marcellino G. D'Ambrosio, "Henri de Lubac and the Critique of Scientific Exegesis,"
Communio (US) 19 (1992).

[135] Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 1
(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), xx.

[136] Susan Wood has pointed out that, for de Lubac, the relationship between the
literal and allegorical senses of Scripture is analogous to the relationship between nature
and grace. Just as in *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, the natural order is
converted and transformed in the supernatural order, in de Lubac's work on spiritual
exegesis the literal sense is converted and transformed by the allegorical sense. This is
also to say that the Old Testament is converted and transformed by the New. See Wood,
Spiritual Exegesis, 119, fn. 148.

grace had been bridged, he turned his attention towards enabling the Church to actually

do what had now been shown fundamental to the nature of the Church – engage culture

through a more intentional participation in the Divine economy.[137] For de Lubac,

although it is the Eucharist that "makes the Church," this making or this immersion in

God's divine economy is facilitated through spiritual exegesis. Indeed, de Lubac gives

Scripture priority over the Eucharist when he suggests that "however real the

[sacramental] 'body' may be, it is not the Divinity itself . . . it always remains the symbol

of a more spiritual reality, while, on the other hand, the 'Word' is, in its pure essence, that

reality itself. Because the Son of God, God Himself, is 'Word.'"[138]

For de Lubac spiritual exegesis enabled the Church to move beyond the external

facts of biblical history in order to "plunge into" the history of salvation through the same

Spirit that animated it.[139] The genius of the ancient Christian exegete is that "he

discovers in ancient documents [biblical texts] the wellsprings for his own prayer."[140]

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[137] I do not mean to oversimplify de Lubac's career by suggesting a clear, linear progression, without regular diversions, from his ecclesiological work, to his ontological work, and then to his exegetical work. On the contrary, de Lubac touched on various issues at different times throughout his career. However, his major works on ecclesiology and grace do seem to have prepared the way for his major efforts on patristic and medieval exegesis. I also want to emphasize the organic relationship between the historical/ontological and the historical/exegetical works. The exegetical works offer a "method," for lack of a better word, through which a participatory ontology can guide the Church's engagement with secular culture.

[138] Henri de Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit: L'intelligence de L'écriture D'après Origène*, Théologie; 16 (Paris, France: Aubier, 1950), 366. In chapter five, I will suggest that the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy and John Milbank in particular, in their appropriation of de Lubac, have paid too little attention to the priority of spiritual exegesis in his thought.

[139] Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius 1987), 154.

[140] Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 25.

Commenting on de Lubac's understanding of spiritual exegesis, von Balthasar explains that "the theory of the senses of Scripture is not a curiosity of the history of theology but an instrument for seeking out the most profound articulations of salvation history."[141] Indeed, spiritual exegesis enables the church to perceive its own history as "animated by the spirit," and it facilitates the Church's continued incorporation into this history of salvation. De Lubac explains that

> The Christian mystery, because of the magnificent providential Economy which embraces both Testaments and links them together, has not been handed down to us as a collection of timeless definitions, unrelated to any historical situation and demanding only to be clothed, according to our fancy, with biblical images as with just so many illustrations. The intimate links between the two Testaments are quite of another kind. Within the very consciousness of Jesus – if we cast a human glance into that sanctuary – the Old Testament was seen as the matrix of the New or as the instrument of its creation. This meant something much more than extrinsic preparation. Even the categories used by Jesus to tell us about himself are ancient biblical categories. Jesus causes them to burst forth or, if you prefer, sublimates them and unifies them by making them converge upon himself. . . . Thus, "biblical images," and the concrete facts behind them, furnish the thread, both historical and noetic, from which is woven the Christian mystery in all its newness and transcendence.[142]

For de Lubac, the spiritual interpretation of Scripture is constitutive for the Church. Without a spiritual understanding of Scripture, the Church cannot comprehend the nature of its own salvation.[143] Indeed, he suggests, "the entire process of spiritual understanding is, in its principle, identical to the process of conversion. It is its luminous aspect. *Intellectus spiritualis credentem salvum facit (*Spiritual understanding saves the

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[141] Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac*, 76.

[142] Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 7-8.

[143] "All the basic biblical themes: Covenant, Election, People of God, Word, Messiah, Kingdom, Day of the Lord, and so forth, enter into the Christian idea of salvation." Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 9.

believer)."[144] Moreover, "theological science and the explication of Scripture cannot but be one and the same thing" since "knowledge of the faith [amounts] to knowledge of Scripture."[145]

The Fourfold Interpretation of Scripture

Beginning in 1950 with his great defense of Origen, *Histoire Et Esprit*, and culminating in his four volume, *Exégèse Médiévale* (1959-1964), de Lubac illustrates the methods and implications of spiritual exegesis practiced by the patristic and medieval Fathers. The ancient, quadripartite interpretation of Scripture recognizes the literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical senses. In a paper presented to the *Faculté de théologie de Toulouse* in 1948, de Lubac recalls an old Latin saying: "*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia*." Translated, this means that "the letter teaches us what took place, the allegory what to believe, the moral what to do, the anagogy what goal to strive for."[146]

The literal sense of Scripture is also called the historical sense. God intervenes in human history, and through the Bible we "learn the history of his interventions."[147] The literal sense is, for de Lubac, the foundational sense upon which all of the others are based. Interestingly, the literal is often misunderstood because it can refer either to a historical event narrated in Scripture or to a figurative event, such as the stories narrated

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[144] Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 21.

[145] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 1*, 27-28.

[146] Henri de Lubac, "On an Old Distich: The Doctrine of the 'Fourfold Sense' in Scripture," in *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1989), 109. For more on the Latin formula, see Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 1*, 1-14.

[147] Lubac, "On an Old Distich," 113-114.

in the first chapters of the book of Genesis.[148] The Fathers understood even these

figurative stories as historical because they communicate a kind of historical truth, e.g.,

God created the earth and considered it good; humankind fell from grace, etc.

Importantly, all of the senses of Scripture work together to form a whole, so the literal

cannot be separated from those senses that follow it. The literal sense always

presupposes a telos or an end that gives history its meaning. It would be a mistake,

therefore, to study the literal sense from a historicist perspective, "which reconstructs the

past without paying any attention to what the past was pregnant with."[149] In contrast to

the historicist approach, de Lubac suggests that the critical scholar can become

> contemporary with the facts he must describe and explain. Intent upon avoiding
> both an overestimation of the texts and a superficial interpretation of them, he seeks
> to reconstruct the religious consciousness of men in the biblical past, just as he
> would do for any other past. He studies carefully the spirit of an Abraham, a
> Moses, a David; the spirit of an Elijah, an Isaiah, a Jeremiah. He strives to
> understand the religious institutions of the people of Israel precisely as understood
> by them, not only in general but also in particular. He restructures his own view of
> the universe, and he discovers in ancient documents the wellsprings for his own
> prayer.[150]

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[148] Regarding potential misunderstandings of the literal sense, de Lubac explains that "it has been said that a literal reading is not identical to a historical one; in many passages, even in entire books, it can offer no historical meaning: this is true for parables, proverbs, commandments, etc. It cannot be said of it: *gesta docet*. But – without considering that in this case a terminology used until the thirteenth century would have resulted in a denial that there was still a literal meaning – here we are dealing with the 'letter' of the Scripture taken as a whole. Nevertheless, is it not essential for Scripture to recount a history, the history of redemptive events? Is that not, even for the unbelieving observer, the characteristic that most markedly differentiates the Bible from so many other sacred Scriptures? Again, it has been said that, even if allegory has a certain value, it alone does not provide the doctrine to be believed. Is not the doctrine often expressed by the literal reading? Lubac, "On an Old Distich," 122-123.

[149] Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 39.

[150] Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 25.

The literal sense does not imply a positivistic understanding of history but anticipates its transformation in the spiritual sense and remains incomplete without it. The facts of history, de Lubac writes, do "not yet give us and cannot give us anything but an exterior and distant view of what we too quickly take to be the 'Face of God.' Only the order of the spirit founded upon history and disengaged from history, will finally allow us to say, with Saint Gregory: *In his Scripture we look, as it were, upon his face.*[151]

The second sense – the allegorical – instructs Christians in "what to believe." According to de Lubac, the "'other thing' that a literal reading suggests and that allegory gives us is doctrine, the very object of faith. It is the 'mystery' that immediately follows the history. They are the *sanctae fidei sacramenta*, that is, the totality of truths concerning Christ and his Church, prefigured throughout the Old Testament and present in the New."[152] The most important aspect of the allegorical sense is that its object is Christ and the Church.[153] De Lubac follows Augustine in claiming that everything in Scripture pertains not only to Christ but to the Church as well. When Christ is united with the Church as head to a body, then the fullness of Christ appears. It is the fullness of Christ that the allegorical sense points to.[154]

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[151] Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 82.

[152] Lubac, "On an Old Distich," 114.

[153] The Church is the "fullness of Christ," or the "Mystical Body of the Eucharistic celebration."

[154] Lubac, *Exégèse Médiéval, 2/1*, 504.

Notably, the allegorical sense of Scripture is to be located in historical events rather than in the text.[155] De Lubac explains that when the Church Fathers used the allegorical method, they "felt that, rather than giving a commentary on a text or solving a verbal puzzle, they were interpreting history." He goes on to explain that "history, just like nature . . . was a language to them. It was the word of God. Now throughout this history they encountered a mystery which was to be fulfilled, to be accomplished historically and socially, though always in a spiritual manner: the mystery of Christ and his Church." [156] The Fathers believed that the sacred history narrated in Scripture was animated by the Spirit of God and that their task as interpreters was to "understand the spirit of history without impairing historical reality. For there is a spiritual force in history . . . ; by reason of their finality the very facts have an inner significance; although in time, they are yet pregnant with an eternal value."[157] Thus, the Fathers interpreted Old Testament events, such as the Jewish Passover, as though they were pregnant with a

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[155] Lubac, *Exégèse Médiéval, 2/1*, 493.

[156] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 170.

[157] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 168. De Lubac notes the difference between Christian and pagan allegory. Whereas early Christian allegory, according to de Lubac, offered a means for discovering the depths of history, he claims that Hellenistic allegory tended to neglect history altogether. De Lubac writes that "the idea of a spiritual Reality becoming incarnate in the realm of sense, needing time for its accomplishment, that without prejudice to its spiritual significance should be prepared, come to pass, and mature socially in history – such a notion is entirely alien to these philosophers. Confronted with it, they find it a stumbling-block and foolishness. . . . Even Philo in trying to derive a spiritual teaching from the Bible denudes it somewhat of its historical significance" (Lubac, *Catholicism*, 166-167). For an essay devoted entirely to the differences between Christian and Hellenistic allegory, see Henri de Lubac, "Hellenistic Allegory and Christian Allegory," in *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1989), 165-196. It seems that de Lubac may overstate the differences between early Christian and pagan allegory, since patristic allegory did not always seek to "discover the depths of history." See, for example, Ambrose' *On Naoboth*.

meaning that was only fully revealed in Christ – the true Passover lamb.[158] It was, for

the Fathers, as though "the shadow [existed] before the body" and the "copy [came]

before the original."[159]

With the tropological sense "man learns to know himself with his misery and his

sin while getting to know the perfection for which God destines and calls him."[160] This is

the moral sense that follows from the Church's doctrines, dogmas, and mysteries, and it

is based, above all, on charity. According to de Lubac, the Bible acts as a mirror that

reveals the drama of the Church's historical existence as well as the drama of every

individual's interior life.[161] The tropological is that sense through which persons are

called to become imitators of Christ. According to one commentator, "it is essentially,

then, a reproduction or an interiorization of Christ's Mystery in the life of individual

Christians."[162] Like the other senses, the tropological must always be understood within

the fourfold context because all of the senses complement each other. For example,

whereas the allegorical sense unlocks the Christological and ecclesiological meaning of

Scripture and the tropological is applied to individuals, the tropological sense cannot be

understood from an individualistic perspective because the Church is fundamentally

social and because each individual is united with every other individual through the blood

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[158] The same can be said of Jesus (as depicted in the gospels) and of the Apostle Paul.

[159] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 173.

[160] Lubac, "On an Old Distich," 115.

[161] Lubac, "On an Old Distich," 115. The most famous example of a Church Father reading the Bible this way is found, of course, in Augustine's *Confessions*.

[162] D'Ambrosio, *Henri de Lubac and the Recovery of the Traditional Hermeneutic*, 199.

and body of Christ. Thus, the real meaning of the tropological sense will always depend upon the allegorical sense as well as the others.

Another important point to make about the tropological sense is that it does not pertain to "morality" as a kind of universal law binding on persons. Rather, the tropological sense is, in de Lubac's view, "mystical." Thus, the chapter in the second volume of *Medieval Exegesis* that deals with tropology is entitled "Mystical Tropology."[163] The use of the word mystical is meant to communicate an interiorization of Christ's virtues in the individual Christian through a participation in his mystical body. For de Lubac, the revelation of Christ can be "in some way interiorized in man in such a way as to bear its fruit within him."[164]   Mystical tropology, importantly, makes no attempt to separate morality from epistemology. In an important essay on mysticism, de Lubac writes that "the mystical or spiritual understanding of Scripture and the mystical or spiritual life are, in the end, one and the same. Christian mysticism is that understanding pushed to its most fruitful phase by its four traditional dimensions – history, 'allegory' or doctrine, ethics or 'tropology' and anagogy – each of which is absorbed by the following one."[165]

Finally, the anagogical sense is eschatological in that it looks ahead to the final consummation of all things in Christ. The anagogical sense shows the Church "what goal to strive for."[166] According to de Lubac, the anagogical sense is not only concerned with

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[163] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 127-177.

[164] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 1*, xvi.

[165] Henri de Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," in *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1989), 58.

[166] Lubac, "On an Old Distich," 115.

the objective return of Christ at the end of history. It also enables a mystical unification

between the Church in the present and the fullness of Christ to come.[167] The anagogical

interpretation of Scripture enables the Church to experience the eschatological

consummation as both now and not yet. De Lubac writes that

> In traditional eschatology . . . the doctrine of the four senses is achieved and finds its unity. For Christianity is a fulfillment, but in this very fulfillment it is a promised hope. Mystical or doctrinal, taught or lived, true anagogy is therefore always eschatological. It stirs up the desire for eternity in us. This is also why the fourth sense is forced to be the last. No more than it could really lack the three others could it be followed by a fifth. Neither is hope ever lacking nor, in our earthly condition, is it ever surpassed even if it already encroaches upon its term.[168]

Susan Wood explains that "the anagogical sense of Scripture constitutes the perfection of

the allegorical and tropological senses by achieving the synthesis of the doctrinal and

communal emphasis of the first and the moral and individual emphasis of the second."[169]

So, the literal sense offers insight into the people and events of biblical history, while the

allegorical shows that those persons and events were but shadows of a more complete and

perfect reality – Christ and his body the Church. The tropological sense enables the

individual to be incorporated into Christ and his Church in order to share in Christ's

goodness and perfection. Each of these senses "leads to the other as its end" until we

come to anagogy, which shows us that the experience of time was but a preparation for

eternity.[170]

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[167] Lubac, *Exégèse Médiéval, 2/1*, 624.

[168] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 197.

[169] Wood, *Spiritual Exegesis*, 44.

[170] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 203.

Although de Lubac did not advocate a strict return to the exegetical methods enumerated above, he was convinced that contemporary exegetes could learn a great deal from the Fathers and that they should attempt to retrieve the "spirit" of their exegetical practice, and consequently read Scripture as the Word of God incarnate in human history. Indeed, all of the fourfold senses serve to illuminate the spiritual meaning of history from a Christocentric perspective. It is partly through this illumination that the Church is united with God in the incarnate Christ. Citing a statement from *Catholicism* again, we see that, according to de Lubac,

> God acts in history and reveals himself through history. Or rather, God inserts himself in history and so bestows on it a "religious consecration" which compels us to treat it with due respect. As a consequence historical realities possess a profound sense and are to be understood in a spiritual manner: *i`storika. pneumatikw/j*. The Bible, which contains the revelation of salvation, contains too, in its own way, the history of the world. In order to understand it, it is not enough to take note of the factual details it recounts, but there must be an awareness of its concern for universality . . . . It was in this way that the Bible was read by the Fathers of the Church . . . . If salvation is social in its essence it follows that history is the necessary interpreter between God and man.[171]

Spiritual exegesis, which de Lubac equates with conversion, facilitates the Church's engagement with culture, first, by enabling it to understand the spirit that guided biblical history (literal and allegorical senses), and second, by enabling it to engage history in that same spirit (tropological sense) as it continually interprets the world in light of the final consummation of all things in Christ (anagogical sense). Spiritual exegesis is not a speculative, academic exercise. Rather, it is social and political to the core since it mediates the Church's ongoing historical engagement with culture. For de Lubac, nature and all of history finds its completion and fulfillment only in God yet remains incapable of ascending to God without supernatural grace. Apart from the

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[171] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 165.

God who redeems creation from within, and without a vision of this telos revealed through God's incarnate and transcendent Word, which is mediated to the Church and the world through Scripture, individuals and entire civilizations fall into dissolution.[172]

Conclusion

The preceding sections have shown that de Lubac's major works on ecclesiology, ontology, and exegesis are related to each other organically. De Lubac was motivated by his dissatisfaction with the Church's complacency in the face of the crises of twentieth century Europe. He felt that the Church had become exiled from the pressing concerns of everyday life and that this exile was, at least in part, the consequence of a dualism created and perpetuated by theologians and biblical scholars. With his early works on ecclesiology, namely *Catholicism* and *Corpus Mysticum*, de Lubac offered a vision of the Church participating with Christ in the Divine economy and described an important historical transformation that served to obscure this vision. A participatory ontology, such as the one envisioned by de Lubac, means that there can be no separation between the natural and the supernatural. In the end, nature and history are transformed and completed by God's supernatural grace. De Lubac argued in *Surnaturel*, and in a later two-volume expansion of that book's thesis, that the Church's great tradition is consistent in its affirmation that grace completes nature.

After demonstrating that the Fathers did not concur with neo-scholasticism's dualistic ontology, de Lubac focused his energies on spiritual exegesis, and wrote more

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[172] I will have a great deal more to say about the role of spiritual exegesis in the Church's engagement with culture in chapter five.

pages on this issue than on any other during his long career.[1] The great achievement of

this work is that it illustrates how spiritual exegesis enables the Church to perceive its

own history as animated by the Spirit, and at the same time facilitates the Church's

ongoing incorporation of itself and the world into the Divine Economy – of time into

eternity.

Chapter five of this work will delve much deeper into de Lubac's work on

spiritual exegesis. In the meantime, however, chapter four will offer a slight detour as I

consider the thought of several other twentieth century theologians who affirmed, like de

Lubac, that scientific exegesis provides an inadequate hermeneutic to guide the Church in

its engagement with culture. Namely, the next chapter will focus on two major "schools

of thought"– postliberalism and radical orthodoxy – in order to examine their respective

approaches to hermeneutics and culture. Chapter five will then place de Lubac in

conversation with these other schools of thought.

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[1] D'Ambrosio, "Henri de Lubac and the Critique of Scientific Exegesis," 366.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Interpretation of Scripture in Postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy

Introduction

De Lubac had several goals in mind when he wrote his first major work on the

history of exegesis, *Historie et Esprit: l'intelligence de l'Écriture d'après Origène*

(1950). First, he intended to rescue Origen from the widespread belief that his allegorical

interpretation of Scripture flouted "the truth of history", i.e. that it was heavily indebted

to Hellenistic allegorists like Philo who tended to treat Old Testament texts from an

ahistorical and abstract perspective.[1] Against this widespread criticism, de Lubac argued

that Origen clearly affirmed and appreciated the history told in the Old Testament.[2]

Moreover, according to de Lubac, Origen's allegorical interpretation was fundamentally

different from that of Philo since its primary objective was to grasp "the true meaning of

biblical history."[3] Origen's interpretive method was focused on the Spirit that, he

believed, animated Old Testament history, pointing it towards its Christological

fulfillment.[4]

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[1] The first chapter of *Histoire et Esprit,* which is entitled "Grievances against Origen," offers a review of the many scholarly works that have criticized Origen in this way. Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit*, 13-46. For a concise treatment of the difference between Christian and Hellenistic allegory, see Lubac, "Hellenistic Allegory and Christian Allegory."

[2] Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit*, 93-94.

[3] Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit*, 139.

[4] Chapter three of *Histoire et Esprit* deals exclusively with Origen's appreciation of history.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, de Lubac, following Blondel, was critical

of "scientific exegesis" that treated only the "external facts" of history without ever

considering the "real history" or the spirit within history that inspired the texts.

Accordingly, de Lubac hoped that, in addition to rescuing Origen from misunderstanding,

his own work in the history of exegesis would inspire a new synthesis in biblical

scholarship uniting the scientific methods with a more traditional appreciation for the

dynamic, spiritual reality that the words of the text point to as signs.[5] During the time

that de Lubac was writing his multi-volume *Exégèse Médiévale* he explained in a report

to the Academy of France that

> In *Histoire et Esprit*, it is the central idea of the ancient interpretation of Scripture
> that I tried to bring out by taking as the center of perspective its most brilliant
> representative, Origen. In so doing, I hoped to make a contribution, on the one
> hand, to the current research into the philosophy or the theology of history and, on
> the other, to the synthesis that is also being sought today within Christianity
> between exegesis, properly so-called, dogmatic theology and spirituality. It is a
> continuation of this study, this time adopting the early Latin Middle Ages as the
> center of perspective, that is occupying me at this time.[6]

Despite his hopes, de Lubac's work in the history of ancient exegesis has not yet

lead to a new synthesis between biblical exegesis, dogmatic theology, and spirituality. In

general, scholars were convinced by his defense of Origen against claims that he

disregarded history in the manner of Greek allegorists, but few professional biblical

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[5] One commentator suggests that "De Lubac's investigation into the history of
ancient Christian exegesis was, then, clearly intended to make a contribution towards a
synthesis between the traditional hermeneutical wisdom of the Church and contemporary
exegetical science. Yet . . . he did not himself attempt to write a blueprint for their active
collaboration in the practical work of exegesis. Leaving that delicate task to others, de
Lubac instead limited himself rather modestly to clearing away false oppositions between
these two perspectives and attempting somewhat to clarify the issues involved
historically and theologically" (D'Ambrosio, *Henri de Lubac and the Recovery of the
Traditional Hermeneutic*, 291).

[6] Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 93.

scholars have embraced the idea of an exegetical *ressourcement*.[7] This is not to say,

however, that other scholars have not also been dissatisfied with the overly scientific

character of biblical scholarship. Indeed, some of de Lubac's fiercest critics agreed that

contemporary biblical scholarship was suffering from a "spiritual bankruptcy," though

they did not find in de Lubac's work a solution to the problem.[8] However, beginning in

the nineteen-seventies, and especially with the work of Hans Frei, a new critique of

scientific exegesis emerged and began to have a significant influence on biblical and

theological scholarship.

The present chapter will offer a survey and critique of the movement commonly

referred to as postliberalism, and specifically the approach to biblical interpretation found

in the work of postliberal theologians, Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. Postliberalism is

among the most important theological movements of the late-twentieth century, and it

represents a genuine advancement beyond the overly scientific, historical-critical

approach to the Bible that de Lubac found lacking. After a brief survey of select works, I

will put Frei and Lindbeck into conversation with several of their contemporary critics in

order to suggest a number of areas where modifications are needed. Finally, I will offer a

brief analysis and critique of John Milbank's approach to hermeneutics and to the radical

orthodoxy movement that he has helped spearhead.

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[7] For a summary of the reception of de Lubac's work on ancient exegesis, see D'Ambrosio, *Henri de Lubac and the Recovery of the Traditional Hermeneutic*, 239-242; 327-334. Despite the skepticism of academics, de Lubac's recovery of spiritual exegesis did have a very significant influence on the Vatican II constitution, *Dei Verbum*.

[8] One critic of de Lubac's work writes that "The spiritual bankruptcy of scientific interpretation must be noted as a fact which can be neither explained or defended" [John L. McKenzie, "The Significance of the Old Testament for Christian Faith in Roman Catholicism," in *The Old Testament and Christian Faith*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1969), 104].

Hans Frei and the Return to Narrative

Much like Blondel and de Lubac before him, Hans Frei believed that modern

biblical scholarship had gone astray in its interpretive practices. In his groundbreaking

book, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974), Frei offered a historical study of modern

biblical interpretation, focused primarily on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In

the course of his study, Frei noted two negative tendencies that emerged around the

eighteenth century. On the one hand, there is a tendency to look for the meaning of

biblical texts in abstract and eternal truths about God and humans, rather than in the

storied world rendered in the narrative.[9] The other tendency, according to Frei, is to

regard biblical texts as records of historical events that can be verified using the tools of

historical-critical scholarship.[10]

According to Frei, both of the above-mentioned tendencies are errant because

they attempt to locate the meaning of the biblical text outside of the overall narrative of

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[9] Frei acknowledges that the universal truths referenced in the text could be taken either as "dogma [as with the neo-scholastics] or general religious ideas (meaning as ideal reference) [as with the liberals]" (Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative; a Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 101]. It is interesting to note that, although Frei focuses on liberalizing theologians such as Schleiermacher as representative of this tendency, de Lubac's (and Blondel's) critique of neo-scholastic "extrinsicism" is very similar.

[10] De Lubac's critique of "historicism" was focused on the same tendency. Here again, it is important to note that both liberalizing theologians and proto-fundamentalists sought to substantiate their preferred interpretations through historical argumentation – either in support of biblical claims (as with biblical creationists) or against (as with the nineteenth and twentieth century attempts to discover the historical Jesus.) For more on Frei's critique of these two tendencies, see William C. Placher, "Introduction," in *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. Hans Frei, George Hunsinger, and William C. Placher (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 7-8.

the Bible – in either an ideal or a historical referent.[11] However, whereas de Lubac

looked to the interpretive practices of the patristic and medieval era (spiritual or

allegorical interpretation with its four-fold method) for the basis of a new synthesis

capable of overcoming the limitations of modern biblical scholarship, Frei looked to the

figural approach of the Reformers.

The Recovery of Realistic Narrative

In *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Frei tells us that for the Reformers and their

predecessors, Scripture was authoritative and cohesive in its depiction of history and

doctrine. It was not an option for Luther or Calvin to separate the literal or figural

meaning of a text from the historical events depicted there. To the pre-critical mind, the

storied world of the Bible was "real." It was the real history of God and humanity, and it

was a history that could be entered into. [12]

According to Frei, the pre-critical world understood its own history as continuous

with the history depicted in Scripture. This history began when God created the heavens

and the earth, and the creatures living on the earth, and the humans to rule over the earth.

It continued as the first humans fell from grace, and the history of salvation began to

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[11] Frei suggests that these tendencies are a direct result of a misguided apologetics
that views truth and meaning in abstracted and foundational terms. "Individual words
appeared to be the basic units of meaning. Meaning itself was thought of as a kind of
unvarying subsistent medium in which words flourish or, to change the figure, a kind of
conveyor belt onto which words are dropped for transportation to their proper reference
or destiny"(Frei, *Eclipse*, 109).

[12] "The text fitly rendered what it talked about in two ways for Calvin. It was in
the first place a proper (literal or figurative) rather than allegorical depiction of the world
or reality it narrated. But in the second place it rendered reality itself to the reader,
making the reality accessible to him through its narrative web. He could therefore both
comprehend it and shape his life in accordance with it" (Frei, *Eclipse*, 24).

unfold. This history involved a consistent interaction between humans and God as a

people were chosen, promises were made and broken, and grace was continually poured

out. In the Christian Scriptures, the center of this history is Jesus. For the reformers, and

those who came before them, the history depicted in the Old Testament flows smoothly

into the New Testament and then into the church. This is the history of God's redemptive

activity, and to become a Christian is to join God (through the incarnation of Christ that

continues in the church) in this history that provides the witness according to which all

history is ultimately judged.[13]

In Frei's outlook, the pre-critical view of Scripture as a "realistic story," in which

the literal sense of the text is identical with the historical references made there, has

important implications for biblical interpretation. For Luther and Calvin, biblical

interpretation was a matter of making sense of their world in light of the "real" world

depicted in the "realistic narrative" of the Bible. The process of making sense of the

present world was natural to the pre-critical mind because it involved an extension of the

typological or figural sense of Scripture.[14] As mentioned above, typology allowed the

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[13] "Long before a minor modern school of thought made the biblical 'history of salvation' a special spiritual and historical sequence for historiographical and theological inquiry, Christian preachers and theological commentators, Augustine the most notable among them, had envisioned the real world as formed by the sequence told by the biblical stories. That temporal world covered the span of ages from creation to the final consummation to come, and included the governance of man's natural environment and of that secondary environment which we often think of as provided for man by himself and call 'history' or 'culture' (Frei, *Eclipse*, 1).

[14] Eric Auerbach, one of Frei's major influences, explains that "Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first. The two poles of a figure are separated in time, but both, being real events or persons, are within temporality. They are both contained in the flowing stream which is historical life" [Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 73].

Reformers and their predecessors to view the Bible as a cohesive and extended historical

narrative. Important events in the Old Testament, events like the crossing of the Jordan

River, were types or figures of New Testament events such as the baptism of Jesus in the

Jordan River. In the same way, this figuration continues into the present. Thus, the

ongoing baptism of believers is prefigured by both the original entry of the Hebrews into

the Promised Land and the inauguration of God's promised reign on earth in the baptism

of Jesus. The realistic narrative of Scripture gives meaning to our contemporary

experience, and our history is prefigured by the history of God's redemptive activity in

the life of Israel and in Jesus.

According to Frei, however, the direction of biblical interpretation changed after

the seventeenth-century, as scholars began to locate the meaning and significance of the

text, as mentioned previously, in either abstract universal truths or historical events.[15]

For those locating the text's significance in abstract, universal truths, history was

relatively unimportant. However, for historical-critical scholars, the religious

significance or "meaning" of a story, like the post-exodus entry into Palestine, became

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[15] "It is no exaggeration to say that all across the theological spectrum the great reversal had taken place; interpretation was a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating the world into the biblical story" (Frei, *Eclipse*, 130). Frei, like de Lubac before him, believes that things began to go astray in the seventeenth century and only got worse. He suggests that the method of "modern biblical-historical criticism and its slightly younger cousin, historical-critical theology. . . owes much to the seventeenth century, for instance to Spinoza's reflections in the first twelve chapters of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, to the conviction of the Socinians that the veracity of Scripture would and should be attested by independent rational judgment rather than dogmatic authority, and to the pioneering critical exegesis of men like Hugo Grotius and Richard Simon. But there is no doubt that as concerted practice, building into a continuing tradition and literature, it started in the second half of the eighteenth century, chiefly among German scholars" (Frei, *Eclipse*, 17).

dependent upon the historicity of the events in question. If an event was historically

suspect, then the meaning was suspect and figural interpretation was often lost.[16]

One of the primary concerns of *The Eclipse* was that biblical scholars after the

late eighteenth-century consistently failed to appreciate the significance of the realistic

narrative character of Scripture.[17] According to Frei, this failure had a negative influence

upon biblical scholarship and theology. He claims that "a realistic or history-like (though

not necessarily history) element is a feature, as obvious as it is important, of many of the

biblical narratives that went into the making of Christian belief." The fact that much of

the Bible is depicted as realistic narrative cannot be ignored if Scripture is to be

interpreted properly.[18]

Though Frei's *Eclipse* has been highly influential, its aims were fairly modest,

since it was intended simply to point out an important characteristic of Scripture that was

being overlooked.[19] However, Frei did not recommend a return to the pre-critical

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[16] "If the religious truths the Bible communicated were completely dependent for their meaning on the historical events through which they had originally come into currency, the Bible was of course at once an indispensable source of factual information and of religious truth. Moreover, its being the latter depended entirely on its also being the former. But if the religious meaning of the Bible (including the history-like) narratives did not depend logically on its connection with these stories and events, it was certainly factually dispensable; history in that case made no difference to religion." Frei, *Eclipse*, 118.

[17] Robert Jenson remarks that "any reader of pre-Enlightenment writings is struck by the way in which the stretch of time is experienced as continuity. . . . In the eighteenth century, the intellectual policy of "critique" broke this continuity and transformed experience of the stretch of time into experience of separation. The space of time ceased to be the space in which we live together and became distance, despite which we struggle toward each other" [Robert Jenson, "On the Problems of Scriptural Authority," *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 245-246].

[18] Frei, *Eclipse*, 10.

[19] Frei, *Eclipse*, 10.

assumption that the literal sense of the realistic narrative always describes real history. Frei accepted many of the conclusions of historical-critical scholars, but like de Lubac, he contended that these modern exegetical methods are limited in their ability to disclose the real meaning of biblical texts. Interestingly, Frei admits that

> in order to recognize the realistic narrative feature as a significant element in its own right . . . one would have . . . to distinguish sharply between literal sense and historical reference. And then one would have . . . to allow the literal sense to stand as the meaning, even if one believed that the story does not refer historically.[20]

In other words, there can be no going back to the days when the realistic narrative and the history were unified, since the many insights of historical-critical investigation cannot be ignored.[21] However, this presents Frei and others with a problem of the relationship between biblical story and history, since the Christian faith presupposes that the God of Israel acts in history to redeem his chosen people and the world. Indeed, if the proper interpretation of Scripture requires choosing a story over and against history then biblical redemption is a mere fiction. Although Frei never addresses the relationship between story and history in *The Eclipse*, he does elsewhere.

The Identity of Jesus: Where Story and History Converge

Frei's suggestion in *The Eclipse* appears to be that exegetes must ignore the lack of historical reference in order to appreciate the "realistic narrative" or "history like" quality of a large portion of Scripture. His concern is that the typological dimension of

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[20] Frei, *Eclipse*, 11.

[21] In an unpublished address given at a Yale Divinity School Symposium, Frei talked about the need for a "post-critical naiveté" – a phrase that he attributes to Karl Barth, though he acknowledges the similarities of this phrase with Paul Ricoeur's "second naiveté" [Hans Frei, *History, Salvation-History, and Typology* (New Haven, CT: Yale Divinity School, 1981), 83].

Scripture is only comprehensible if the stories are interpreted as history-like. In the absence of a typological reading, the story has no ability to incorporate "extra-biblical thought, experience, and reality into the one real world detailed and made accessible by the biblical story." [22]

As previously mentioned, the problem with Frei's recommendation in *The Eclipse* is that it has never been the ultimate goal of Christian redemption to draw people into a fictional story. Rather, redemption involves, as the Reformers rightly understood, a historical reality. To be redeemed is to be incorporated as a recipient of grace into God's *history* of salvation, so the matter of historicity cannot be put-aside for the sake of proper interpretation.

What we learn in *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (1975) is that Frei's insistence that interpreters take seriously the literal sense of biblical stories, even when historical reference is in doubt, does not preclude the reality of a true history of salvation. On the contrary, what we can deduce from Frei's argument is that the essence of salvation history is best communicated in a fiction-like, narrative form. He makes this point clear in his discussion of the identity of Jesus as depicted in the gospels. He explains:

> With regard to the Gospels, we are actually in a fortunate position that so much of what we know about Jesus, beginning at the crucial initiatory point of the climactic, unbroken sequence, is more nearly fictional than historical in narration. Yet the story is about an individual who lived; and, by common agreement, it is within the passion-resurrection sequence that we come closest to historical events in his life (specifically in the trial and crucifixion). But also, in that most nearly biographical sequence, the form of the narration is more nearly like that of fiction. The main example of that fact is the direct inside understanding of the person of Jesus provided by the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. Surely one would not want to call this description biographical. It is not even pertinent to the story to ask how this sequence can be historical, if Jesus was alone there and his disciples were sleeping some distance away. It is precisely the fiction-like quality of the whole

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[22] Frei, *Eclipse*, 3.

narrative, from upper room to resurrection appearances, that serves to bring the identity of Jesus sharply before us and to make him accessible to us.[23]

Frei argues cogently that fiction writers are often better able to provide insight into the essence of a person's identity than are biographer-historians because they offer insight into a character's inner thoughts.[24] For this reason, he suggests that we should be grateful that the gospel writers chose to give us insight into the identity of Jesus, a real person, through fiction-like narratives such as the one portraying Jesus inner struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane.[25] We should therefore be wary of historical-critical attempts to uncover the identity of Jesus through his sayings, or by using any method that ignores the literal sense of the gospel narratives – particularly those parts describing Jesus' passion and resurrection. The identity of Jesus, according to Frei, is best communicated in the most fiction-like portions of the gospel narrative.

Importantly, Frei does not urge interpreters to concentrate on the realistic narrative over and against history. Rather, he argues that the best way to understand and enter into God's redemptive activity in history is through the story. The nature of salvation-history is such that it cannot be grasped through the kind of presentation that would be characteristic of a historical-biography or through some other kind of events chronicle. This is because, at the center of salvation history is a person – Jesus; and as

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[23] Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975), 144-145.

[24] "But also, in that most nearly biographical sequence, the form of the narration is more nearly like that of fiction. It is precisely the fiction-like quality of the whole narrative, from upper room to resurrection appearances, that serves to bring the identity of Jesus sharply before us and to make him accessible to us" (Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 145).

[25] The gospels resemble fiction in the way that their authors arranged freely the characters, events, settings, etc. in the service of the overall plot.

mentioned above, Frei contends that personal identities are best communicated in the

form of narrative. George Lindbeck, much like his friend and colleague Hans Frei,

emphasizes the importance of story in relation to identity formation. He explains that the

gospel stories

> identify and characterize a particular person as the summation of Israel's history
> and as the unsurpassable and irreplaceable clue to who and what the God of Israel
> and the universe is. They interpret the Hebrew Bible in terms of Christological
> anticipation, preparations, and promissory types. Jesus' story fulfills and
> transforms the overall biblical narratives of creation, election, and redemption, and
> thereby specifies the meanings of such concepts and images as Messiaship,
> Suffering Servanthood, Logos, and divine Sonship. He is the subject, everything
> else is predication. Some New Testament writings may not clearly exhibit this
> pattern . . . . but insofar as they are treated as parts of a narrationally and
> christologically unified cannon, they are submitted to the same hermeneutical
> rule.[26]

Just as the personal identity of Jesus is best communicated through realistic

narrative, so are the communal identities of Israel and the Church. Lindbeck suggests

that "the church is fundamentally identified and characterized by its story. Images such

as 'body of Christ,' or the traditional marks of 'unity, holiness, catholicity, apostolicity,'

cannot be first defined and then used to specify what is and what is not the church. The

story is logically prior."[27] In other words, it is the story that identifies and defines the

characteristics that the church, henceforth, must attempt to embody.

Biblical scholars have made similar arguments about the relationship between Old

Testament stories, even stories that may not refer historically, and the communal identity

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[26] George Lindbeck, "The Story Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and
Theological Interpretation," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed.
Garret Green (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 164.

[27] Lindbeck, "The Story Shaped Church," 165.

of Israel.[28] For example, according to Joseph Blenkinsopp, the historicity of the exodus event, as depicted in the Old Testament, is highly suspicious. For one thing, “we have no knowledge of an Israelite sojourn in Egypt or an exodus from Egypt apart from the biblical record.”[29] Also, the logistical impossibility of sustaining six hundred thousand men, plus women and children, in the desert for generations is problematic.

Blenkinsopp explains that after the period of Babylonian captivity the Hebrews had to struggle for survival. As a part of this struggle “the new commonwealth . . . had to shape an identity and therefore construct a past by a selective incorporation of memories on which their own self-understanding could be patterned. The results of these efforts are inscribed in the Hebrew Bible and especially in the Pentateuch.”[30] Gerhard Lohfink explains that “the Exodus texts became a *figura,* an enduring figure to support memory, the original image for all generations. In this very way and only in this way, [the Hebrews] were enabled to summarize within themselves all Israel’s later exodus experiences.”[31]

What these scholars are suggesting is that, in the case of the Old Testament, the past may have been narratively constructed in order to make sense of Israel’s present and future. The gospels were arguably written for the same purpose – to make sense of the

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[28] I do not mean to suggest that historical reference is all-or-nothing. Indeed, it is doubtful that any of the stories found in the Old Testament provide a perfectly accurate description of historical persons or events, though many do have an evident historical basis.

[29] Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Memory, Tradition, and the Construction of the Past in Ancient Israel," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27 (1997): 80.

[30] Blenkinsopp, "Memory," 80.

[31] Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?: Toward a Theology of the People of God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 68.

present and future of the growing Christian community whose sacramental identity was

inseparable from the historical person of Jesus. With regard to both the Old and New

Testaments there is an unbreakable bond between story and history, since the stories

serve to communicate and preserve the identity of either a person or people with whom

God dwells in history. In both cases, story communicates what Blondel and de Lubac

might call, "real" or "dynamic" history and what Frei would call historical identity.

Moreover, according to Frei and Lindbeck the identity of Jesus provides the

hermeneutical key for understanding the identity of both Israel and the Church. Lindbeck

explains that

> the relation of Israel's history to that of the church in the New Testament is not one
> of shadow to reality, or promise to fulfillment, or type to antitype. Rather, the
> kingdom already present in Christ alone is the antitype, and both Israel and the
> church are types. The people of God existing in both the old and new ages are
> typologically related to Jesus Christ, and through Christ, Israel is prototypical for
> the church in much the same way that the exodus story, for example, is seen as
> prototypical for all later Israelite history.[32]

From this perspective, the baptism of Jesus is not dependent for its meaning on the

historical reliability of the book of Joshua. Rather, the story of the original entry into the

Promised Land gains its significance from Jesus' baptism as told in narrative form in the

gospels. The center of the history of salvation is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Because of Jesus, the past, present, and future are redeemed, and believers are able,

through grace, to join in God's redemptive history. According to Frei and Lindbeck, the

function of realistic narrative in the gospels is to communicate the identity of the

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[32] Lindbeck, "The Story Shaped Church," 166.

crucified and resurrected Jesus, who stands as the center and hermeneutic principle that gives meaning to all the rest of salvation-history. [33]

Interestingly, the narrative theology of Frei and Lindbeck appears to be grounded in a philosophy of history that has much in common with de Lubac's. Namely, Frei and Lindbeck argue that biblical stories, even though they may at times be only "history-like," offer profound insight into the true historical identity of a person and/or a people. We recall that de Lubac defended Origen's allegorical method because, rather than ignoring history, it was focused on "the true meaning of biblical history," i.e. the *subject* anticipated in all of biblical history – Christ.[34]

Scripture Absorbs the World

Frei and Lindbeck assert that the biblical narrative constitutes a kind of complete world or semiotic system with Jesus at the center, giving meaning to all that comes before and after him. [35] Frei holds that biblical interpretation should incorporate "extra-biblical thought, experience, and reality into the one real world detailed and made accessible by the biblical story."[36] Lindbeck considers religions, including the Christian religion, "as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework . . . that shapes the entirety of life and

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[33] According to Frei, "however impossible it may be to grasp the nature of the resurrection, it remains inconceivable that it should not have taken place." Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 145. This is because, according to Frei, the identity of Jesus as depicted in the passion and resurrection narrative holds the overall story of the Old and New Testaments together in such a way that without it, everything else would fall apart as meaningless.

[34] Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit*, 103.

[35] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 59. Also Lindbeck, "The Story Shaped Church," 174.

[36] Frei, *Eclipse*, 3.

thought."[37] For both thinkers, the cultural and linguistic world found in the stories of the

Bible should shape and transform the world outside of Scripture perceptually.[38] The

narrative world of Scripture should serve as a lens through which Christians "construe

and construct reality."[39] Lindbeck explains:

> Until recently, most people in traditionally Christian countries lived in the
> linguistic and imaginative world of the Bible. It was not the only world in which
> they dwelt. In most periods of Christendom, the poorly catechized masses lived
> also in a world of hobgoblins, fairies, necromancy, and superstition; in the educated
> classes, everyone, not least devout Christians, had their imaginations shaped by
> pagan classics of the Greeks and Romans. . . . Yet the text above all texts was the
> Bible. . . . Thus all of experience, including sacred texts from other religions, such
> as the classics of Greece and Rome, was absorbed into the scriptural framework. It
> is more than a metaphor, it is a literal description to say that Christendom dwelt
> imaginatively in the biblical world.[40]

However, as Frei's study in *Eclipse* has argued, modern interpreters have tended,

increasingly, to construe and construct reality through secular lenses and to approach

Scripture, not in search of reality, but in behalf of a misguided apologetics striving to

provide evidence of the Bible's credibility in relation to some other reality. Lindbeck

suggests that biblical interpreters, instead of redescribing "reality within the scriptural

framework" are too often "translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories."[41] The

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[37] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984), 33.

[38] This complex and far from self-evident theme, found throughout the writings of both Frei and Lindbeck, will provide the basis for a critical analysis of postliberalism below.

[39] George Lindbeck, "The Church's Mission to a Postmodern Culture," in *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Frederic B. Burnham (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1989), 39-40.

[40] Lindbeck, "The Church's Mission," 38, 41-42.

[41] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 118.

danger in this correlationist approach, according to Lindbeck, is that it encourages

Christians on all sides of the political spectrum to "accommodate to the prevailing culture

rather than shape it."[42] In other words, when Scripture no longer provides Christians with

an endless source of imagination through which to construe and construct reality,

Christian culture atrophies and perhaps disappears completely. This, according to

Lindbeck, is exactly what has happened in the west, since the biblical text has

increasingly been studied "as an object… dissociated from its use as a language with

which to construe the universe."[43]

According to Lindbeck, modern approaches to biblical interpretation have lead to

"a loss of both biblical literacy and biblical imagination."[44] Moreover, this loss is cause

for grave concern, since it also entails a loss of a common language and a common

rationality – both of which may be necessary for the survival of western civilization.[45]

Lindbeck explains that "if imagination is basic to thought (as some modern cognitive

psychologists, not to mention ancient Aristotelians, affirm), then the weakening of the

biblical substructure of our culture's communal imagination may dry up the wellsprings

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[42] George Lindbeck, "Scripture, Consensus, and Community," in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 87.

[43] Lindbeck, "The Church's Mission," 44.

[44] Lindbeck, "The Church's Mission," 44.

[45] Lindbeck suggests that "without a shared imaginative and conceptual vocabulary and syntax, societies cannot be held together by communication, but only by brute force (which is always inefficient, and likely to be a harbinger of anarchy). But if this is so, then the biblical cultural contribution, which is at the heart of the canonical heritage of Western countries, is indispensable to their welfare, and its evisceration bespeaks an illness which may be terminal" (Lindbeck, "The Church's Mission," 50).

of western humanistic creativity in general."[46] The result is that "we try to deal with apocalyptic threats of atomic and ecological disaster in the thin and feeble idioms of utilitarianism or therapeutic welfare. . . . The culture of Christians as well as of non-Christians has been de-Christianized, and the language of public discourse has become dangerously feeble. . . . We have, in other words, no common language in which to discuss the common weal."[47]

The loss of a common language has also, of course, become a problem for the church, which "has become a communicative basket case" where "genuine argument is impossible, and neither agreements nor disagreements can be probed at any depth."[48] To a certain extent, Lindbeck affirms that the "the waning of cultural Christianity might be good for the churches," since it could force them to return to the well-springs of Scripture and tradition without which they cannot survive.[49] However, he worries that "traditionally Christian lands when stripped of their historic faith are worse than others. They become unworkable or demonic," he suggests, and "there is no reason to suppose that what happened in Nazi Germany cannot happen in liberal democracies, though the devils will no doubt be disguised very differently."[50]

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[46] Lindbeck, "The Church's Mission," 47.

[47] Lindbeck, "The Church's Mission," 47-48.

[48] Lindbeck, "The Church's Mission," 49.

[49] George Lindbeck, "Confession and Community: An Israel-Like View of the Church," *Christian Century*, May 9, 1990, 494.

[50] Lindbeck, "Confession and Community," 494.

Accordingly, Lindbeck believes that the Church must renew itself, not for its own sake but for the sake of the world.[51] And this renewal depends above all, he suggests, "on the spread of proficiency in premodern yet postcritical Bible reading."[52] He explains that

> Biblical literacy, though not sufficient, is indispensable. This literacy does not consist of historical, critical knowledge about the Bible. Nor does it consist of theological accounts, couched in nonbiblical language, of the Bible's teachings and meanings. Rather, it is the patterns and details of its sagas, its images and symbols, its syntax and grammar, which need to be internalized if one is to imagine and think scripturally.[53]

Lindbeck and Frei both describe this process of scriptural imagination and cultural engagement as "intratextual theology." According to Lindbeck, "intratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories."[54] Frei uses similar language when he explains that

> The direction in the flow of intratextual interpretation is that of absorbing the extratextual universe into the text, rather than the reverse (extratextual) direction. The literal sense is the paradigmatic form of such intratextual interpretation in the Christian community's use of its Scripture: The literal ascription to Jesus of Nazareth of the stories connected with him is of such far-reaching import that it serves not only as focus for inner-canonical typology but reshapes extratextual language in its manifold descriptive uses into a typological relation to these stories.[55]

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[51] As the title of his essay suggests, Lindbeck is thinking of the Church in a role that would allow it to be, like Israel, a "light to the nations" and particularly to western culture.

[52] Lindbeck, "Confession and Community," 494.

[53] Lindbeck, "The Church's Mission," 51-52.

[54] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 118.

[55] Hans Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?," in *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. Hans W. Frei, George Hunsinger, and William C. Placher (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 147.

For Frei and Lindbeck, if the church hopes to engage culture faithfully, it must first learn how to inhabit the world via a scriptural imagination.

A Critique of the Narrative Approach

One of the obvious differences between the postliberal approach and the allegorical approach of the Fathers is that Frei and Lindbeck, following the Reformers, make figures/types a part of the literal sense while patristic and medieval commentators tend to affirm multiple, though inseparable, senses.[56] Indeed, Frei is critical of the tendency of patristic commentators who, he believes, too often attach "a temporally free-floating meaning pattern to any temporal occasion whatever, without any intrinsic connection between [a] sensuous time-bound picture and the meaning represented by it."[57] In contrast to patristic and medieval allegory, Frei prefers the figural reading of the Reformers, and especially Calvin, whose "sense of figural interpretation remained firmly rooted in the order of temporal sequence and the depiction of temporal occurrences, the links between which can be established only by narration and under the conviction of the primacy of the literal, grammatical sense."[58] For Frei, it is precisely this narratively

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[56] Frei, "The 'Literal Reading'," 147.

[57] Frei, *Eclipse*, 29. Frei's criticisms here are representative of a widespread scholarly distrust of allegory. Frei was, perhaps, unacquainted with de Lubac's writings on patristic and medieval exegesis. Although de Lubac was very willing to acknowledge the excesses of the ancient approach, he would not have agreed with such a general condemnation.

[58] Frei, *Eclipse*, 31. It is important to note, once again, that de Lubac was also well aware and critical, of the excesses of patristic and medieval allegory. De Lubac in no way advocated a simple return to the ancient methods. Rather, he wanted them to be understood and appreciated so that a new synthesis between biblical exegesis, dogmatic theology, and spirituality could be pursued. Regarding the four-fold sense, de Lubac asks, would we "propose returning to it as a guide for today's exegesis and theology? No one would seriously dream of that." Lubac, "On an Old Distich," 124.

rendered temporal sequence, associated with the literal sense of Scripture that enables the

Bible to be read as a world unto itself with a beginning, middle, and end – a world

capable of "absorbing" other worlds. However, I will argue below that the literal sense

of Scripture, as conceived by Frei and Lindbeck, ultimately becomes a static, ahistorical

world incapable of the kind of absorption that they advocate.[59]

The Emergence of New Interpretive Methods

Unlike de Lubac's multi-volume study of patristic and medieval exegesis, many

of the insights of theologians like Hans Frei and George Lindbeck have been embraced

by biblical scholars, and they have helped inspire new, widely practiced exegetical

methods.[60] Indeed, one of Frei's greatest achievements may have been his success in

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[59] De Lubac was involved in a long-running debate with his friend, Jean Daniélou, regarding the differences between allegorical and figural/typological readings of scripture. While Daniélou argued for the superiority of figural reading, de Lubac held that allegory (or something like it) was indispensible for a sufficiently Christological reading of scripture. Whereas typology connects two figures within a temporal succession, allegory "establishes the relationship of the figure to the truth, of the letter to the spirit, of the old to the new. It shows how what was written after having taken place *tupikw/j* must be understood and lived *pneumatikw/s*." See Henri de Lubac, "Typology and Allegorization," in *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 129-164. Elsewhere he has written that "'typology'. . . has the virtue of doing away, at least in intention, with all the old straw in the grain of Christian exegesis, something which could not be accomplished by the word 'allegory' alone. But it has the drawback of referring solely to a result, without alluding to the spirit or basic thrust of the process which produces the result. Its connotations may be too narrow, for, strictly speaking, it corresponds solely to the first of the three meanings spelled out in the classical division after the literal sense, 'history.' Typology thus puts narrow limitations on its object. . . . It does not include within its scope the most properly spiritual explanations. . . . We should not place exclusive dependence upon it unless we are prepared to reduce the bold and pregnant teaching of a St. Paul to a game of figures, no matter how completely they may be authenticated" (Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 16).

[60] Notably, my first in-depth reading of *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* took place in a New Testament Seminar led by Mikeal Parsons of Baylor University. The book was first on our list of required readings.

convincing biblical scholars, not only that historical-critical methods too often miss the

literal or plain sense of Scripture, but also that the full meaning of the text is

incomprehensible apart from this plain sense. Regarding Frei's insight into the

limitations of historical-critical methods, Mark Alan Powell explains that

> the major limitation of all these approaches, as documented by Hans Frei in 1974, is that they fail to take seriously the narrative character of the Gospels. These books are stories about Jesus, not compilations of miscellaneous data concerning him. They are intended to be read from beginning to end, not dissected and examined to determine the relative value of individual passages. In focusing on the documentary status of these books, the historical-critical method attempted to interpret not the stories themselves but the historical circumstances behind them.[61]

The work of postliberal theologians has inspired a much greater appreciation

among biblical scholars for the literal sense of the stories in Scripture.[62] In the last thirty

years, there has been a dramatic shift in biblical scholarship as several new exegetical

methods have emerged.[63] Narrative criticism, for example, considers biblical stories in

their entirety, focusing on issues like character, plot, intended audience, and setting.

Additionally, rhetorical and social-scientific criticism have become commonplace, and

both are focused on understanding the social, cultural, and linguistic world within which

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[61] Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (London, UK: SPCK, 1993), 2.

[62] For a consideration of Frei's influence on biblical scholarship, see David Lee, *Luke's Stories of Jesus: Theological Reading of Gospel Narrative and the Legacy of Hans Frei*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series; 185 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

[63] Although the work of narrative theologians, and especially Frei, has helped convince many biblical scholars of the need for a renewed focus on the "realistic narrative," it should be pointed out that Frei had very little to say about how exactly biblical scholars should go about investigating this neglected dimension of Scripture. Not surprisingly, then, biblical scholars, although influenced by Frei and others, have borrowed a great deal from secular literary criticism as they have endeavored to explore the literary dimensions of the Bible. For more on this subject, see Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* , 1-11.

biblical stories were originally received in order to gain a greater understanding of their meaning.[64] Rhetorical and social-scientific criticism are often used in the service of narrative criticism.[65] Canonical criticism is another more recent interpretive approach, and it seeks to understand the relationship of particular stories and texts in relation to the biblical canon as a whole. Taken together, all of these new approaches evince a renewed enthusiasm in biblical scholarship for the narrative/literal sense of Scripture that Frei, Lindbeck, and others wanted to see restored to a place of importance. However, these new interpretive methods have not generally been accompanied by a renewed engagement with culture based upon a rediscovered biblical imagination. The temptation remains for practitioners of these methods to approach Scripture as though it constitutes a closed world that can be studied as one might study an artifact in a museum.

Does the Text Really Absorb the World?

A number of theologians, though appreciative of the contributions made by Frei and Lindbeck, have raised objections to the notion of a scriptural "world" capable of

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[64] This is perhaps what George Lindbeck has in mind when he suggests that "there can . . . be no rejection of historical-critical biblical studies, but these become auxiliary to literary-canonical readings in which narrative (especially realistic narrative à la Erich Auerbach and Hans Frei) is primary." George A. Lindbeck, "Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Intratextual Social Embodiment," in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 239-240.

[65] According to Vernon Robbins, within the gospel narratives there is an "argumentative texture" that is more easily discernible through the study of ancient rhetoric. A familiarity with the conventions of ancient rhetoric, he suggests, will illumine "the depictions of Jesus' motives, actions, speech, death, and resurrection" which are the "inner fabric of the gospels." Vernon K. Robbins, "Narrative in Ancient Rhetoric and Rhetoric in Ancient Narrative," *SBL Seminar Papers* (1996): 368, 372. For a group of essays focused on the complimentary nature of narrative and social-scientific criticism, see Jack Dean Kingsbury, ed., *Gospel Interpretation: Narrative-Critical & Social-Scientific Approaches* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1997).

absorbing other worlds. The problem, according to Rowan Williams, is that "the 'world of Scripture,' so far from being a clear and readily definable territory, is an *historical* world in which meanings are discovered and recovered in action and encounter."[66] Williams objects to the idea that the biblical narrative comes to us as a given reality – a "'framework' within whose boundaries things – persons? – are to be 'inserted.'"[67] Although he agrees with Lindbeck that the church needs "to revive and preserve a scriptural imagination" in order to faithfully interpret the world outside of the Bible, Williams suggests that the formation of such an imagination is more complex than narrative theologians indicate.[68] He suggests that

> We are not dealing with the 'insertion' of definable blocks of material into a well-mapped territory where homes may be found for them, but with events of re-telling or re-working traditional narrative patterns in specific human interactions; an activity in which the Christian community is itself enlarged in understanding and even in some sense evangelized.[69]

In William's estimation, Frei and Lindbeck oversimplify the reality of the church's engagement with culture when they suggest that the direction of biblical interpretation must move in only one direction, i.e. that the text must absorb the world and not vice versa. According to Williams, the text does not absorb the world, but as the Church strives to live faithfully it continually looks to the stories of Scripture to discover its own identity and future. In other words, the church brings the Scriptures constantly

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[66] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2000), 30.

[67] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 29.

[68] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 30. Cf. Miraslov Volf, "Theology, Meaning, and Power," in *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Miraslov Volf*, ed. Miraslov Volf, Thomas Kucharz, Carmen Krieg (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 101-103.

[69] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 31.

into contact with the world, and the consequence of this interaction is the generation of something new and unimagined. Williams writes:

> The Church may be committed to interpreting the world in terms of its foundational narratives; but the very act of interpreting affects the narratives as well as the world, for good or ill. . . . Something happens to the Exodus story as it is absorbed into the black slave culture of America. Something still more unsettling happens to Abraham and Isaac when they have passed through Kierkegaard's hands.[70]

Instead of calling this ecclesially enacted interaction between the text and the world "intratextual," Williams suggests that it is "generative," since it provides the occasion for the Church's ongoing "discovery" of the meaning of the text "as well as a discovery of the world."[71]

The intratextual approach assumes that the meaning of the text can be known prior to an engagement with the world outside of the text. Thus, the task of the theologian is to continually reinterpret the world outside of text in terms of the biblical narrative. From William's generative perspective, the theologian does not comprehend the full meaning of the biblical narrative until it is brought into engagement with the world. As I will argue below, the difference between Lindbeck and Williams regarding the interaction of the church with the world leads to (or perhaps arises from) a different understanding of the nature of theology.

Is Theology Intratextual and Descriptive?

For Lindbeck (and for Frei) theology is intratextual and fundamentally a "descriptive" exercise. Lindbeck suggests that "the task of descriptive (dogmatic or systematic) theology is to give a normative explication of the meaning a religion has for

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[70] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 30.

[71] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 30-31.

its adherents."[72] Because, for Lindbeck and Frei, the meaning of the Christian religion is located in the text, or in the narrative of Scripture, the task of the theologian is "to give a normative explication of the meaning" of the biblical narrative, which must be understood as a given reality – a block of material with definable borders. Moreover, claiming that the theologian's task is to explicate the meaning of Scripture is to claim that the theologian operates in a space outside of the framework of Scripture. The theologian, in Lindbeck's account, becomes an objective observer of the text who then describes its meaning to others.[73] According to Reinhard Hütter, Lindbeck contradicts himself at this point, because in order for theology to be "intratextual," the "descriptive activity" of the theologian cannot be "abstracted from the text itself."[74] Interestingly, Lindbeck compares the theological task of explicating the meaning of the scriptural world to that of an ethnologist who explicates the meaning of the "imaginative universe" of particular cultures.[75]

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[72] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 113. Cf. Hans Frei, "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative: Some Hermeneutical Considerations," in *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. Hans W. Frei, George Hunsinger, and William C. Placher (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 113.

[73] The most insightful analysis of Lindbeck's approach to theology that I have seen can be found in Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000). Hütter takes issue with Lindbeck's proposal that theology is a descriptive exercise and attempts to strengthen the intratextual approach by incorporating it into a view of theology as Trinitarian church practice. In Hütter's view, only an understanding of theology as church practice can accommodate Lindbeck's own desire for descriptive theology to serve as a constructive enterprise within the church, 59-65.

[74] Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 60.

[75] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 115. Lindbeck borrows the phrase "thick description" from Clifford Geertz and Gilbert Ryle to describe this kind of explication. For a critique of Lindbeck's embrace of "thick description," see Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 60-62.

In contrast to Lindbeck's proposal that theology is essentially descriptive, Rowan Williams suggests that "theology is the exploration of a parable, and so of conversion."[76] This statement is consistent with his unwillingness to view "the world of Scripture" as a "clear and readily definable territory" to be explicated by the ethnographer/theologian. A parable, argues Williams, is a story whose meaning is not clear at all. He writes that "the riddle of parables, the fact that they are seen as hopelessly enigmatic by friends and enemies, lies in making the connection with one's own transformation – that is, encountering God in the parable."[77] The task of the theologian is therefore to listen to Scripture and be prepared for "radical loss and radical novelty." The theologian, in William's account, must be open to the possibility of surprise when reading Scripture, and she must be open to the possibility of challenge and judgement as well:

> The inner readiness to come to judgement and to recognize the possibility of truth and meaning becomes visible and utterable in the form of discipleship, abiding in the community created by God's love. The dramatic event of Jesus' interaction with his people – set out in a series of ritual, quasi-legal disputations – is an event of judgement in that it gives the persons involved definitions, roles to adopt, points on which to stand and speak. They are invited to 'create' themselves in finding a place within this drama – an improvisation in the theatre workshop, but one that purports to be about a comprehensive truth affecting one's identity and future.[78]

Williams offers "feminist exegesis as an example of disturbing scriptural reading which forces on us the 'conversion' of seeing how our own words and stories may carry sin and violence in their telling, even as they provide the resource for overcoming sin and

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[76] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 42.

[77] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 41.

[78] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 32. For a more developed treatment of the idea of "improvisation" as a description for Christian scriptural interaction with the world, see Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (London, UK: SPCK, 2004).

violence."[79] Because theology necessarily entails conversion, it is characterized by

"silence, watchfulness, and the expectation of the Spirit's drastic appearance in

judgement, recognition, conversion, for us and for the world."[80] Moreover, and perhaps

most importantly, Williams suggests that "the theologizing of Christological and

Trinitarian faith presupposes – quite simply – living in Christ and in the Trinitarian

mystery, living in the Spirit."[81]

Perhaps the most important difference between the descriptive and the generative

(referring to William's view) approaches to theology is that the latter is more successful

than the former in situating both Scripture and the theologian interpreting Scripture

within a Trinitarian framework.   William's account of the nature of theology assumes a

participatory ontology while Lindbeck's does not. It seems that in arguing for a

descriptive understanding of the nature of theology Frei and Lindbeck have limited the

ability of the narrative to be expanded in order to actually "absorb the world." Even

though Frei and Lindbeck criticize exegetical tendencies that find the meaning of the text

in an "ahistorical" space separated from the text, the postliberal approach also becomes

ahistorical in the sense that the world of the text is viewed as an enclosed, semiotic

system.

Reinhard Hütter makes this point when he argues that there is a tension between

Lindbeck's assertions that theology is both intratextual and descriptive. He asks, "is it

not the task of a purely descriptive discipline to adhere to the concrete elements already

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[79] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 42.

[80] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 43.

[81] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 146.

before it?" In other words, in Hütter's estimation it is Lindbeck's insistence that theology

is descriptive that leads him to view the scriptural framework as a "static" given.[82] In

order for theology to be intratextual (a word that Hütter is willing to embrace), the text

must be dynamic and expandable in order for the theologian to operate intratextually.

Hütter writes that with regard to intratextuality "the analogy with ethnology completely

collapses, since this creative and constructive aspect of theology plays a role, indeed,

becomes necessary only if theologians themselves participate in the substantive

configurations of language and activities of the religion in question!"[83] In Lindbeck's

account, the theologian, if her work is really analogous to that of an ethnographer, does

not need to be a participant in the Christian faith in order to offer a theological

description of its semiotic world. In contrast, for Hütter and Williams theology is a

practice of the church that entails participation in the Trinitarian life of God.

Does the Narrative Identify Jesus?

　　　　The narrative approach of Frei and Lindbeck also falls short of a participatory

ontology in its approach to Christology. Even though they insist that the scriptural world

has the capacity to absorb other worlds, Frei and Lindbeck do not approach Jesus, the

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[82] John Milbank makes a similar critique when he writes that "a narrative that is falsely presented as a paradigm is seen as over and done with, and easy to interpret. . . . He [Lindbeck] thereby converts metanarrative realism into a new narratological foundationalism and fails to arrive at a postmodern theology" (Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 385).

[83] Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 60. Hütter remarks further that Lindbeck's descriptive model has "an emphatically static, and thus unhistoric, formal character, something evident not least in its failure to associate theology *theologically* with its pathic and poietic elements," 64.

hermeneutical key to all of Scripture, as an absorbing character but rather as a spectacle to behold extrinsically.

In the introductory chapter of *The Identity of Jesus Christ* Frei indicates that the book is concerned with two primary issues: the "presence and the identity of Jesus."[84] Specifically, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* is focused on clarifying the order within which Christians come to experience the presence and the identity of Jesus. In Frei's estimation, "talk about Christ's identity and presence should be in that order, rather than the reverse:" identity must precede presence.[85]

By "identity," Frei means the "specific uniqueness of a person, what really counts about him. . . . A person's identity is the total of all his physical and personality characteristics" and implies an "unbroken relationship between the past and present experience of the same self."[86] In other words, a person's identity can be comprehended by others only as his or her actions and intentions are illuminated through the passage of time.

As mentioned above, Frei and Lindbeck both argue that the identity of Jesus is made known through the plain sense of the biblical narrative, whose meaning is "directly accessible" to the reader. According to Frei, this narratively rendered identity provides the hermeneutical basis for dogmatic theology, since it is only proper to talk about what

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[84] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 1.

[85] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 5. Notably, Frei makes this point in contrast to the existentialist perspective represented by figures like Bultmann who tend to reduce Christ to the Christian's inner experience.

[86] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 37-38.

Jesus does (presence) if we know who Jesus is (identity). Ronald Thiemann, one of

Frei's former students at Yale, suggests that

> A doctrine of revelation is an account of God's identifiability. That definition locates the doctrine within the reflection on God's identity, i.e. within the doctrine of God, rather than in prolegomena or methodological reflection. The Christian claim to revelation asserts that God is identifiable 1) within the narrative of Yahweh who raised Jesus from the dead, 2) through the narrative as the God of promise who in addressing his promise to the reader is recognized as *pro nobis* and *extra nos*, and 3) beyond the narrative as the one who, faithful to his promises, will fulfill his pledge to those whom he loves.[87]

For Thiemann, as for Frei and Lindbeck, the revelation of God's identity through the

biblical narrative is a prerequisite for theological reflection, since theology is a

descriptive activity.

Theologians have offered two primary criticisms of the "Yale-school" regarding

the identity of Jesus. First, it seems that Frei, Lindbeck, and others are simply mistaken

about the ability and intent of the gospel stories to render the identity of Jesus.

According to John Milbank, the first mistake made by narrative theologians is to claim

that the gospels identify Jesus in the way that a character would be identified in a novel.

Milbank suggests that "the gospels are not 'history-like narratives' (in the sense of a

predominance of 'literal reference' over allegory in the identification of event and

character), nor do they in any way approximate to the 'realism' which is an element in

some eighteenth-and nineteenth-century novels." The gospel portrayal of Jesus is

nothing like the literary portrayal of a character that would be found in a novel, since "we

are told nothing about his tastes, quirks and inclinations, nor (pace Frei) about his

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[87] Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 153.

'intentions' – Jesus speaks only of what he does and must do. During the course of the

gospel accounts he undergoes no psychological development."[88]

Indeed, the Jesus portrayed in the gospels remains a mysterious and elusive

figure, and the "identity" given him by the gospel writers "does not actually relate to his

'character,' but rather to his universal significance for which his particularity stands,

almost, as a mere cipher."[89] In other words, Milbank thinks that the gospels tell us

almost nothing about the particular personality of the man Jesus. Rather, he argues, they

focus narrowly on his significance in relation to the law and the prophets and on his

relationship to God and humanity in general. The Jesus of the gospels, it seems, almost

completely lacks the kind of personal identity that a novelist would strive to create for a

central character.[90]

The second criticism of the Yale-school's focus on the identity of Jesus is that it is

soteriologically weak. Reinhard Hütter, commenting on the fact that intratextual

theology claims to be a descriptive exercise, suggests that it "loses its unique

soteriological center; soteriology slips off into form."[91] Milbank clarifies the issue

somewhat when he asks:

> What difference does the mere *fact* – however astounding – of God's identifying
> with us through incarnation make to our lives, or even to our pictures of what God
> is like, what he wants for us? How can mere belief in the event of atonement be

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[88] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 149.

[89] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 149.

[90] For more on the non-identifiability of Jesus in the gospels, see Graham Ward, "Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 163-181.

[91] Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 63-64.

uniquely transformative for the individual? To collapse both objections into a single more positive question: how can incarnation and atonement be communicated to us *not* as mere facts, but as characterizable modes of being which *intrinsically* demand these appellations?[92]

With Frei clearly in mind, Milbank is suggesting that, even if the gospels did offer a clear identity description of Jesus (though he claims that they do not and are not meant to), this extrinsic identity description would have no saving power. For Hütter and Milbank, salvation involves participation in the economic Trinity. Accordingly, any discussion of who Jesus is or what Jesus does must focus on the way that he opens up and enables a new "mode of being" in reconciled relationship with God.

It is not enough to suggest that we can know Jesus as we might know a character in a story, extrinsically. Rather, Christians claim to be reconciled to God through incorporation into Christ's body. Thus, the knowledge or revelation of God in Christ implies, for the Christian, the gift of an insider's view of the Trinitarian economy. God's identification in Jesus can only be grasped meaningfully (soteriologically) through ontological participation in His body, the Church.

Radical Orthodoxy and the Search for a Participatory Hermeneutic

Since the narrative approach of Frei and Lindbeck fails to overcome the problem of extrinsicism, there remains, in theology, a need for a truly participatory biblical hermeneutic. Moreover, this hermeneutic will necessarily move beyond mere theological description and into the realm of Church practice if it claims to be situated in a space interior to the Trinitarian economy. In *The Word Made Strange* (1997) John Milbank outlines a biblical hermeneutic that, he thinks, fills this need. The key to Milbank's

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[92] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 148.

argument is that reality itself is fundamentally linguistic. Language is "constitutive" of

reality, and this, for Milbank, has important implications for Christology and

hermeneutics.[93]

Milbank on the Identity of Jesus

After critiquing Frei's treatment of the identity of Jesus, Milbank endeavors, in

The Word Made Strange to offer a new interpretation of the gospel portrait of Jesus that

is participatory and soteriologically potent. As mentioned previously, Milbank and

others argue that the gospels do not offer a clear identity description of Jesus in the way

that Frei and Lindbeck suggest. Importantly, Milbank believes that this is a good thing

and that the gospels were never intended to identify Jesus precisely. He suggests that

when (as in John) the gospels do actually focus on Jesus' identity, they

> Abandon mimetic/digetic narrative, and resort to metaphors: Jesus is the way, the
> word, the truth, life, water, bread, the seed of a tree and the fully grown tree, the
> foundation stone of a new temple and at the same time the whole edifice. These
> metaphors abandon the temporal and horizontal for the spatial and vertical. They
> suggest that Jesus is the most comprehensive possible context: not just the space
> within which all transactions between time and eternity transpire, but also the
> beginning of all this space, the culmination of space, the growth of space and all the
> goings in and out within this space. Supremely, he is both word and food: the
> communicated meanings which emanate from our mouths and yet in this outgoing
> simultaneously return to them as spiritual nurture.[94]

According to Milbank, the gospels portray Jesus in a way that allows him to be

interpreted not merely as a specific person but rather as the total context within which all

of our lives take place. In other words, the gospels portray Jesus as a figure who is both

immanent and transcendent. The gospels, according to Milbank, must "evacuate the

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[93] Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, "The Word Made Speculative? John
Milbank's Christological Poetics," *Modern Theology* 15 (1999): 418.

[94] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 149-150.

person [Jesus] of any specifiable content," since only in this way is He capable of absorbing the world.[95] The gospel portrayal is, in Milbank's view, soteriologically potent since Jesus is narrated, not as a character in a novel, but as the founder of a new language and a new practice. We should read the gospels "not as the story of Jesus, but as the story of the (re)foundation of a new city, a new kind of human community, Israel-become-the-Church."[96]

Jesus functions for Milbank "as primarily the 'founder' of a practice/state of being which is fully transferable to others."[97] He suggests that the gospels outline "the general norms of that practice" and thus enable the Church to move "from one kind of discourse to another"[98] – that is, from a secular discourse of violence and power to a Christianized discourse structured by "Jesus' utter refusal of selfish power."[99] Although he admits that "there is a certain specific 'flavour' of personality binding the various incidents and metaphors" identifying Jesus, these incidents and metaphors are "formal statements about, and general instructions for, every human life. In consequence, the 'shape' of Jesus' life, his 'personhood' or 'personality', can only be finally specified as the entire

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[95] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 150.

[96] "The high Christologies of Colossians, the Epistles to the Corinthians and the Epistle to the Hebrews are strikingly yoked to the notion that Jesus is but the foundation of the building and the first of many sons: the *archegon*, or pioneer of salvation, such that 'he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin' (Hebrews 2:10-11; Col. 1:15-29; 2 Cor. 3:9-11; 11:1; 2 Cor. 1:3-7; 4:10-11; 5:13-14, 21; 11:7)" (Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 151).

[97] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 157.

[98] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 149.

[99] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 153.

content and process of every human life, in so far as it is genuinely human life, according to the formal specifications of the gospel narratives and metaphors."[100]

Because Jesus has founded a new language and a new practice of nonviolence and charity, salvation has become a possibility, and it is up to the Church, through a "non-identical repetition" of Jesus' universal identity, to enact a "structured transformation" of the world.[101] Russell Reno suggests that, for Milbank, "the absence of a savior in the text creates the need for us to construct a savior in and through our own interpretive practice."[102] However, it would be more accurate to say that, for Milbank, the salvific language patterns and practices formalized in the text by the ambiguous character, Jesus, *enable* the church's ongoing characterization of the savior through its own interpretive practice." Interestingly, Milbank claims that he is advancing a "high Christology," since the human Jesus has been "evacuated" of all but a proper name, thus leaving only God.[103] This contention is built upon his assertion that the primary narrative of the human Jesus

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[100] Milbank suggests that his approach to Christology, "from the context of ecclesiology actually allows a full retrieval of the Chalcedonian position" which affirms that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine (Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 156). I will argue below, however, that, in the end, Milbank's approach doesn't do justice to the "fully human" side of the Chalcedonian equation.

[101] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 152.

[102] Russell Reno, "The Radical Orthodoxy Project," *First Things* 100 (2000): 40.

[103] "And yet, the effect of implying that a person situated within the world is also, in himself (like God) our total situation, or that which is always transcendentally presupposed, is to evacuate that person of any particular , specifiable content. It is to ensure that Jesus who is in all places, because he is in all places, never in fact appears. Thus, for reasons belonging to the logic of discourse, it is indeed true that incarnation cannot be by the absorbing of divinity into humanity, but only by the assumption of humanity into divinity" (Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 150).

has been absorbed into the metanarrative of God's redemption, which encompasses all of Scripture from creation to consummation.[104]

Radical Orthodoxy's Pursuit of a Christianised Ontology

Milbank argues that it is better to approach Christology through ecclesiology, since in its ongoing engagement with the world, the Church re-narrates and re-realizes Christ and this "must be God himself."[105] This process of "re-narration" is, in Milbank's view, a kind of ontological extension through which the world is made to participate in the life of God.[106] How exactly is this "re-narration" to take place? At this point, Milbank's project becomes complicated. One might expect him to turn with enthusiasm towards a more participatory approach to biblical hermeneutics, but this is not the case. Rather, Milbank's next major project following *The Word Made Strange* (1997) is a collaborative effort entitled, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (1999).

What is perhaps most remarkable about *Radical Orthodoxy* is that it represents an attempt to move beyond prolegomena and into a direct engagement with the secular world. Milbank and his co-editors, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, explain that their interest is in "recovering and extending a fully Christianized ontology and practical philosophy consonant with authentic Christian doctrine."[107] In other words, *Radical*

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[104] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 146.

[105] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 156-157. Cf. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 386-387.

[106] Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 2-3.

[107] Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 2. One might ask what exactly the editors of *Radical Orthodoxy* mean when they use the phrase, "fully Christianized ontology." Specifically, how exactly are the essays contained in the *Radical Orthodoxy* book capable of "extending a fully Christianized ontology?" It seems

Orthodoxy is the beginning of an attempted "re-narration," through which the world

outside of the metanarrative can be made to participate in the life of God as Jesus Christ

is "re-realized" in long-abandoned places:

> 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 guises). Participation, however, refuses any reserve of created territory, while allowing finite things their own integrity…. Every discipline must be framed by a theological perspective; otherwise these disciplines will define a zone apart from God, grounded literally in nothing.[108]

For the editors of *Radical Orthodoxy*, the process of re-narrating and re-realizing Christ,

which is also the process of "recovering and extending a fully Christianized ontology,"

involves framing the various disciplines within a theological perspective.[109] In his

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that Milbank and the others believe that when they combat secular social theories of economics, art, the body, friendship, etc., and expose the nihilism upon which those theories are grounded, they have opened a space within which the Church can offer a renarration of Christ. This renarration, we are led to believe, entails ontological participation in a space once uninhabited by the church – thus the extension of a "fully Christianized ontology." I will argue below that the proponents of radical orthodoxy fail to explain how exactly the theological speculation contained in their works actually enables the Church to inhabit these long-abandoned places.

[108] Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 3.

[109] I do not mean to imply here that Milbank's earlier works provide the only foundational influences for the Radical Orthodoxy project. Clearly, Ward, Pickstock, and the other contributors to the project have been influenced by a great many thinkers. However, insofar as Milbank is a co-author of the introductory essay of the initial volume, I can assume that, at least for Milbank's part, the project is consistent with and builds upon his earlier works. I should also mention here that Milbank, Ward, and Pickstock dispute the idea that Radical Orthodoxy constitutes a theological "movement" or "school of thought." Pickstock, for example describes it as a "loose tendency." See Catherine Pickstock, "Reply to David Ford and Guy Collins," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001). Ward describes Radical Orthodoxy as a "theological sensibility." He also mentions that "participation" is one of the "more fundamental" themes of Radical Orthodoxy and that it has been the motivating influence on his "continuing engagement with analogy and allegory; Catherine Pickstock's continuing engagement with Plato; John Milbank's long engagement with the ontologies of Nyssa, Augustine, and Aquinas, and the more general interest in metaphysics." See Graham Ward, "In the Economy of

Theology and Social Theory (1991), Milbank argued that modern social thought

presupposes overwhelmingly an ontology of violence. From the nominalists of the

thirteenth century and passing through figures like Kant, Malebranche, Machiavelli,

Hegel, Marx, and modern liberation theologians, social theorists have assumed that the

maintenance of society depends upon the use of power and violence.

This ontology of violence, which has its own ethics and its own interpretation of

history, is, in Milbank's view, the fabric that holds the secular social and political world

together. In order to engage and overcome the secular, therefore, Milbank argues that

Christians must offer a "counter-history," a "counter-ethics" and a "counter-ontology"[110]

in order to expose the nihilistic ontology under girding modern social theory as

mythological and offer the Christian alternative of an ontology of "harmonic peace" in its

place.[111]

It seems obvious that, at least for Milbank's part, the radical orthodoxy project,

with its emphasis on a participatory ontology, is a continuation of the "strategy" proposed

in *Theology and Social Theory*.[112] Indeed, this ontology is the main thrust of the radical

orthodoxy project, and the initial volume in the Routledge series contains essays on

topics as diverse as desire, language, friendship, music, the city, and knowledge. This

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the Divine: A Response to James K. A. Smith," *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 25 (2003): 118. My own engagement with Radical Orthodoxy will focus primarily on the editors' shared interest in participation.

[110] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 381.

[111] "Christianity. . . recognizes no original violence. It construes the infinite not as chaos, but as harmonic peace which is yet beyond the circumscribing power of any totalizing reason," Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 5.

[112] Milbank refers to his proposed "counter-ontology" as a "strategy," Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 279.

strategy of offering a counter-ontology has continued as the contributors to the original volume, along with others, have published books and articles providing a theological perspective on issues where "secularism has invested heavily – aesthetics, politics, sex, the body, personhood, visibility, space," economics, and more.[113]

For Milbank and Ward, it is the vagueness and openness of the scriptural identity of God in Jesus that enables the church to identify itself with Christ as it engages in the "speculative task of ontology and theology."[114] This "speculation" has so far consisted of an ambitious scholarly effort to expose the nihilism inherent in all disciplines not framed theologically. The movement, radical orthodoxy, "refuses any reserve of created territory" to secular thought; so sex, science, art, music, friendship, and all other dimensions of human existence can and should be exposed for their nihilism when conceived autonomously and then brought under the umbrella of a Christian ontology.[115]

When Milbank and the others claim that theologians can recover and extend a "fully Christianised ontology" by exposing secularism's nihilism, they are assuming a reciprocal relationship between theory and practice. They are assuming, in other words, that a Christianized ontology theoretically conceived can free the Church to inhabit (liturgically) those regions where secularism once reigned. James Smith defends radical orthodoxy's theoretical bent by suggesting that while a modern materialist ontology would potentially inhibit the Church's imagination and practices, "RO's participatory ontology undoes the ontological atomism of ontologies of immanence; as such it also

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[113] Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 1.

[114] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 385. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 145-168. Ward, "Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ," 163-181.

[115] Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 3.

counters the social atomism of secular modernity by generating an alternative account of sociality rooted in participation."[116]

Milbank is unapologetic in his insistence that the church needs a "social theory" to combat secularism, but he insists that "there can only be a distinguishable Christian social theory because there is also a distinguishable Christian mode of action, a definite practice. The theory explicates this practice."[117] Graham Ward offers a more complete account of Radical Orthodoxy's relationship to ecclesial practice when he writes that

> Christians are called upon, by Christ in the Gospel of Matthew most directly, to read the signs of the times. The Church is situated in an eschatological and soteriological management of time, established in its teachings on the Trinity and the relationship of the Triune God to Creation. Reading the signs of the times *is* the Church's participation in that management; Christians live in Christ and live pneumatologically through the practices of encountering, negotiating and interpreting the world around them. Those Christic and Pneumatic practices of everyday life are part of the in-gathering of all things into the Godhead. They draw creation's attention, not only to its radical contingency, but also, in and through that contingency, to its giftedness and its maintenance in grace.[118]

In other words, the proponents of radical orthodoxy consider their speculative/theoretical work a participatory endeavor, and they acknowledge that their work must accompany a true Christian "mode of action, a definite practice."[119]

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[116] James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 232.

[117] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 380.

[118] Graham Ward, "Radical Orthodoxy and/as Cultural Politics," in *Radical Orthodoxy? - a Catholic Enquiry*, ed. Laurence Paul Hemming, Heythrop Studies in Contemporary Philosophy, Religion, & Theology (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 103.

[119] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 380.

For and Against Radical Orthodoxy

When *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* was first published, it received

considerable attention from within the academy and even some mention in popular

magazines.[120] While the project has received its fair share of scholarly criticism, many of

the responses have been generally appreciative. According to Milbank, although the

contributors to the original volume were primarily Anglican (in addition to a few

Catholics), the project has found "many surprising sympathizers amongst Baptists,

Methodists, Mennonites, Nazarenes, and others."[121] Radical Orthodoxy's success in

garnering attention is likely due to the fact that its proponents have drawn together

several themes of considerable contemporary interest, uniting them in a coherent and

constructive project.[122]

Among the themes united in the radical orthodoxy project are an unrelenting

critique of modernity and secular autonomy, an emphasis on the cultural and linguistic

contextualization of all knowledge, an energetic engagement with Christianity's great

tradition (Augustine and Aquinas especially), an ecumenical spirit, and a commitment to

remain both catholic and evangelical. With these foci in view, it is easy to see why

radical orthodoxy has wide appeal, and I count myself among its sympathizers.

However, to sympathize with a project such as this is to hope that it has a future and that

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[120] Attention from sources outside of academia have included David van Biema, "God as a Postmodern: Radical Orthodoxy," *Time*, December 17, 2001. Jay Tolson, "Academia's Getting Its Religion Back," *U.S. News and World Report*, August 28, 2000. For a comprehensive scholarly bibliography, see Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 263-277.

[121] Milbank, "The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy," 36.

[122] The Radical Orthodoxy project has of course been advanced by the fact that Routledge Press has published a series of recent books under its name.

there is thus more work to be done. In the following pages I will discuss several fairly

fundamental issues where clarifications and/or modifications are needed.

Does a Counter-Ontology Atone? One of the most common criticisms of the

radical orthodoxy project has been that it exaggerates the role of theological speculation

in influencing Christian practice. As mentioned above, radical orthodoxy aims to

undermine secular ontologies of violence and offer in their place a Christian ontology of

harmonic peace. This counter-ontology will, in Milbank's view, have the effect of

freeing the church to "embody" those regions of culture where secularism formerly

reigned:

> In elaborating the metanarrative of a counter-historical interruption of history, one
> elaborates also a distinctive practice, a counter-ethics, embodying a social
> ontology, an account of duty and virtue, and an ineffable element of aesthetic
> 'idiom', which cannot be fully dealt with in the style of theoretical theology.
> However, the developing idiom is also an allegorical representation of an idea, a
> speculation, which practice itself both promotes and presupposes as 'setting."[123]

In suggesting that the "idea" is promoted and presupposed as the "setting" for Christian

practice, Milbank reveals his platonic disposition and sheds light on the logic of the

radical orthodoxy project. Christian practice needs an ideal to serve as its telos; radical

orthodoxy aims to supply it.

Although speculation can be and always has been an important part of Christian

practice (and a participatory practice at that), it seems that Milbank has overstated

drastically the soteriological function of theological speculation. Frederick Bauerschmidt

suggests that, with regard to Milbank's Trinitarian ontology,

> We have a case here of the philosophical tail wagging the theological dog. . . .
> While Milbank posits an oscillation between the 'formally distinguished moments'

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[123] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 422-423.

of narrative and of speculative conceptualization . . ., it is the former that usually seems to receive short shrift. . . one must at least note that at times Milbank's commitments to certain philosophical positions regarding language push him in directions that seem to run counter to the stories and practices of the church.[124]

Interestingly, Milbank offers a justification for his theoretical and speculative disposition in the introduction to *The Word Made Strange*. It will be instructive to quote him at length here:

> Today, theology is tragically too important. For all the current talk of a theology that would reflect on practice, the truth is that we remain uncertain as to where today to locate true Christian practice. . . . The theologian feels almost that the entire ecclesial task falls on his own head: in the meagre mode of reflective words he must seek to imagine what a true practical repetition would be like. Or at least he must hope that his merely theoretical continuation of the tradition will open up a space for wider transformation. In the past, practice already 'made strange', already felt again the authentic shock of divine word by performing it anew, with variation. The theologian could articulate this and add her own further twists that might contribute to renewed vision. Yet today it can feel as if it is the theologian alone . . . who must perform this task of redeeming estrangement; the theologian alone who must perpetuate that original making strange which has the divine assumption of human flesh. . . . No: the only chance lies in the composing of a new theoretical music.[125]

The preceding statements should arouse empathy from those who, like Milbank, long for a church community where the Word of God dwells in recognizable, habitual, and consequential practices. However, these statemetns should also be a bit alarming for those who worship (or have worshiped) in churches "where true Christian practice" does indeed take place – making ontological inroads even in those spaces where secular social theorists claim sovereignty. Perhaps Milbank's confession should be interpreted as an indictment of the communities within which he worships, but surely he is wrong if he

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[124] Bauerschmidt, "The Word Made Speculative?," 429.

[125] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 1.

means to suggest that we now live in an age where "true Christian practice" cannot be found.

Despite Milbank's claim that speculation *presupposes* Christian practice, the more familiar one becomes with radical orthodoxy in its current state, the more one gets the impression that Christian practice is in bondage without theological speculation in the style of radical orthodoxy.[126] However, Milbank and the others have failed to explain how, exactly, the church is to go about embodying the space supposedly opened up through the work of speculative theology. Although the many books and essays published in the Radical Orthodoxy series are excellent in their own right, it is hard to see how they achieve anything more than a deconstruction of secular social theory. How, for example, might D. Stephen Long's excellent work entitled the *Divine Economy*[127] actually enable the church to instantiate new economic practices and thus extend a Christianized ontology? In other words, if Long's work has opened up a space, how exactly does the Church go about inhabiting this space? How can Long's work on economic theory lead to anything more than the kind of lament expressed by Milbank in the introduction to *The Word Made Strange*? What I am suggesting is that Milbank's speculative ontology is incapable of providing the kind of linguistic, christological mediation of Christian practice that he desires.

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[126] In the following chapter I will argue that, for de Lubac, the "idea" is promoted or produced through the "practice" of spiritual exegesis. It seems to me that Milbank, at least, has neglected this fundamental step in his efforts to construct a speculative ontology intended to offer a "setting" for Christian practice.

[127] D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000).

It is interesting that radical orthodoxy has thus far paid little attention to the ways in which Christian spiritual exegesis can and does, in fact, enable the church to inhabit new spaces by generating the "idea" (aesthetic idiom) that serves as a setting for the church's ongoing embodiment. In failing to do so, Milbank and the others seem to endorse a kind of dualism where the speculative idea necessarily presupposes and somehow enables the practice and the embodiment.[128] In order to overcome this impression, the proponents of radical orthodoxy need to focus more attention on the role played by the Word and the sacraments in generating the conceptual setting (social ontology) that the church embodies.

Rowan William's approach, which views Christian social engagement as an "improvisation" within the biblical Drama, could be helpful here. What radical orthodoxy lacks thus far is an entry point for Christian practice. Radical orthodoxy deconstructs secular social theory but makes no concrete suggestions as to how Christians are to inhabit the space created by the deconstruction. Williams, in contrast to Milbank, casts the problem in terms of identity transformation. Modern people live in a radically secular world and derive their identities from this world. However, the biblical drama offers an an invitation to identity transformation, or to use Milbank's terminology, a new "mode of being." Williams suggests that when persons encounter Jesus through the biblical drama, they find themselves in an "event of judgement" where they are given

> roles to adopt, points on which to stand and speak. They are invited to create themselves in finding a place within this drama – an improvisation in the theatre workshop, but one that purports to be about a comprehensive truth affecting one's identity and future. . . . The scope of Jesus' work is the world – so, we must

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[128] For a similar critique, see Bernd Wannenwetsch, "The Political Worship of the Church: A Critical and Empowering Practice," *Modern Theology* 12 (1996): 274-275.

assume, the declaration of a newly discovered identity in encounter with Jesus represents a change for at least some.[129]

For Williams, the biblical drama (and particularly the gospels) necessarily mediates the christological "mode of being" or "the space" that individuals and the community as a whole embody. There is thus, for Williams, no thought of an "ontological extension" without the christological mediation of Scripture. Radical orthodoxy will do well to attend more closely to the constitutive role of scripture in the church's engagement with the world.

Is the Word made Speculative? The recommendation above may be difficult to accomplish, however, unless Milbank is willing to reconsider his approach to Christology. As mentioned previously, Milbank finds Frei's stress on the identity of Jesus problematic. He suggests that a narratively rendered identity description of Jesus is simply non-existent in the text, and even if it were there, it would lack the ability to effect a transformation in readers. Rather than identify Jesus as a distinctive character, Milbank suggests that the gospels "evacuate the person Jesus of any specifiable content" and at the same time portray him as the founder of a new language and a new practice. The gospels, we are told, should be read "not as the story of Jesus but as the story of the (re)foundation of a new city, a new kind of human community, Israel-become-the-Church."[130]

There are several problems with Milbank's proposal. First, although he claims to offer a "high Christology" in arguing that Jesus' human identity (the primary narrative)

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[129] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 32.

[130] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 150.

has been absorbed into his divine identity (the metanarrative of the incarnate Logos), he

has really offered a docetic, or at least a monophysite Christology. Indeed, this is

Bauerschmidt's impression as well. He suggests that Milbank's position "certainly is a

high Christology, but Christological error moves in both directions. Therefore we must

ask whether Milbank's Christological position amounts to, if not docetism, at least a

'monophysite' absorption of Christ's humanity into his divinity."[131] Milbank argues that

"for reasons belonging to the logic of discourse, it is indeed true that incarnation cannot

be by the absorbing of divinity into humanity, but only by the assumption of humanity

into divinity."

While it is perhaps objectionable to claim that Jesus' human identity is absorbed

into his divine identity, in Milbank's proposal, Jesus' human identity is not just absorbed,

it is "evacuated." He is explicit on this point when he says that "all that survives that is

particular in this assumption is the proper name 'Jesus.'"[132] I would argue that if the

human Jesus must be evacuated of all content except a proper name, then we have

effectively obliterated the doctrine of the incarnation. Milbank seems to suggest that

Jesus cannot be the incarnate Logos and a human being with a distinctive personality at

the same time. Bauerschmidt makes the same point when he writes,

> Milbank simply fails to make his case that Jesus is not the ascriptive subject (to use
> Frei's term) of the gospel narratives, and his attempt to shift the subject matter of
> the gospels away from Jesus and on to the church burdens the church with a load it
> cannot bear. It is true that Jesus is not a 'character' in the sense one finds in a

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[131] Bauerschmidt, "The Word Made Speculative?," 425. Monophysitism was a Christological heresy, that emerged in the fifth century and claimed that Christ had only one nature, the divine. For a book length treatment of the issue see, W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement; Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

[132] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 150.

nineteenth-century novel, and it is also true that the story of Jesus exceeds the boundaries of his human life by virtue of the resurrection. But this does not mean that the story does not remain in some determinative sense the story of Jesus. . . . It is not so much that Milbank is wrong when he claims that the gospels enshrine an 'event of transformation' that is the genesis of the church; rather, he poses a false alternative when he says that one may read the gospels either as the story of Jesus or as the foundation of the pilgrim city.[133]

It seems that Milbank's Christology lies at the heart of radical orthodoxy's nearly exclusive focus on speculative ontology.[134] Indeed, we can see in Milbank's suggestion that Jesus is "situated within the world" and "also, in himself (like God) our total situation," a connection to his earlier remarks in *Theology and Social Theory* regarding the "idea" or "aesthetic idiom" that provides the "setting" within which Church practices take place. Because Jesus' human identity is "evacuated of content" the church is able to "go on re-narrating and re-realizing Christ," and it does this through the "strategy" of producing a "counter-ontology" prescribed in *Theology and Social Theory* and enacted beginning with the initial volume of *Radical Orthodoxy*.

In other words, Milbank, perhaps unintentionally, seems to equate the incarnate Logos of the metanarrative with the "idea" or the "aesthetic idiom" produced by theological speculation. But we should ask, returning to our previous example, how has Christ been "re-narrated" and "re-realized" in D. Stephen Long's *Divine Economy* – (Long, to be fair, does not profess that he does so) – or in any of the books or essays that comprise the radical orthodoxy series? How does radical orthodoxy's *Kulturkritik* mediate a new "mode of being" that accounts for a true ontological extension? I suggest

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[133] Bauerschmidt, "The Word Made Speculative?," 426-427.

[134] Although Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock may dispute this claim, it should be expected, given the popularity of Milbank's work, that such an interpretation would be commonplace. Moreover, it is reasonable to suggest that, at least for Milbank, the radical orthodoxy project is consistent with his earlier "strategy."

that, if we must approach Christology through ecclesiology as Milbank recommends,

then radical orthodoxy is rendered incompetent in its pursuit of a new mode of being.

There are several reasons why Milbank's Christology will eventually fail. First,

in subsuming Christology under ecclesiology, he has rendered Jesus incapable of

judgment (theoretically speaking). Milbank argues that "the only thing which will really

remove us from extrinsicism is the primacy of ecclesiology."[135] Milbank wants to avoid

a Christology that will focus on an extrinsic identity description because such a

description is soteriologically weak. Milbank believes that salvation entails ontological

"participation" in the life of the Trinity, and a Christology that enables us only to gaze

upon Jesus as though he were a spectacle to behold fails to enter the realm of

participation. However, Milbank fails to consider the fact that participation in Christ

(which begins with baptism) is always preceded by repentance. We encounter Jesus,

first, as wholly (and Holy) other. Before the Jesus who is narrated in the gospels we

stand judged. We are then invited to be baptized and to become participants in Christ's

body.[136]

Moreover, because the church on earth exists in this time between the times, its

participation in Christ will remain a story of continual repentance and baptismal

immersion. Perhaps this is what Bauerschmidt means when he writes that to "shift the

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[135] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 165.

[136] Frei discusses the importance of recognizing the *difference* between Jesus and his followers. He suggests that "The particular story of Jesus, then, is pre-empted by him and him alone. Only those refractions of it will be credible and concrete that do not seek to reiterate it completely but only in part, not from too close by but at a distance, in the figure of a disciple rather than in the cosmic, miraculous, and abysmal destiny of the original" [Hans Frei, "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," in *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. Hans W. Frei, George Hunsinger, and William C. Placher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 56].

subject matter of the gospels away from Jesus and on to the church burdens the church

with a load it cannot bear." Indeed, the church stands always under the judgement of

Jesus, finding itself forgiven, redeemed, and transformed into the body of Christ through

its continuing acts of repentance, confession, and worship.[137]

In order to avoid making the church responsible for bearing the load that only

Jesus is meant to bear, radical orthodoxy theologians should, as mentioned above, focus

more attention on the constitutive role of the Word and the sacraments in mediating the

church's participation in the life of the Trinity and engagement with the world.

Milbank's proposal that Christology should be subsumed under ecclesiology must be

rejected. In its place, a Christology capable of reading the gospels as the story of Jesus

(judge and redeemer), and simultaneously as the founder of a new universal language and

practice, should be affirmed so that the church's ontological participation in the life of the

Trinity will be continually mediated through *this* Person and the texts that tell His story.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, de Lubac hoped that his work on

the history of ancient exegesis would inspire, not a return to the four-fold interpretive

method, but a new synthesis between biblical interpretation, dogmatic theology, and

Christian spirituality capable of guiding the Church in a more robust and faithful

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[137] John David Dawson, following Hans Frei, suggests that Christians should embrace and preserve the particularity and difference of Jesus' identity in relation to their own. "There is no 'sharing of identity,'" he suggests, "that could lay the groundwork for supersession; there is instead an 'identifying with' that never dissolves into a 'common identity.' Human beings are invited to 'identify with' one who, in his own unique identity, has chosen to 'identify with' them. The very possibility of the action of 'identifying with' presupposes the unsubstitutable and non interchangeable identities of the agents" [John David Dawson, "Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Christian Identity in Boyarin, Auerbach and Frei," *Modern Theology* 14 (1998): 193].

engagement with secular culture. Unfortunately, his hopes have not yet been fully

realized, since the majority of biblical scholars view the allegorical method as

characteristic of a pre-scientific age and incapable of offering guidance in these more

enlightened times.

Yet, the efforts of narrative theologians such as Hans Frei and George Lindbeck

have been highly influential in theology and in biblical studies, providing at least some of

the inspiration for a host of new exegetical methods that attempt to avoid the twin

problems that de Lubac referred to as historicism and extrinsicism. Indeed, these new

interpretive methods represent a healthy new respect for the literal sense of Scripture that

Frei hoped to see restored to a place of prominence.

The narrative approach associated with the Yale school has its limitations

however, and these limitations also apply, in large part, to contemporary biblical

scholarship. Namely, narrative theologians have failed to offer an adequate account of

the relationship between Scripture and the Church's theological practice. Frei and

Lindbeck both consider theology a descriptive discipline, and they view Scripture as an

enclosed semiotic system that can be studied as an ethnologist might study a foreign

culture. This account of the relationship between theology and Scripture falls short of a

participatory hermeneutic, and this is problematic for a variety of philosophical and

theological reasons.

John Milbank argues that a more philosophically sound hermeneutic can be found

by reconsidering the "identity of Jesus." Rather than portray him as a character in a

nineteenth century novel, Milbank argues that the gospels portray him as the founder of a

new language and a new practice and that these provide the "situation" within which the

Church participates ontologically. However, Milbank's "strategy" for "extending a fully Christianised ontology" is built upon a potentially docetic Christology that "evacuates" Jesus' humanity, leaving only a proper name. Moreover, the process of "extending a fully Christianised ontology," so far enacted by radical orthodoxy theologians, has not been mediated by biblical interpretation. The ironic result is that, when viewed as an extension of Milbank's earlier work, radical orthodoxy offers a strategy for engaging and transforming culture that is dualistic and ahistorical. Scripture does not absorb the world for radical orthodoxy theologians. Rather, the "aesthetic idiom" generated by speculative theologians absorbs the church.

In the following chapter I will argue that de Lubac's intended synthesis is capable of capitalizing on the achievements of postliberalism while also providing a more Christologically orthodox biblical hermeneutic to under gird the very important cultural critique of radical orthodoxy theologians. In short, I will argue that de Lubac's work on spiritual exegesis can advance the work of Frei and Lindbeck while providing an important missing element in Milbank's theological program.[1]

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[1] In a critical review of the original volume, David Ford remarked that "the editor's Introduction promises, as an alternative to the 'ploddingly exegetical' approach of Barthianism, a collage of 'exegesis, cultural reflection and philosophy' which, at least as regards scriptural exegesis, is not fulfilled. The absence of reference to the Old Testament is especially striking. 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" (Ford, "Radical Orthodoxy and the Future of British Theology," 398). In response to Ford's remarks, Catherine Pickstock promised that "all the editors intend that this should be remedied in the future, and welcome contributions along these lines" (Pickstock, "Reply to David Ford and Guy Collins," 411). My argument here is that, in order to remedy this problem, radical orthodoxy will either need to state explicitly that it's efforts in "extending a fully Christianised ontology" are not logically continuous with Milbank's earlier works, or Milbank will need to revisit several important matters discussed here.

CHAPTER FIVE

Spiritual Exegesis as Christological Poesis

Introduction

John Milbank has recently published a provocative essay in which he suggests

that de Lubac's struggles with the Roman Catholic hierarchy in the years before Vatican

II "traumatized" him to such an extent that he lost focus and failed to bring his

revolutionary theological program to its logical completion.[1] He cites as evidence the

well known fact that de Lubac never completed his "theological-historical-mystical

treatise on Christ" which was to be his most important work.[2] De Lubac himself

admitted that he lacked the "physical, intellectual, and spiritual strength" needed to

complete this work. Milbank infers from this confession that the papal encyclical,

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[1] John Milbank, "Henri de Lubac," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, ed. David Ford and Rachel Muers (Malden, MA: Blackwell 2005), 79.

[2] Milbank, "Henri de Lubac," 79. The following words were written in nineteen fifty-six and cited later in his collected memoirs: "I truly believe that for a rather long time the idea for my book on Mysticism has been my inspiration in everything; I form my judgments on the basis of it, it provides me with the means to classify my ideas in proportion to it. But I will not write this book. It is in all ways beyond my physical, intellectual, spiritual strength. I have a clear vision of how it is linked together, I can distinguish and more or less situate the problems that should be treated in it, in their nature and in their order, I see the precise direction in which the solution of each of them should be sought – but I am incapable of formulating that solution. This all is enough to allow me to rule out one by one the views that are not conformed to it, in the works I read or the theories I hear expressed, but all this does not take its final form, the only one that would allow it to exist. The center always eludes me. What I achieve on paper is only preliminary, banalities, peripheral discussions or scholarly details." Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 113.

Humani Generis and its implicit denunciation of de Lubac's thesis on nature and grace, caused severe distress and limited his scholarly production to histories of dogma that tended to obscure his true theological voice.[1] Milbank suggests that de Lubac's "increasing indirection reflected both a continuing trauma after 1950 [and *Humani Generis*], and a continued need for caution, even into his old age."[2]

There may have been other issues, however, that made it difficult for de Lubac to write in his own theological voice. Milbank admits that

> the *surnaturel* thesis deconstructs the possibility of dogmatic theology as previously understood in modern times, just as it equally deconstructs the possibility of philosophical theology or even of a clearly autonomous philosophy *tout court*. . . . De Lubac elaborated a 'discourse of the supernatural' that was neither dogmatics nor philosophical theology – although he would have insisted that this was a restoration of an Augustinian 'Christian philosophy' or a Thomist *Sacra Doctrina*. This usually took the (only partially apparent) form of a historical theology. Such a form was inevitable in so far as a combination of event and sign in continuous process would seem to be the only possible ground that de Lubac's paradoxical discourse can occupy. De Lubac indeed declared that theology should be a mysticism and that mysticism was essentially a reading of signs.[3]

Still, Milbank thinks that de Lubac's theological work was unnecessarily confined to *ressourcement* projects and that this constitutes "a failure to proceed to a newly enhanced 'speculation' on the part of a thinker at once traumatized and forced to speak always with

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[1] De Lubac's "crucial views were . . . always expressed indirectly through historical interpretations" (Milbank, "Henri de Lubac," 79).

[2] Milbank, "Henri de Lubac," 80.

[3] Milbank, "Henri de Lubac," 80. De Lubac was quoting Jean Lacroix when he wrote that "The deepest thing in the spiritual history of mankind is the comprehension of the sign, and every great philosophy is a semeiology: the discovery of the world's cipher and the consequent ability to reveal its language is the object of man's basic desire. And mysticism is undoubtedly the meaning of signs before anything else" (Jean Lacroix, cited in Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 70-71).

caution."[4] Elsewhere, Milbank has claimed that his own theological project, with its

'speculative' ontological extension, is a deliberate advancement of de Lubac's *nouvelle*

théologie.[5] Milbank believes that there is continuity between de Lubac's theological

program and his own. Indeed, he believes that his project offers a genuine advancement

where de Lubac failed "to proceed to a newly enhanced speculation."

Milbank's claim that de Lubac's scholarly production was overly cautious due to

the trauma of *Humani Generis* makes good sense. Indeed, de Lubac lamented, well into

his old age, that his work was always focused on narrow historical themes when he might

have offered guidance to a confused age by stating his own positions more directly. He

writes:

> I am still haunted by the questions I have asked myself . . . concerning the choice
> of subjects approached in the course of my life, to the degree that these choices
> depended on me. Thinking of the pressing necessities of the present time, I feel
> some shame in having been able to offer to so many disoriented minds, as the
> final fruit of my work, only a study of Pico della Mirandola, whose usefulness no
> one would assert to be imperative. – But one cannot start our lives over again,
> and regrets are pointless.[6]

While it is fair to assume that de Lubac may have been overly cautious regarding

his choice of subjects, Milbank's contention that he failed "to proceed to a newly

enhanced speculation" is questionable, since there is no evidence to suggest that de Lubac

ever intended his work to culminate in a new speculative theology like the one that

Milbank has initiated in radical orthodoxy. Indeed, Milbank himself has acknowledged

that de Lubac's great ambition was to write a mystical treatise on Christ. De Lubac

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[4] Milbank, "Henri de Lubac," 80.

[5] Milbank, "The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy," 35-36. See also Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 2.

[6] Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 151.

regretted, not that he failed to proceeded to an enhanced speculative engagement with secularism in the style of radical orthodoxy, but that he never completed his mystical Christology, which was always at the center of his thought. He wrote in 1956 that "for a rather long time the idea for my book on Mysticism has been my inspiration in everything; I form my judgments on the basis of it, it provides me with the means to classify my ideas in proportion to it. But I will not write this book. It is in all ways beyond my physical, intellectual, spiritual strength."[7] This book on mysticism was to be his treatise on Christ, and the statement above suggests that his major works on ecclesiology, ontology, and exegesis were inspired and guided by his mystical-christological thought. Although he never completed this work, de Lubac did write an important essay on mysticism,[8] and this essay contains a number of insights into the christological assumptions that guide the major works mentioned above.

Ironically, whereas Milbank believes that his speculative ontology advances de Lubac's theological revolution, I will argue that de Lubac's mystical approach to Christology has the potential for correcting the problems in Milbank's work mentioned at the end of chapter four. Moreover, whereas Milbank contends that de Lubac's confinement to *ressourcement* projects prohibited him from bringing his revolution to completion, all of the necessary components of this revolution are implicit in the historical projects that de Lubac completed. Specifically, the fundamental elements of de

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[7] Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 113.

[8] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 35-70. The original, condensed version of this essay first appeared as the preface to a series of essays collected in the following work: S.J. Fr. André Ravier, ed., *La Mystique et Les Mystiques* (Paris, France: Desclée de Brouwer, 1965).

Lubac's mystical Christology can be extracted by examining his essay on mysticism in combination with his other major works and especially his work on spiritual exegesis.

Towards the end of chapter four, I outlined several areas where Milbank's project needs to be redirected. I suggested that Milbank would do well to reconsider his argument in favor of the "primacy of ecclesiology" over Christology and that he should attend more closely to the way that the Church's engagement with culture is necessarily mediated through biblical interpretation. This chapter is intended to illustrate how de Lubac's theological project can correct the aforementioned weaknesses in Milbank's work. In the first two sections I will examine the Christology implicit in several of de Lubac's works including his essay entitled "Mysticism and Mystery." In the following section I will compare and contrast de Lubac's Christology with Milbank's. The third section will illustrate how de Lubac's mystical Christology is mediated through the practices of spiritual exegesis and guides the Church's engagement with culture. In conclusion I will summarize the ways that de Lubac's christological mysticism complements and corrects both postliberalism and radical orthodoxy.

De Lubac's Christological Mysticism

The word "mysticism," like many words, needs clarification if it is to be useful. De Lubac was well aware of this problem, and he wrote "Mysticism and Mystery" in order to, among other things, articulate a distinctively Christian and Catholic understanding of mysticism. First, he admits that the word "has mixed origins, and its present meaning has only fairly recently been accepted by theologians."[9] This, however, is no reason to think that the word has no usefulness. The same could be said of the

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[9] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 39.

words, "religion" and "spirituality," "which ordinarily no one thinks of challenging."[10]

Mysticism, for de Lubac, "is to be understood as a kind of perfection attained in spiritual

life, a form of actual union with the Divinity."[11] This union, however, is in no way to be

construed as a kind of "essentialism" or basic spiritual experience of the divine that is

common to all humans through a variety of religious traditions. De Lubac criticizes those

who claim that "there is only the infinite, eternal, and indefinite Essence that is absolutely

pure and beyond all reach, and its transcendence must be demonstrated by the dissolution

of all forms as well as by its radiance that shines through them."[12] In contrast, he

suggests that "all mysticism is not 'ignorant' in the same way, nor is it 'learned' in the

same way."[13] Rather, mysticism, like all human knowledge and experience "is never

without an a priori." Thus, when de Lubac uses the word mysticism, he is speaking of a

distinctively Christian way of experiencing union with the Divinity, and he insists that

this union necessarily has certain characteristics.

The Distinctiveness of Christian Mysticism

      According to de Lubac, Christian mysticism "can only mean the union with the

tripersonal God of Christian revelation, a union realized in Jesus Christ through his

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[10] The following comments are added in a footnote after the above statement: "Various authors, even Catholic ones, influenced more or less directly by Karl Barth (poorly understood) or by Bonhoeffer, avoid calling Christianity a religion, or even, not content to distinguish the two notions, contrast religion and faith" (Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 40, fn. 9).

[11] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 39.

[12] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 47.

[13] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 45.

grace."[14] When de Lubac speaks of mysticism, he has in mind "an 'infused' gift of

'passive' contemplation,"[15] or the vision or perspective of persons who participate in the

body of Christ. He writes that Christian mysticism

> is not only a participation in the experience of Christ – albeit superior and unique – it is a participation, always deficient and the deeper it goes the more the mystic becomes aware of the deficiency, in the *reality* of Christ." Christian mysticism, then, is "never pure interiority. . . . The deeper it goes, the more it involves the intentional movement that carries the mystic beyond himself in the direction of the Source who is forever filling in the gulf that separates them. . . . Mysticism is the interiority of faith by the interiorization of the mystery; but, as the mystery becomes interiorized, the mystic's faith in the mystery sends him out of himself. The ecstasy (one that is truly ontological) always prevails over the enstasis. [16]

When de Lubac speaks of mysticism he hopes to express what St. Paul meant

when he claimed to have the "mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:13). Indeed, one of the reasons

that de Lubac uses the word mysticism is because he believes that it communicates,

accurately, the Pauline and Johannine perspectives. He describes the "christological

mysticism . . . of St. Paul" which offers us "a more complete awareness of the depths and

heights of the spiritual life on earth." He goes on to suggest that "the Pauline doctrine on

the union of the believer with Christ, on the presence and action of the Spirit in the

Christian community, is quite clear. . . . Paul's mysticism is so conspicuous . . . that

several exegetes whose systematic mentalities never hesitate to make drastic amputations

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[14] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 39.

[15] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 39. De Lubac's reference to a "passive" contemplation is likely meant to correspond logically with the idea that grace is "infused." For de Lubac, the contemplation of Christ is itself a gift of grace and does not occur on the basis of a "natural" human ability, although it does fulfill a "natural" human appetite.

[16] Emphasis mine. Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 55-56.

have wished to remove entire chapters from even the most important of his letters."[17]

The christological mysticism of St. John, de Lubac suggests, is "even more evident."

"According to John," he writes, "the Christian has received divine life; he is reborn from

water and the Spirit. . . . He affirms that this Life came and dwelt among men and that,

by his Spirit, Life dwells in men's hearts."[18] Accordingly, we can say that, for de Lubac,

mysticism is a word that can be used to describe the contemplative existence of those

who dwell in Christ and in whom Christ dwells. Moreover, what it describes is

consistent with the perspective of Pauline and Johannine literature as well as the great

Christian tradition that follows.[19]

The Principle Characteristics of Christian Mysticism

     Having established its distinctiveness and its theological basis in scripture, de

Lubac suggests several additional "principal characteristics" of Christian mysticism,

which help to clarify his Christological thought.[20] He tells us, first, that "it is a mysticism

of likeness. 'God, who is completely present everywhere, does not dwell in everyone.'

In other words, the divine image is inalienable in every human being, but the union of

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[17] He doesn't mention any names here, but a host of early twentieth centuries biblical scholars could apply. Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 50.

[18] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 50-51.

[19] "Mysticism is not a late graft on the trunk of the Christian tree. Well before Pseudo-Denys, who has been honored (or reproached) for having been the grafter, it is possible to find incontestably mystical elements not only in the writings of Evagrius – who precedes Denys by only a little and whose doctrine is questionable – and in those of the great Cappadocians but as far back as St. Ignatius of Antioch, who lived less than a century from Christianity's origins" (Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 49).

[20] Although I will mention all of the "characteristics" that de Lubac discusses, I will change the order to suit my own purposes.

God is a 'union of likeness.'"[21] This suggests that, having been created in the image of

God, humans have no guarantee that they will be united with God or that they will be

conformed to the likeness of God. Humans always remain in a condition where their own

completion and fulfillment depends upon the intervening grace of God. De Lubac

suggests that mysticism is not an awareness of the "self, at the deepest part of one's

being." On the contrary, persons can only ever know themselves through the "gracious

intervention of God in giving the mystery,"[22] and this mystery is given in Christ. He

explains:

> Christ completes the revelation of man to himself. By taking possession of man, by
> seizing hold of him and by penetrating to the very depths of his being Christ makes
> man go deep down within himself, there to discover in a flash regions hitherto
> unsuspected. It is through Christ that the person reaches maturity, that man
> emerges definitively from the universe, and becomes conscious of his own being. . .
> . for through the Christian revelation not only is the scrutiny that man makes of
> himself made more searching, but his examination of all about him is at the same
> time made more comprehensive. Henceforth, the idea of human unity is born.
> That image of God, the image of the Word, which the incarnate Word restores and
> gives back to its glory, is "I myself"; it is also the other, every other. It is that
> aspect of me in which I coincide with every other man, it is the hallmark of our
> common origin and the summons to our common destiny. It is our very unity with
> God.[23]

This stress on "likeness" and the idea that humankind discovers itself and the

world only as it is drawn, by the grace of God, towards Christ, in whose image persons

are made, is the christological foundation upon which the *Surnaturel* thesis rests. Indeed,

de Lubac suggests that "Christian mysticism is directed toward a goal, toward God who

calls to us and beckons us to meet him at the end of the road. It presupposes a process

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[21] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 57.

[22] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery."

[23] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 339-340.

that can never be finished, and it contains an element of eschatological hope."[24] The

process of being conformed to the "likeness" of God is the process of human nature

finding its completion and fulfillment in the supernatural. Humans, although they are

created in the image of God, are misdirected in their search for fulfillment. Christ comes,

then, as an interruption of grace through which fallen human nature is redirected towards

its supernatural destination.

The second principle characteristic of Christian mysticism is that it is biblical.

According to de Lubac, Christian mysticism "is essentially an understanding of the holy

Books. The mystery is their meaning; mysticism is getting to know that meaning."[25]

Elsewhere, he writes that the "spiritual understanding" of scripture is "identical to the

process of conversion. It is its luminous aspect."[26] In equating mysticism with the

meaning of scripture, de Lubac is not limiting the content of mystical experience. Rather,

he is claiming that all of reality is discerned in its fullness and truth only as it is

understood through the lens of Scripture. Scripture, for de Lubac, acts as a "prism"

through which the christological "unity of the universe" is comprehended.[27] Christian

mysticism is thus the understanding of reality in conformity with the christological

perspective of Holy Scripture. Hans Urs Von Balthasar captures this principle when he

writes that "to penetrate into the spirit of Scripture means, in the final analysis, to learn to

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[24] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 57.

[25] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 58.

[26] Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 21.

[27] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 58, fn. 74.

recognize the inner nature of God, to appropriate to oneself God's thoughts about the world."[28]

Here, then, is the christological center of de Lubac's voluminous work on spiritual exegesis. The spiritual exegesis of Christian scripture, as practiced by patristic and medieval theologians, serves to illumine all reality in the "light of Christ." It is through spiritual exegesis that the church comes to know the historical person of Jesus as the ascended Christ who is omnipresent, or, in Milbank's terminology, our "total context." De Lubac writes:

> The mystical or spiritual understanding of scripture and the mystical or spiritual life are, in the end, one and the same. Christian mysticism is that understanding pushed to its most fruitful phase by its four traditional dimensions – history, "allegory" or doctrine, ethics or "tropology" and anagogy – each of which is absorbed by the following one. . . . It is by submitting to historical-doctrinal facts and assimilating them that the necessary foundation for union [with God] can be found. The anagogical sense by which the spirit raises itself to God in a unique intuition has the richness of the three preceding dimensions concentrated within itself. Far from excluding them or freeing itself from them, it includes the full historical realization of salvation that is the permanent and indispensable base for mysticism, a gift of God.[29]

For de Lubac, spiritual exegesis plays a constitutive role in the church's participation in the life of the Trinity. Indeed, he affirms that the stages of history, allegory, and tropology on the way to anagogy shape Christian mysticism around an "indispensable" structure whose fabric is Christ. If one were to speak of a participation in Christ that

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[28] Cited in Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 23. Importantly, this suggests an empathetic knowledge of God that does not deny God's hiddenness. I will say more about this in the concluding chapter.

[29] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 58.

bypasses these stages, then "there would be a fall from Christian Mysticism into natural mysticism."[30]

Another characteristic of Christian mysticism, according to de Lubac, is that it is "attached to the symbolism of spiritual marriage."[31] What this means is that the spiritual "union" of the church with Christ is "not an identification."[32] He explains that "between the human soul and its God, as in the marriage of the Church and the Lamb, there is always a union, not absorption."[33] The union between humans and God involves "mutual love" though it is God who first loves humans and not vice versa. This love, which is at the heart of the great commandment, suggests that the union results from the human desire for God who is other. De Lubac cites John of the Cross:

> When we speak of the union of the soul with God, we are not referring to the union that already exists between God and all his creatures, but to the union of the soul with God and its transformation by his love. This transformation takes place, however, only when the soul, through love, resembles that of the Creator. That is why union is called supernatural. It takes place when two wills, that of the soul and that of God, are in agreement, and one has nothing that repels the other. Thus, when the soul completely rejects in itself all that is repugnant or does not conform to the will of God, it is transformed into God through love.[34]

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[30] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 60.

[31] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 60.

[32] "One might fear, however, that the expression "spiritual marriage", which allows personal duality to survive, does not sufficiently convey the profound unity resulting from the mystical process. Such concern, however, would be unfounded since it would proceed from a false notion of unity. Surely there is a veritable unity in the image of the divine Trinity, and yet the distinction of personal Beings is not only maintained but carried to perfection" (Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 61).

[33] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 60.

[34] St. John of the Cross, cited in Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 62.

The union of love described above is, according to de Lubac, a "unity of desires," or a "mysticism of the will" such as one would find in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux or William of St. Tierry. For these thinkers, the will was "not a mere 'faculty,' but the most profound element of being."[35] This aspect of de Lubac's Christology is central to the thesis of *Corpus Mysticum*, which stresses that the Church's true nature and identity are inseparably linked to the flesh and blood of Jesus. The Church discovers itself again and again through its Eucharistic encounter with the crucified and risen Christ whose fullness always transcends the earthly *ekklesia*.

This brings us to another principle characteristic of Christian mysticism, which, according to de Lubac, "is necessarily an ecclesial mysticism, since the incarnation achieves first of all in the Church the marriage of the Word and humanity."[36] He writes that "if mystical life at its summit consists of an actual union with Divinity, such a union could be possible only through a supernatural grace whose normal setting is the Church and whose normal conditions are the life of faith and the sacraments. . . . It is only in the Church that a true mysticism can be found; outside of the Church, no mysticism."[37] Whereas *Catholicism* is concerned primarily with the Church's role in mediating Christ to the world, *Corpus Mysticum* is focused on the importance of the Eucharist in mediating Christ to the Church.

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[35] De Lubac argues that this mysticism of the will, or of desire, is based on a long biblical tradition that culminates in the Pauline imagery of the church as bride, and is taken up with enthusiasm by Origen and many later commentators. See Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 60-61, fn. 84.

[36] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 62.

[37] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 43.

A final characteristic of Christian mysticism is that it is always Trinitarian in form. According to de Lubac the Trinitarian God

> is not the infinite One, as undifferentiated as he is unlimited, whom our spirit risks losing in some empty space. He is not the 'All-Possibility' or the 'place of indefinite possibilities.' Neither is he the *Ungrund*, the original chasm, the obscure core of being – or nonbeing – from which persons emerged. The God whom we adore and who wants us to be united with him is not faceless: he has a superior form, an 'infinitely determined form.' His infinity is not one of dispersion but of concentration: in him all the mystery of personal Being is condensed. Contemplation may enable man to plumb other depths and abysses, but unless they are explicitly or implicitly depths of the triune, human-divine and ecclesial life, they are either spurious or demonic.[38]

For de Lubac, Christian mysticism is necessarily a structured mysticism. Indeed, the characteristics mentioned above are patterned after the economic Trinity. Humans are created in the image of God and conformed to His likeness through grace, united with God in spiritual marriage through the Son, and participate in the life of God through the community of the Holy Spirit – the Church. Christian mysticism, according to de Lubac, is not a natural capacity inherent in human nature. Rather, it is a gift of God. He suggests that "what the Catholic Church calls mysticism is only the conscious actualization of this gift of God." Moreover, Christian mysticism is not something reserved only for a few. Rather, it defines "all Christian reality."[39] Christian mysticism, in de Lubac's thought, is simply the revelation of God, which is always also the revelation of humans to themselves.

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[38] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 62-63.

[39] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 63.

Christology in de Lubac and Milbank

I argued, in chapter four, that Frei and Lindbeck failed to articulate a participatory

theological hermeneutic capable of avoiding the problem of extrinsicism. Milbank is

particularly critical of Frei's claim that Jesus is clearly "identified" through the biblical

narrative because, even if he were, this rendering of Jesus' identity would be nothing

more than a mere "fact," having no ability to reconcile persons with God. According to

Milbank, theological hermeneutics must be Trinitarian and participatory, and Christology

must focus on the "force" of Jesus' identity – its ability to transform others.[40]

Accordingly, Milbank argues that the gospel portraits of Jesus do not render a clear

identity description and seem instead to "evacuate" him of all personal and "specifiable"

content" to such an extent that only the proper name, Jesus, remains.[41]

Rather than a clear identity description, Milbank argues that the gospels portray

Jesus as the founder of a new "mode of being." He claims that the force or soteriological

potency of Jesus derives from the fact that he inaugurated a new language and a new

practice of "harmonic peace," which is "fully transferable to others." Jesus' persistent

identity, according to Milbank, should not be attached to "any 'subsistent' dimension

within the individual" as "Chalcedonian high Christology" and "Aquinas still

supposed."[42] For Milbank, a person's persistent identity "resides purely on the surface of

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[40] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 164.

[41] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 150.

[42] Milbank suggests that his own "'postmodern' escape from preoccupation with an 'interior' subject and its 'intentionality', allows us to retrieve a more objective understanding of 'personhood', detached from notions of physical individuality, consciousness, will and so forth – all of which were, of course, fully and purely human in Christ. So that Chalcedonian high Christology need no longer seem so embarrassing as it did for modernist theology. . . . I do not wish to disguise the fact that I am transposing

a series of events which exhibit a certain pattern and coherence."[43] Reconciliation

between God and humans occurs as the Church re-narrates and re-realizes this "pattern

and coherence," which, for Milbank, is the *Totus Christus* (ontologically speaking).

Accordingly, "the only thing which will really remove us from extrinsicism," Milbank

claims, "is the primacy of ecclesiology."[44]

Happily, de Lubac's mystical Christology avoids the problem of extrinsicism that

characterizes postliberalism without affirming the primacy of ecclesiology over

Christology as Milbank does. Indeed, de Lubac's mystical Christology entails a

participatory and Trinitarian hermeneutic focused on the soteriological potency of Christ

while avoiding the errors of Milbank's approach, which are discussed at the end of

chapter four of this work. The first thing to say about de Lubac's Christology, in contrast

to Milbank's, is that it does not allow the need to overcome extrinsicism to obscure the

fact that Jesus is first encountered, in the gospels and in the worship of the Church, as

other. De Lubac's insistence that the union between humans and God be symbolized by

the image of "spiritual marriage" rather than "identification" differs from Milbank's

focus on Jesus' "state of being which is fully transferable to others."[45] Because there is

nothing persistent about Jesus, for Milbank, that is not fully transferable to the Church,

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Chalcedonian orthodoxy into a new idiom which only perfects it by dissolving
'substantial' notions of subjectivity which it did not always fully overcome." Milbank,
The Word Made Strange, 157.

[43] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 157.

[44] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 165.

[45] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 157.

there is no reason why Christology (as well as the doctrine of atonement)[46] should not be

subsumed under ecclesiology. Among the various problems with Milbank's approach to

Christology, the one that stands out as particularly problematic is the way that it

eliminates the distance/difference between Jesus and the Church and thus renders Christ

incapable of judgment (theoretically speaking).[47] How is the Church to worship Jesus as

judge and redeemer if He is accessible only through the Church's re-narration of Him? If

Christology is subsumed under ecclesiology, as Milbank recommends, then the distance

between Jesus and the Church, which allows distinctions such as teacher/disciple,

savior/saved, creator/created, and judge/judged, disappears. Orthodoxy Christianity

holds that the will of individual persons must be conformed to God's will through an

encounter with God's one and only Son, Jesus, before His language and practice can be

re-narrated and re-realized through the Church's worship and witness.

As I mentioned in chapter four, baptism is always preceded by repentance, and

repentance occurs when persons recognize the unique perfection of Jesus in *contrast* to

their own imperfection. Accordingly, the primacy of Christology has to be maintained,

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[46] "If Jesus' death is efficacious, not just as the offering of an enabling sign, but also as a material reality, then this is because it is the inauguration of the political practice of forgiveness; forgiveness as a mode of 'government' and social being." Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 161.

[47] John David Dawson writes that "the body of Christ is irreducibly particular, uniquely Christ's own. How then does membership 'in' that body enhance rather than suppress the individual identities of its members? Would it not make more sense for each of us to interpret the body of Christ as a metaphor for the various meanings that we might wish to give our own unique lives? Would not such 'Christic meaning,' precisely because it would no longer be attached to, and identified by, the actions and passions of that particular body, be sufficiently malleable to accommodate our own irreducible diversity? Conversely, if we all were to become identified by means of inclusion in Christ's body, in his person, would not our own uniqueness be superseded by Christ's? Would we not become hollow figures whose distinctiveness had given way to a single, universalizing fulfillment?" (Dawson, "Figural Reading," 192).

and de Lubac's christological mysticism ensures that it will with its insistence on a union

symbolized by spiritual marriage rather than identification via a fully transferable pattern,

as in Milbank's thought. De Lubac affirms, with the tradition and in contrast to Milbank,

that Jesus' persistent personal identity (the identity that the Church weds) rests in his will

– in his love/desire for the Father. Consider de Lubac's prayer to Jesus:

> Jesus, I believe in You. I confess that You are God. You are for us the whole
> Mystery of God. What other definition of God would we seek than that given by
> your Apostle? And was it not in contemplating You that he found it? God is Love.
> The single word contains an unfathomable mystery, which I adore. But through
> You this mystery illumines our night already. For Love has done a great deed, and
> this Deed of Love, the Love made visible to our eyes, perceptible to hearts of flesh,
> effective and saving Love, is You Yourself! It is God made man, it is the
> Incarnation of God.[48]

Not only is Jesus' persistent identity here described as Love, but it is precisely the Love

of Jesus that de Lubac describes as "effective." Regarding this love he writes: "An

efficacious feat: through this 'divine strength' already recognized by the Apostle Paul, he

uproots us from our egotism, he opens us, takes us, makes us capable of adopting the

contours of it in our turn. He eradicates the old man and implants the new man."[49]

This, of course, is quite different from Milbank's claim that the force of Jesus'

identity (its efficaciousness) has nothing to do with any "interior" subsistent

characteristic like the "will," but rather resides in the fully repeatable language and

practice that he inaugurated. Aware that his position might be construed as rendering

Jesus dispensable, Milbank explains that

> The universal repeatability of Jesus is made possible *by* his specific historic
> occurrence, and this is never 'dispensable' in specifying the conditions of our

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[48] Henri de Lubac, "The Light of Christ," in *Theology in History* (San Francisco,
CA: Ignatius 1996), 218.

[49] Lubac, "The Light of Christ," 218.

salvation. . . because a genuine 'foundation' is not the first instance of a general phenomenon, but rather is itself the 'general' though specific, definition of that phenomenon. It follows that Jesus can be talked of as uniquely a 'substitute' and 'representative', not because these attributes cannot be repeated, but precisely in so far as they can be and are.[50]

The strange thing about this statement is that it so completely contradicts Milbank's lament in the introduction to *The Word Made Strange* concerning his own difficulty in locating true Christian practice. In the quotation above, it sounds as though Jesus' "total refusal of selfish power" is something easily and "fully repeatable." The truth, of course, is that the mode of being inaugurated by Jesus in the gospels is not fully repeatable. Jesus' entire life was given over to the will of the Father, and it is precisely the union of the divine and human wills in Jesus that characterizes a new mode of being – one that can be only partially (not fully) realized in the earthly *ecclesia* through the practices of repentance, baptism, and worship

The fact that de Lubac affirms the otherness of Jesus via the symbolism of "spiritual marriage" and locates the persistent identity of Jesus in his love of the Father does not, however, mean that his Christology is extrinsic. On the contrary, de Lubac's Christology moves from the historical narration of Jesus that is characteristic of the synoptic gospels towards an affirmation that Jesus is indeed the *Totus Christus* or the total context within which human life takes place. De Lubac's appreciation for the "Cosmic Christ" is perhaps most evident in his works on the thought of Teilhard de Chardin.[51] He writes of de Chardin that "if it is true that he attributes to the risen

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[50] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 158.

[51] See the following works: Henri de Lubac, *Teilhard de Chardin: The Man and His Meaning* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1965), 35-54, Henri de Lubac, *Teilhard Explained* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1968).

Humanity of our Lord (as others also do) 'a presence in the world as vast as the very immensity of God,' can we be certain that in holding this against Teilhard our censure may not at the same time embrace St. Paul?" De Lubac writes further, "*Omnia in ipso constant* – 'in him all subsist' – this sentence from the Epistle to the Colossians had long fired Teilhard's enthusiasm. Following some of his seniors, he had learnt during his years of theology to set them at the heart of Christian thought. Nor could he have felt that he was introducing any innovation when he said that, 'Christ is the term supernaturally, but also physically, assigned to the consummation of humanity.'"[52]

In the quotations above, and in many other places, de Lubac clearly embraces the "cosmic point of view" regarding Christ, and he explicitly states that Teilhard has done theology a great service by working to retrieve such a view.[53] Indeed, it is the cosmic Christ that de Lubac identifies in the mystical Christology of St. Paul and St. John. How though, does the Church progress from an encounter with the Jesus of the gospels who "uproots us from our egotism" to the Cosmic Christ who "makes us capable of adopting the contours" of His "divine strength?" For de Lubac, spiritual exegesis enables the Church to comprehend that the historical Jesus is the cosmic Christ who reigns over all of

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[52] Lubac, *Teilhard de Chardin: The Man and His Meaning*, 42-43.

[53] "We should, it is true, recognize at any rate that during the last few centuries this 'cosmic' aspect of Pauline teaching had become somewhat blurred in current Catholic thought. There can be no doubt that most modern theologians have devoted little attention to it. Some of the best New Testament exegetes, both Catholic and Protestant, have commented only briefly on the passages in which it is to be found. It was this lack that Père Teilhard wished to supply: and even those readers who find themselves unable to accept what is most personal to him in his explanations, should be willing, I believe, to recognize that his attempt will prove to have been well worthwhile" (Lubac, *Teilhard de Chardin: The Man and His Meaning*, 44).

heaven and earth.[54] In other words, in de Lubac's thought, the "extension of a fully

Christianised ontology"[55] takes place as the Church interprets and understands Scripture

according to the Spirit.

The Mediation of Christ in Spiritual Exegesis

For Milbank and the other editors of *Radical Orthodoxy*, secularism is engaged

and overcome as "every discipline" is "framed by a theological perspective." Thus, the

theologian's task is to expose the nihilism inherent in secular social thought while

contrasting it with the beauty and "relative worth" of social reality conceived as a

participation in God.[56] The fruit of this speculative engagement, or so it is claimed, is

that "space," formerly governed by secular social theory, is now opened up, and the

Church is freed to inhabit those places where secularism once reigned. However, it

remains unclear as to how this speculative engagement actually enables and promotes the

instantiation of new participatory practices. I argued in chapter four that radical

orthodoxy has offered an interesting deconstruction of secular social theory but has

failed, thus far, to show how Christians inhabit the space created by this deconstruction.

Although Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward suggest that "radical orthodoxy mingles

exegesis, cultural reflection and philosophy in a complex but coherently executed

collage," sustained biblical interpretation is relatively absent in radical orthodoxy's

engagement with secularism.[57] This missing exegetical element is, in my view, the

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[54] I will explain this comment in the following section.

[55] Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 2.

[56] Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 3.

[57] Ford, "Radical Orthodoxy and the Future of British Theology," 398.

reason why radical orthodoxy, which intends to advance a "fully Christianized ontology," has not really moved beyond the speculative deconstruction of secular social theory. It is here that de Lubac's work on spiritual exegesis can supply the missing element in Milbank's program.

The Fourfold Method: From Jesus of Nazareth to "Totus Christus"

For de Lubac, as mentioned above, Jesus is necessarily mediated to the Church, at least in part, through spiritual exegesis. In other words, it is through spiritual exegesis that the Church moves from an encounter with the historical Jesus to a union with the cosmic Christ. In his essay on mysticism, de Lubac argues that the union of humans with God "includes the full historical realization of salvation." He holds that christological mysticism is essentially an understanding of the scriptures that has progressed from history to allegory and then to tropology in pursuit of the eschatological vision of God (anagogy).[58]

The literal/historical sense. In the second volume of *Medieval Exegesis*, de Lubac devotes a lengthy chapter to each of the four traditional senses of scripture. With regard to the first, he explains that the Fathers use the terms, *littera* and *historia*, interchangeably to denote either what has been clearly spoken or what has taken place in history.[59] Both terms, according to de Lubac, are used to describe "the exterior and

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[58] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 58.

[59] According to de Lubac, the Fathers were well aware of the fact that the "sensible aspect of things" often entailed a metaphoric or symbolic meaning, as in the case of parables or poems. Thus, to speak of the literal sense is not to exclude certain literary genres that rely on symbolism. Also, when the Fathers spoke of the historical sense, they had no "interest in the human past for its own sake" as a nineteenth century historian may have. Rather, the historical sense was that sense of scripture that recognized God's involvement in human affairs, leading them towards His intended end.

sensible aspect of things, as opposed to their mystic or hidden signification, which is not at all perceived by the sense but only by the understanding."[60] It is through the historical sense that we first "make a real contact with . . . the object of scripture: the development of the revelation of the mystery of Christ."[61] According to de Lubac

> We are obliged to believe in a whole series of facts that have really come about. God has chosen a people for himself; in this way he has intervened in the history of men: the first thing to do, then, is to know, according to the book in which the Holy Spirit has recorded it, the sequence of his interventions. Thus it will never be possible to forget history, nor to put it into question again, nor to free oneself of it or spurn it. One must endeavor to receive and preserve its testimony.[62]

The literal/historical sense of scripture provides the signs that point to Christ. Importantly, these signs are themselves the products of God's intervention in history, i.e. through the selection of a people and especially through His incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth. The historical sense provides what de Lubac refers to as the "biblical facts." He suggests that "he who neglects to study [the historical sense] is . . . like the grammarian who would believe he could neglect the alphabet."[63] Indeed, the historical sense, when considered in light of the anagogical sense, provides the fabric from which the allegorical and tropological senses are built. Without the historical sense, there would

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De Lubac writes that "our ancient exegetes did not have any idea, thanks be to God, of that 'absolutized History,' which is one of the principal idols invented by our age. On the other hand, they did have a sense of biblical history, or even of universal history" (Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 41-44; 71-72).

[60] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 42.

[61] Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," 59.

[62] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 44.

[63] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 45.

be no deeper understanding (allegory) and no participation in Christ (tropology) just as there could be no words without the letters from which they are built.

In the same way that the latter senses depend upon the historical sense, the Fathers affirmed that the historical sense remains incomplete unless it is surpassed by those that come after it. Paul's famous saying in 2 Corinthians 3:6, "the letter kills, but the spirit gives life," provided the basis for the ancient way of understanding the relationship between the first sense and those that follow it. According to de Lubac, "it was not the 'letter' that bothered them, but the 'mere letter,' the 'mere surface of the letter,' the 'property of the letter alone.'"[64] They never approached history for mere information. Rather, patristic and medieval commentators believed that history was pregnant with the spirit of God and that its true meaning was to be found in its final end – Christ. Accordingly, to focus "merely" on the literal or historical sense was simply to miss the point.

It is interesting to note that Milbank, in his engagement with the gospels in *The Word Made Strange*, never moves beyond the literal/historical sense. He argues, contra Hans Frei, that the literal sense of the biblical narrative fails to provide a personal identity description of a character named Jesus, but he is not troubled by this fact because, for him, such a description would have no soteriological potency. Milbank claims that "the name 'Jesus' does not indicate an identifiable 'character', but is rather the obscure and mysterious hinge which permits shifts from one kind of discourse to another."[65] Jesus saves because he inaugurates a new language and a new practice that is "fully

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[64] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 51.

[65] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 149.

transferable" to the church.[66] Jesus, in Milbank's account, is indispensable because he

inaugurates and therefore "defines" a new mode of being in reconciled relationship to

God. Jesus "persists" in history because his identity resides on the "surface of a series of

events which exhibit a certain pattern and coherence," and this identity can be re-realized

and re-narrated by the Church through a "non-identical repetition" of Jesus.

In Milbank's account, the historical Jesus has become the total context within

which human life takes place *only because He has been de-personalized and essentially

abandoned to the first century.*[67] In Milbank's account, the Church participates in a

language and in a practice, but not necessarily in the divine-human person, Jesus of

Nazareth. Milbank sees, like the Church Fathers, that the letter is limited. However,

Milbank's Christology capitalizes on the letter's inability to identify Jesus, whereas the

Fathers proceeded to allegory. Milbank is forced to leave Jesus behind because he, like

Frei, has attempted to make too much out of the literal sense of scripture. He has

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[66] It is noteworthy that, in subsuming Christology under ecclesiology, Milbank loses the distinction between head and body in the *totus Christus.* Cf. Eph. 5:23; Col. 1:18.

[67] By "de-personalized" I am referring to Milbank's contention that "the effect of implying that a person situated in the world is also, in himself (like God) our total situation, or that which is always transcendentally presupposed, is to evacuate that person of any particular, specifiable content" (Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 150). John David Dawson takes a very different approach to the gospel portrayal of Jesus' identity when he suggests that "He moves ever closer to an identification with the one he calls 'Father', yet in doing so, becomes ever more himself, until, at the moment of resurrection, we see only the identity of Jesus in the Father's action by which he is raised. Maximal submission to the will of the Father coincides with maximal expression of individual identity" (Dawson, "Figural Reading," 192). Unlike Milbank, Dawson argues that the personal identity of Jesus is clarified, not distorted, as Jesus submits to the will of the Father. For Dawson then, there is no need to suggest that the historical Jesus is somehow evacuated of personal content as his personal narrative is subsumed into the metanarrative. On the contrary, the person of Jesus is most fully illumined as we come to understand his place in the metanarrative.

transformed the "non-interior" identity of Jesus which "resides purely on the surface" (thus in the literal sense) into an omnipresent reality within which persons can participate.

The Allegorical Sense. De Lubac, in contrast to Milbank, views allegory as the means through which the historical Jesus is transformed into the omnipresent, *totus Christus*, and tropology as the means through which the Church comes to participate in Christ. Importantly, Christian allegorical interpretation is, according to de Lubac, not an invention of the patristic age. Rather, it was the Apostle Paul who first read the Old Testament allegorically, and he was followed by a host of other New Testament authors.[68] The allegorical sense of scripture is simply that sense which views all of the Old Testament, both its history and its words, as a signification of Christ and the Church.[69] De Lubac suggests that "as Saint Paul said, Christ and the Church are just one great mystery: this is the mystery of their union. Now the whole mystery of Scripture, the whole object of *allegoria*, resides in this. This enables one to discover everywhere the 'deeper mysteries about Christ and his body.'"[70]

De Lubac points out consistently that the allegorical interpretation of Scripture is not abstract or ahistorical. He writes that "it does not exist in idea. It does not consist in any atemporal truth or object detached from speculation. This mystery is a reality in act,

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[68] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 1*. It is also important to note that the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, which are instituted by Jesus in the gospels, are themselves based on allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament. It is thus fair to say that Jesus himself is the first to interpret the Old Testament allegorically.

[69] Consider the following statements: "allegory exists when the present sacraments of Christ and the Church are signed by means of mystical words or things. . . . All the Scripture of the Old Testament invites us to behold the mysteries of Christ and the Church." Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 91.

[70] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 92.

the realization of a Grand Design; it is therefore, in the strongest sense, even something historical, in which personal beings are engaged."[71] The allegorical sense searches for the spiritual meaning within the history told in the Old Testament.[72] De Lubac explains that

> to discover this allegory, one will not find it properly speaking in the text, but in the realities of which the text speaks; not in history as recitation, but in history as event; or if one wishes, allegory is indeed in the recitation, but one that relates a real event. 'The actions speak. . . . The deeds, if you understand them, are words.' Allegory is prophecy inscribed within the facts themselves: 'not only in the things said, but also, God disposing all things marvelously, in the deeds themselves.'[73]

As mentioned above, allegorical interpretation assumes the omnipresence of Christ. Thus, it sees Christ in things that have already happened, and it finds Christ in the unfolding of history as well.[74] De Lubac considers the ontological assumptions of allegorical interpretation as follows:

> To go into a little detail: if. . . the manna is really the figure of the Eucharist, or if the sacrifice of the paschal Lamb really prefigures the redemptive death, the reason

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[71] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 93-94.

[72] I should note that de Lubac does not mean to over-simplify matters by drawing a sharp distinction between literal and spiritual senses. He explains that "the antithesis which we have set out is, to be sure, a formal one. We can even admit that it is somewhat artificial. Its precise importance can be measured by what will follow. Concretely, the spiritual meaning of Scripture and the religious meaning of the Bible [the literal/historical sense] coincide at many points. The ideal is for them to continue each other and interpenetrate. They somehow need one another: the former must have a permanent basis, and the latter must not be truncated. We might express this fact by saying that, before we can undertake any spiritual interpretation of the Old Testament through the New, we must first have historically understood the New Testament through the Old" (Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 28).

[73] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 86.

[74] "And by the words of Christ we do not mean those only which He spake when He became man and tabernacled in the flesh; for before that time, Christ, the Word of God, was in Moses and the prophets. For without the Word of God, how could they have been able to prophesy of Christ?" (Origen, *On First Principles*, Preface, 1).

for this is not extrinsic resemblance alone, no matter how striking this might be. There is actually an 'inherent continuity' and 'ontological bond' between the two facts, and this is due to the same divine will which is active in both situations and which, from stage to stage, is pursuing a single Design – the Design which is the real object of the Bible. And if St. Paul, looking back on the events which occurred in the desert and the 'spiritual' rock at which the Israelites quenched their thirst, can add: '*Petra autem erat Christus*,' it is because 'the event which took place in the desert was itself part of the forward movement, driven on by a force which surpasses time and for which 'a thousand years are as a day,' towards the Easter event, and was destined to find in that event, its own true meaning.[75]

The allegorical sense presumes that the history of salvation described in the Old Testament was "driven by a force which surpasses time" and that this force was God. There is thus a genuine "ontological bond" between Old Testament characters and the messiah that emerges from Mary's womb. When de Lubac suggests that allegory assumes more than an "extrinsic resemblance" between Christ and that which came before, he is critiquing biblical interpretation that sees no need to move beyond the literal/historical sense. Typology as mere extrinsic resemblance is, in de Lubac's mind, insufficient precisely because it remains on the surface of a series of events and does not assume an ontological bond in the way that allegory does.[76]

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[75] Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 37. Cf. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 73-74.

[76] Lubac, "Typology and Allegorization," 129-164. John David Dawson makes a similar point when he writes that "a person or an event is a *figura* precisely because it begins an extended divine utterance that embraces subsequent persons and events. 'Figuralness' denotes the status of things as significant – not in themselves and not in their meanings – but insofar as they are, in all their concrete reality, the enacted intention of God to signify. If Jesus is the fulfillment of Joshua, that is because both Joshua and Jesus are moments within a single divine intention to signify. Discerning that intention as a literary congruence, the figural reader makes explicit the similarities by which otherwise separate events are related to one another as moments in a single, divine utterance" (Dawson, "Figural Reading," 188). Whereas de Lubac distinguishes between typology and allegory, Dawson refers to a reading that is focused only on extrinsic resemblance as "figurative" and reading that recognizes the "ontological bond" between persons and events as "figural."

Just as the allegorical sense of scripture finds Christ everywhere in the "pregnant past" of the Old Testament, so too does it always interpret the future through a christological lens. "The object of allegory, by relation to the facts that the Old Testament reports," writes de Lubac, "is therefore a reality to come: this is its most immediately tangible characteristic. *They foretell the things to come*. All things were signifying that Christ was about to come."[77] Accordingly, allegorical interpretation unites not only sacred history, but also the Church's present and future in an "ontological bond" with God in Christ. De Lubac explains that just

> as history is not enough to contain the mystery, it is very true that Christian allegory is not contained by the historical dimension. To receive it totally and not to warp it, we must not restrict this reality 'to come,' which is the New Testament, within the bounds of the '*superficies histotriae*,' the 'surface of history.' It overflows these boundaries. It involves another 'dimension.' For a mystery, in the Christian sense, is indeed a fact, but it is much more than an ordinary fact. Allegories discover for us a good deal of '*mysteria futura*,' but these are also '*futura mysteria*,' and the emphasis can be put in turn on the one or the other element of this pair of words. The 'mystery of the dispensation' is a 'dispensation of the mystery'; this is the 'mystical dispensation of Christ.[78]

Allegorical interpretation finds Christ everywhere in the Old Testament, and it also enables the Church to see Christ everywhere in the present and future. In other words, allegorical interpretation assumes that the meaning of scripture is inexhaustible – boundless. Allegorical interpretation is not interested in discovering ultimate truth as a "given," though it always embraces the indispensable signifying role of biblical facts. It enables the Church to continually interpret reality from a Christological perspective. It functions, for patristic and medieval Christians, as a christological hermeneutic through

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[77] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 94.

[78] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 95-96.

which the unfolding of reality can be continually interpreted in light of the biblical drama. De Lubac emphasizes the aesthetic role that allegory plays when he writes that

> The divinity of the Word of God incarnate is in fact the central object of allegory. It is revealed, however, only to the 'eyes of the heart,' to those 'inner eyes,' those 'spiritual eyes,' those 'eyes of the soul,' those 'better eyes,' that are opposed to the eyes of the flesh and which are in reality the eyes received from God, the eyes 'illuminated by the Gospel' or, following a frequent expression, the 'eyes of faith.' For *faith has her own eyes*. Faith is the light 'that makes one see the light of the spirit in the law of the letter; it is like a lamp lit in the night, penetrating the thick cloud of all the biblical 'sacraments' which surround it.[79]

For de Lubac allegorical interpretation supplies the "aesthetic idiom" (to use Milbank's term) within which Church practice takes place. For de Lubac, in contrast to Milbank, this aesthetic idiom, which is always mediated by scripture, makes Christology primary. Accordingly, we can say that the allegorical interpretation of scripture functioned, for the Fathers, as a Christological *poesis* through which the Church extends the reign of God on earth.[80]

The Tropological Sense. Whereas de Lubac indicates that the literal sense of scripture must be surpassed by the spiritual or allegorical sense, the remaining senses require "no such jump."[81] Indeed, there are only two basic senses of scripture – the

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[79] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 108.

[80] Interestingly, Milbank makes an important departure from the Christology of *The Word Made Strange* when he assigns greater weight to the gospel portrait of Jesus in his recent book, which happens to be an analysis of de Lubac's work. He writes that "in insisting upon traditional allegory," de Lubac shows that "Christ's human nature could not exhibit the divine idiom unless the literal events of his life were doubled by an allegorical summation of all of the Old Testament and indeed all foregoing reality" [John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 57]. For discussions of the relevance of the word, *poesis*, to Christian theology, see the chapter entitled "A Christological Poetics" in Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 123-144. See also Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 29-37.

[81] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 127.

literal/historical and the spiritual/allegorical, so the tropological and anagogical senses

should be considered as subcategories within the allegorical sense. De Lubac, following

"the school of Saint Victor," suggests that "in all of Scripture there are two objects to

look for: the "cognition of the truth" and the "form of virtue": history and allegory

converge on the first; tropology supplies the second."[82] Whereas the allegorical

interpretation of the literal sense of scripture provides a kind of Christological

illumination, the tropological sense is concerned with Christian practices that ensue from

this illumination. "The fruits of tropology," according to de Lubac, "can come only after

the 'flowers of allegory.'"[83] Tropology is intimately connected to the spiritual

understanding of scripture that comes through allegorical interpretation. Accordingly, de

Lubac insists that the tropological sense is not concerned with morality as a kind of

natural law. Rather, the tropological sense offers insight into a distinctively

Christological approach to human action and virtue. He writes that,

> If allegory develops dogma, it develops not just any morality, but Christian
> anthropology and the spirituality that flows from the dogma. After the *facta
> mystica* ['mystic deeds that have been done'] given by the allegory, both in
> immediate dependence and in internal dependence upon them, it indicates the
> *facienda mystica* ['mystic deeds that are to be done']. After the 'mystery of faith'
> come the 'works of faith.' After the 'mystical faith' comes the 'moral grace.' It
> makes us see everywhere in Scripture something that concerns us: 'Look these are
> your affairs, brothers . . . , your affairs, I say, your affairs!'

The word tropology comes from the Greek, *tropos*, which indicates a "turn of

phrase" through which some expression is turned in order to make it designate something

new. The "turning" characteristic of *tropos* is captured by the Latin translation,

conversio, which obviously means conversion. The tropological sense thus concerns the

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[82] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 127.

[83] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 128.

way that scripture is "turned . . . toward us, i.e., toward our ways of behaving," leading to

our conversion. De Lubac cites Robert of Melun who suggests that "*tropologia* means

speech that turns (*sermo conversivus*) because (*eo quod*) it designates a deed of such a

sort that it is necessary for us to be converted to it with respect to the establishment of

moral edification."[84] The tropological sense is in no way an appendix to the spiritual

sense. De Lubac writes that

> Tropology . . . has its own indispensable place in the concatenation of the scriptural
> senses. Far from being exterior and inferior to the 'deeper sense' of allegory . . . it
> even marks, in a certain sense, a deepening of it, or even its summit: 'We are
> nourished on history and parables; we grow by means of allegory; we are brought
> to perfection by morality'. . . . Its procedure is essential to the full understanding of
> Scripture. After the 'transposition of the fundamental data of the Word of God
> with reference to Christ,' ought to come the 'assimilation of these data to ourselves
> through his mediation.'[85]

The tropological sense focuses on the relevance of scripture, christologically

interpreted, for the Church and for individual Christians.[86] Tropological interpretation

allows Christians to "interiorize" the mystery of Christ. For example, one medieval

theologian writes of Israel's liberation from Egypt that "though those deeds were

corporeally performed in Egypt, they are nevertheless being performed spiritually in

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[84] Robert of Mellun, cited in Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 129.

[85] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 133.

[86] "The tropological sense therefore does not only presuppose the Mystery of the
Christ, but also that of the Church, which is, as we have seen, inseparable from it. The
tropological sense presupposes, or rather, expresses the mystery: for if the souls are
Christian only within the Church, the reverse holds: 'it is within the souls that the Church
is beautiful.' The whole life of the Christian flows from the 'mystical fecundity of the
Church. Everything that the Gospel history contains, says Saint Bernard, can therefore be
interpreted 'according to tropology, so that what has preceded in the head may
consequently also be believed to come about morally in its body'" (Lubac, *Medieval
Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 135).

us."[87] Offering another example of tropological interpretation, de Lubac paraphrases

Gregory the Great who suggests that "the tabernacle of Moses or the Temple of Solomon,

which allegorically is Christ, is also by necessary consequence 'our heart.' It is 'the very

mind and consciousness of the faithful.'"[88]

Through the tropological sense persons are made to understand the relevance of

Scripture for their own lives. The tropological sense enables the Church, daily and in

every age, to share in both the judgment and in the redemption of Israel.[89] It is thus a

mediator of both repentance and liberation. According to de Lubac, the tropological

sense leads the Church to see that "in everything, Scripture invites us to conversion of

heart. All the wars that it recounts are the wars of the Lord; all the migrations, all the

travels it traces are the wanderings and travels of the soul: it is thus from one end to the

other the book of spiritual combat at the same time as it is the book of departure and of

mystical ascent."[90] He goes on to explain that

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[87] Elmer of Canterbury, cited in Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 134.

[88] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 135.

[89] Tropology thus entails more than the Church's participation in a "fully transferable" language and practice. Tropology enables the Church to recognize, because it can identify itself in Israel's idolatry, the degree to which it falls short of Christ's goodness. Tropological interpretation mediates a union with Christ involving both repentance and baptism.

[90] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 141. Frei worries that the kind of "interiorization" of the narrative that is represented in this quotation from de Lubac is in danger of loosing its grounding in "providentially governed biblical history." Frei, *Eclipse*, 152. De Lubac was well aware of this danger and was thus very enthusiastic about the potential of new historical-critical methods to keep theological interpretation grounded. He believed that a genuine appreciation for the literal sense of the text was absolutely essential for the proper functioning of spiritual exegesis. See, for example, Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 29.

with Abraham we abandon our home and we arrive at the oak of Mamre, where God goes to visit us. With the children of Israel we flee 'the furnace of Egyptian servitude,' we cross the Red Sea, we wander in the desert, our forces are refreshed by a miraculous nourishment, we enter at last into the Promised Land. With them we again collide with the surrounding peoples; with them we return from the captivity of Babylon and rebuild the temple and the city. . . . Finally, whatever page I meditate upon, I find in it a means that God offers me, right now, to restore the divine image within me. Thus, I myself become Jerusalem, the holy city; I become or become again the temple of the Lord; for me the promise is realized: 'I shall dwell in their midst.' God walks with me in the garden, when I read the divine Scriptures.[91]

If allegorical interpretation illumines all reality in the light of Christ, then tropological interpretation finds a place for the Church, and for individuals, within the illumined space that has been created. De Lubac suggests that "Scripture first presents itself to us as a mirror," and that "in this mirror we learn to know our nature and our destiny; in it we also see the different stages through which we have passed since creation, the beautiful, and the ugly features of our internal face. It shows the truth of our being by pointing it out in its relation to the Creator."[92]

De Lubac's argument is supported by an example of tropological interpretation used in chapter three of this work. In a homily by an unknown medieval author, the identity and destiny of a king is illustrated allegorically. In this allegory, the king is identified with the donkey that carried Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The unknown author writes,

It is true, the animal after having made its entrance into Jerusalem Judea, was returned to its owner, but the prophecy, related to the animal, remained in Judea. For of that animal, Christ had needed not the visible, but the intelligible nature; that is, not the flesh, but the idea. Hence, the flesh was returned, but the idea retained: *caro remissa est, ratio autem retenta est.*[93]

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[91] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 141.

[92] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 142.

[93] Cited in Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 85.

The point of this story is that the king's true identity and ultimate destiny are derived from his service to Christ in the temporal realm. The role of the king was conceived liturgically. Through his service to Christ in the temporal realm, the king was wedded to Christ and incorporated into the divine economy.[94]

This example shows how tropological interpretation serves the Church's engagement with culture by providing Christians a means for entering into the divine drama. The king, who is the subject of the above homily, is invited to understand himself and his kingship in relation to Christ and His divine mission. Through tropological interpretation, the king's life can become an "improvisation" in this ongoing drama, as he struggles each day to discover himself in the stories of Scripture.[95]

Tropological interpretation mediates a genuine ontological extension because it serves to convert and transform persons according "to the divine likeness."[96] With the tropological sense, persons are united with the Word of God in spiritual marriage and discover themselves in this union. The tropological sense is considered the "summit" of biblical interpretation perhaps because of its "force" or soteriological potency. In contrast to Milbank's proposal in *The Word Made Strange*, tropological interpretation is potent not because it approaches Jesus as a non-identifiable character whose language and practice are "fully transferable," but because it introduces the Church, in every age

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[94] It is interesting how, in Isaiah 44:28 – 45:6, the Persian King, Cyrus, is incorporated into the divine economy unknowingly.

[95] "It is the Scripture that measures us, and which scrutinizes us, and which makes the fountains of living water spring forth in us, and which ends by saying to us, not to deny it to us by showing us the unity of the first source: 'Drink the water from your vessels and from you wells'" (Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 142).

[96] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 141.

and cultural context, to the divine prophet, priest, and king who judges, challenges, and transforms.

The Anagogical Sense. Hans Urs Von Balthasar has suggested that de Lubac's theological "position moved into a suspended middle in which he could not practice any philosophy without its transcendence into theology, but also no theology without its essential inner substructure of philosophy."[97] This paradox lies at the heart of de Lubac's thesis that nature is contingent and finds its completion and fulfillment only in the supernatural grace of God. John Milbank thinks that the phrase, "suspended middle," represents de Lubac's position with "great accuracy," since de Lubac focuses neither on dogmatics nor on metaphysics, insisting instead that "theology should be a mysticism and that mysticism [is] essentially a reading of signs." For de Lubac, mystical theology is "a combination of event and sign in continuous process."[98] Interestingly, (and Milbank pays too little attention to this fact) de Lubac also suggests in numerous places that "theological science and the explication of Scripture cannot but be one and the same thing."[99]

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[97] Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac*, 15.

[98] Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 11-12.

[99] He writes further that "In its most profound and far-reaching sense this estimation of the situation remains true even to our own day. But in its stricter and more immediate sense, this idea flourished right to the eve of the thirteenth century. The vocabulary, which still remains as a witness to this state of affairs, may strike us as quite curious at first glance. But the great scholastics remained faithful to it. 'Sacred Scripture which is called theology,' says Saint Bonaventure. And similarly Saint Thomas speaks of 'Theology, which is called Sacred Scripture.' We know, too, that in the first question of the Summa theological, the two expressions 'sacred doctrine' and 'Sacred Scripture' are used alternately, as equivalents. In the previous era it had been more truly the case that the scholar was a commentator, and dogma was a kind of exegesis." Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 1*, 27.

It is important to note that, for de Lubac, the "suspended middle" is not a paralysis. Rather, it simply suggests, with Saint Paul, that Christians are equipped, not with epistemic certainty, but with faith, hope, and love. Spiritual exegesis enables the Church to progress in its ascent toward God through a continual formation in faith, hope, and love. Indeed, the three spiritual senses of scripture are identified by patristic and medieval commentators with these three theological virtues. Allegory builds up faith; tropology builds up love, and anagogy builds up hope.[100] Spiritual exegesis entails a christological hermeneutic that mediates, continually, the graced ascent of nature towards the supernatural. Because it leads the Church always higher in its ascent to God, anagogy unifies all of the other senses of Scripture. De Lubac writes:

> It is in traditional eschatology that the doctrine of the four senses is achieved and finds its unity. For Christianity is a fulfillment, but in this very fulfillment it is a promised hope. Mystical or doctrinal, taught or lived, true anagogy is therefore always eschatological. It stirs up the desire for eternity in us. This is also why the fourth sense is forced to be the last. No more than it could really lack the three others could it be followed by a fifth. Neither is hope ever lacking nor, in our earthly condition, is it every surpassed even if it already encroaches upon its term.[101]

The anagogical sense of scripture, then, is driven by the faith of allegory and the love of tropology always deeper into the mystery of Christ. De Lubac explains that "however high anagogy leads, it always leaves something to look for and always with greater fervor, because it still does not uncover the Face of God."[102] He acknowledges his debt to Augustine: "Always seek his face; so that discovery may not bring an end to this quest, whereby love is meant, but, as love increases, let the quest for what has been

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[100] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 181.

[101] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 197.

[102] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 193.

discovered increase as well."[103] It is the anagogical sense of scripture that continually

graces nature and draws it towards its destination and completion in the Triune God. The

anagogical sense ensures that Christ never becomes a mere extrinsic spectacle because

His "face" remains always beyond the Church's reach.

In *The Word Made Strange*, Milbank suggests that ecclesiology should have

primacy over Christology, since, among other reasons, Christ's atonement is made real

only as the Church makes reconciliation a reality in its own practices. He writes that "if

Jesus' death is efficacious, not just as the offering of an enabling sign, but also as a

material reality, then this is because it is the *inauguration* of the 'political' practice of

forgiveness; forgiveness as a mode of 'government' and social being."[104] Christ's death

is efficacious, in Milbank's view, only if the Church continues the "practice of

forgiveness" as its own "mode of government and social being." One of the many

problems with this approach is that it forgets that the Church herself remains always in

need of forgiveness. The Church, in this time between the times, cannot perform a

complete "non-identical repetition" of Jesus' atoning mode of being. Rather, the

Church's true nature remains always only partially realized. The Church receives herself

as a gift of love, and as Augustine reminds us, "as love increases, let the quest for what

has been discovered increase as well." In short, Milbank's ecclesiology, if it is given

primacy over Christology, is cut off from eschatology. In spiritual exegesis, which de

Lubac embraces, the anagogical sense ensures that the Church will remain always in

pursuit of the fullness of Christ.

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[103] Augustine, cited in Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2*, 193.

[104] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 161.

Conclusion

Importantly, de Lubac's theology-as-Christological mysticism is able both to complement and correct postliberalism and radical orthodoxy. De Lubac's Christological hermeneutic is intended to help the Church engage secular culture more faithfully, and in this way its central concern is consistent with the work of Frei, Lindbeck, and Milbank. Frei and Lindbeck advocate a biblical hermeneutic that focuses on the identity of Jesus, but their approach to Christology remains extrinsic and, in the words of Reinhard Hütter, "looses its unique soteriological center."[105] Milbank, on the other hand, wants to avoid extrinsicism, but in his attempt to articulate a Christology with soteriological potency, he evacuates the human Jesus of all specifiable content except a formal name, and his speculative ontological project has thus far engaged scripture far too infrequently.

I have argued that de Lubac's mystical Christology, which is mediated by spiritual exegesis, offers a truly participatory hermeneutic while avoiding the weaknesses found in the works of Frei and Lindbeck as well as in Milbank. His Christology is not extrinsicist like that of the postliberals, yet it assigns a positive and indispensable role to the gospel depiction of Jesus, in contrast to Milbank. Whereas Milbank endeavors to articulate a Christology with soteriological potency, he assigns primacy to ecclesiology and thus renders Jesus incapable (theoretically speaking) of Judgement and transformation. In contrast, de Lubac's mystical Christology is mediated by spiritual exegesis and is focused upon a transformation of the will and the building up of faith, hope, and love in the Church.

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[105] Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 64.

Consistent with the postliberal approach, de Lubac believes that biblical exegesis must mediate the Church's engagement with secular culture. However, whereas Frei and Lindbeck treat the biblical text as an enclosed, semiotic system that renders an extrinsic identity description of Jesus and "absorbs the world" through typological extension, de Lubac sees scripture as a multivalent gateway into the mystery of the cosmic Christ and thus as the means through which all of reality is made intelligible. For de Lubac, the ultimate end of theological science, which is inseparable from biblical exegesis, is "a many-faceted wisdom,"[106] rooted in the virtues, through which the Church participates in the mission of Jesus. Theological science is, for de Lubac, a participation in the mind of Christ. It is a Christological mysticism mediated by Scripture that endeavors to understand all things in relation to the divine light and build up the Church in Christ's virtues.

De Lubac's theological program is intended to show that theology is intrinsically an engagement with secular culture. Theology necessarily entails a "confrontation, a combat" with contemporary secular thought,[107] since its ultimate goal is the illumination of all reality in the light of Christ. Although de Lubac never entered into a direct

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[106] Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 1*, 35.

[107] Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 36. Bonhoeffer suggests that Christian engagement with secularism entails a "participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life. . . . allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ, into the messianic event. . . . This being caught up into the messianic sufferings of God takes a variety of forms in the New Testament. It appears in the call to discipleship, in Jesus' table-fellowship with sinners, in 'conversion' in the narrower sense of the word (e.g. Zacchaeus), in the act of the woman who was a sinner (Luke 7)…in the healing of the sick…, in Jesus acceptance of Children….The only thing that is common to all these is their sharing in the suffering of God in Christ. That is their faith" [Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Eberhard Bethge, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Enl. ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 361-362].

engagement with all the "various modes of secular knowledge," much of his work was focused on showing that this ongoing engagement is necessarily mediated by spiritual exegesis. One might wonder, however, whether de Lubac's retrieval of patristic and medieval exegesis remains a viable alternative for twenty-first century Christians who are many centuries removed from pre-critical interpretation. Although de Lubac did not advocate a strict return to the four-fold method, he did argue that the Church needs a new "synthesis" that combines the methods of critical biblical scholarship with the theological concerns of patristic and medieval exegetes. In the concluding chapter, after providing a brief review of de Lubac's theological program, I will offer several suggestions as to how the Church can appropriate de Lubac's work on spiritual exegesis while embracing the legitimate contributions of critical scholarship.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

De Lubac's Theological Revolution

It will be helpful to recall that de Lubac's theological career should be interpreted,

largely, as an attempt to draw the Catholic Church out of its self-imposed cultural exile in

order to reinvigorate its engagement with secular society. De Lubac believed that the

Church's response to secularization was inadequate because its theological vision was too

narrow to speak effectively to the social ills of European civilization. Faced with world

wars and fascist governments, most citizens of Europe, even Catholics, didn't look to the

Church for guidance in social and political matters. Rather, people poured their hopes

and energies into secular social and political movements like *Action française* because

the Catholic Church had, in recent centuries, begun to endorse a theology that separated

the natural and the supernatural realms. The Church's mission, it seemed, was to save

souls and little more. Theologians who endorsed the neo-scholastic view, which

separated nature and grace, were hard-pressed to relate their work to the concerns of

secular society.

De Lubac accused neo-scholasticism of extrinsicism because it presumed

theology to be a separated science, concerned with the objective content of supernatural

revelation, which is to be found in scripture and in the magisterial authority of the Church

as a "given." In order to disentangle the Church from the constraints of theological

extrinsicism and help it come out of its self-imposed exile in order to engage the secular

world more directly and faithfully, de Lubac focused his academic career on challenging

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the philosophical and theological presuppositions upon which neo-scholasticism stood.

His theological program, as I mentioned in chapter three, focused on three problematic

theological themes: the social and sacramental nature of the church, the relationship

between nature and grace, and biblical exegesis. In his earliest ecclesiological work,

Catholicism (1938), de Lubac showed that the Church is fundamentally social in

character, since its beginning and its end are found in the fullness of Christ – "humanity

as a whole" healed and redeemed.[1]

With *Corpus Mysticum* (1944) he described an important transformation in

sacramental language. Whereas prior to the twelfth century, the sacramental elements

were most often called *corpus mysticum* and the worshiping community was called

corpus verum, these designations were reversed at some point during the twelfth century

so that the elements became the real body of Christ while the worshiping community was

called the mystical body. For de Lubac, this transformation marked the beginning of a

kind of sacramental piety that looks upon the body of Christ as a mere "spectacle" to

behold – a separate and extrinsic presence rather than a presence within which the church

participates. This transformation in sacramental language undermined the christological

mysticism that de Lubac believed characterized most Christian theology prior to the

twelfth century.[2]

Whereas, in de Lubac's mind, Catholicism's movement away from a thoroughly

participatory ontology began at least in the twelfth century with sacramental

developments, it was the emergence of the concept of "pure nature" in the seventeenth

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[1] Lubac, *Catholicism*, 25-47.

[2] For a concise account of this change in sacramental piety, see Lubac, *Catholicism*, 93-101.

century that solidified this transformation. Accordingly, *Surnaturel* (1946) followed

Corpus Mysticum, as de Lubac engaged in his most direct confrontation with the neo-

scholastic majority who embraced the doctrine of *natura pura* and believed that it

represented the thought of Thomas Aquinas accurately.

The next major work to follow *Surnaturel* was *Histoire et esprit* (1950), de

Lubac's defense of Origen's allegorical approach to exegesis. This was de Lubac's first

major work on spiritual exegesis, though he eventually wrote more pages on this issue

than on any other. In de Lubac's mind, Catholic hermeneutics had succumbed to the

extrinsicism of neo-scholastic theology, which saw in scripture objective truth

propositions that formed, along with magisterial teachings, the given "content" of

supernatural revelation. Since he was equally unsatisfied with the increasing historicism

of biblical scholars (a tendency that also treated truth as extrinsic and objective) de Lubac

sought to retrieve the philosophy of history and participatory ontology that under girded

patristic and medieval exegesis. He hoped that his work would lead to a "new synthesis"

that would blend theology, exegesis, and spirituality together.[3]

Interestingly, it was in 1956, not long after he had written his book on Origen, that

de Lubac suggested his intended mystical treatise on Christ served as his "inspiration in

everything."[4] In other words, his major works on ecclesiology, ontology, and exegesis,

all of which challenged obstacles hindering the Church's engagement with secular

culture, were inspired and guided by his christological thought. For de Lubac,

christological mysticism, in the spirit of St. Paul, St. John, and the patristic and medieval

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[3] Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 93.

[4] Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 113.

theological tradition that followed, is fundamental in the Church's engagement with the world. Jesus Christ is the supernatural grace of God that rescues and completes nature. He is the beginning and the end of the Church, and through the mediation of spiritual exegesis, He illumines all reality and reveals the path through which humanity is reconciled to God. For de Lubac, the Church's engagement with the world is an aspect of its participation in Christ and is necessarily mediated by the spiritual interpretation of scripture. It is important to note that de Lubac never attempted to formulate a contemporary "method" of spiritual exegesis, and it is doubtful that he would have approved of such attempts.

Rather, he believed that the Church would always have to struggle in order to interpret Scripture faithfully, and he assumed that this struggle would often lead to unexpected places. De Lubac did believe that the Church could learn a great deal from the ancients. He suggested that contemporary interpreters "must approach matters in greater depth and with greater freedom if we hope to recapture anything of the spiritual interpretation of Scripture as it existed during the first centuries of the Church. We must, above all else, reproduce a spiritual movement, often through completely different methods, while avoiding a retreat into the archaic or into slavish imitation."[5] Although he was not specific about what exactly spiritual exegesis should look like today, we can glean a few simple guiding principles from his work that are particularly relevant for the contemporary context.

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[5] Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 24.

The Future of Spiritual Exegesis

First, de Lubac's work suggests that the literal/historical sense of the text plays an indispensable and determinative role in *theological* interpretation. Although patristic and medieval exegetes insisted that the allegorical senses of scripture must be properly grounded in the historical sense, de Lubac readily admits that their lack of historical insight "led to many abuses."[6] Indeed, early Christian interpreters tended, like many distinctively modern exegetes, to project their own cultural and theological assumptions onto the authors of scripture. Patristic and medieval theologians were not equipped with modern historical-critical tools and knew very little, for example, about Semitic culture.[7] The absence of a genuinely critical approach to the text led to a gradual decline away from "the historical and social character of the Christian synthesis" towards an excessively individualistic approach by the late Middle Ages. De Lubac remarks that "an exegesis which, in essence, concentrated on the interior life was, however, worlds apart from what we call today 'the end of history.' Centered as it was on the individual soul, it really could tell us no more about the triumphant Church than about the militant Church…. As spiritual individualism gained ground, the great dogmatic vision became blurred."[8]

De Lubac believes that a depreciation of the historical sense during the late Middle Ages necessitated a renewed interest in the literal meaning of the text. However,

[6] Lubac, "On an Old Distich," 126.

[7] Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit*, 246-247.

[8] Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 52-53.

when that renewed interest finally came, it was not employed for the same reasons as it

had been in earlier times – in the service of spiritual exegesis:

> After a long life, it had eventually grown old. The problems had changed, and so
> had the needs of Christian thought. Once the period of intense effervescence in
> which it had originated had passed, mystical exegesis had furnished the apologists
> with a weapon, then the Doctors had drawn from it a unified vision of the divine
> Economy; and then the monks had found in it a method useful in their '*lectio
> divina*.' Now came the intellectuals who were interested in constructing a new
> theology with new methods, but within the continuity of the faith. With them,
> reason awakes from its symbolic dream. 'The Age of Proof' begins. . . . It was
> certainly more valuable for argumentative theology to hold fast to the letter. . . .
> Beginning with the sixteenth century, the development was to become more
> pronounced. . . . the onslaught of Protestantism soon required a concentration of
> effort on the establishment of the literal meaning.[9]

A renewed emphasis on the literal sense finally came, but it was too often put into

the service of polemics and apologetics. De Lubac suggests, that following the Protestant

Reformation,

> The onslaught of rationalism and the necessity of examining the biblical accounts
> in the light of the documents discovered by modern scholarship again brought
> apologetical considerations to the fore. The problem of inerrancy received the
> major share of attention, and the spiritual interpretation of the sacred texts, along
> with the earlier method of understanding the faith, were henceforth almost
> completely abandoned.[10]

For de Lubac, there is nothing wrong with historical-critical approaches to biblical

interpretation.[11] However, he believes that critical methods produce too little fruit in the

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[9] Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 57-58.

[10] Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 58. Hans Frei has made similar observations
about the way that biblical interpretation is dominated by apologetic concerns during
much of the modern era. See Frei, *Eclipse*, 105-164.

[11] He defends himself against charges of denigrating scientific approaches to
biblical interpretation, explaining, "I have recently been accused of some sort of
opposition to the acceptance of scientific exegesis in the Church and, by the same token,
to the works of my colleagues and to the spirit of our Faculty. This rumor, although
absurd, has become persistent, it has spread quite far, enough for me to see myself
obliged to combat it. I thus find myself . . . in the most ridiculous position: that of the

Church because they are too often employed for the wrong reasons. When the critical methods are used within the context of either extrinsicist or historicist agendas, they are used in the pursuit of an abstracted and objectified meaning rather than in pursuit of God.

What de Lubac hoped to see was a renewed emphasis on the literal/historical sense of scripture, through historical-critical methods, as a means of inspiring, correcting, and controlling a new and vibrant spiritual exegesis. He believed that a proper understanding of biblical "persons, events, ideas, and texts in their proper historical contexts"[12] should strengthen spiritual exegesis in a host of ways, without abandoning it. De Lubac believed that there is a "religious meaning" inherent in all of scripture and that scholars offer a great service by attending to it. He suggests that "we must reject too all-embracing or too automatic a practice of spiritual interpretation, so as to preserve the religious value of the Old Testament, considered both literally and in its historical situations."[13]

Attention to the historical context can strengthen spiritual exegesis precisely because it offers greater insight into the reality of Jesus. Indeed, if spiritual exegesis mediates, in part, the transformation of the historical Jesus into the *totus Christus*, then it is imperative that the Church understand the gospel portrayal of Jesus to the best of its ability. Jesus of Nazareth, not just any person, is the Word incarnate, so understanding Jesus in literary and historical context is an indispensable first step in understanding what

man who must defend himself from having denigrated the very thing of which all those who know him well know that he was always the warmest supporter" (Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 311).

[12] D'Ambrosio, *Henri de Lubac and the Recovery of the Traditional Hermeneutic*, 256.

[13] Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 29.

His life, death, and resurrection means for the Church and the world in every age. De

Lubac explains the importance of understanding Scripture on the literal and historical

levels when he suggests that

> Even the categories used by Jesus to tell us about himself are ancient biblical
> categories. Jesus causes them to burst forth or, if you prefer, sublimates them and
> unifies them by making them converge upon himself. But he somehow needs
> them. . . . Thus, 'biblical images,' and the concrete facts behind them, furnish the
> thread, both historical and noetic, from which is woven the Christian mystery in all
> its newness and transcendence.[14]

Jesus was fully human, a Jew who lived during the Roman occupation of Palestine. We

should expect that his actions and words, as they are recorded in the gospels, would take

on greater depth and meaning as we become more familiar with the cultural, religious,

and political context within which he lived.

Indeed, studies like Ched Myer's *Binding the Strong Man*,[15] which focus on the

socio-political climate of first century Rome and Jesus' radical subversion of it, offer

invaluable insight into the character who, according to Christians, now reigns over

heaven and earth. According to Meyers, the Gospel of Mark offers a portrait of Jesus as

a Jew whose entire life is an interpretation of the Old Testament, and particularly of the

prophetic tradition which tended to emphasize the relationship between apostasy and

social injustices. Meyer's investigation of Jesus within the context of first century Jewish

and Roman culture shows how Jesus continually subverted Roman imperial power and

pronounced judgement upon Jewish responses to it. It is quite difficult to reconcile this

Jesus with any form of temporal authority exercised through violence and manipulation.

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[14] Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 7-8.

[15] Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

One wonders whether the medieval church would have been as willing to ascribe a liturgical role in the divine economy to kings and princes had they understood Jesus of Nazareth as Meyers suggests he is portrayed in Mark's gospel. Rather than suggesting, as in the allegory mentioned in chapters three and five, that medieval Kings are like the donkey that carried Jesus into Jerusalem,[16] most political and military leaders would have been more accurately portrayed in an allegory as Caiaphas or Pontius Pilate.[17] This is the way that the historical/literal sense should exercise control over the spiritual senses. The more clearly we understand the historical Jesus, as portrayed in the gospels, the more clearly we understand what He means to us now. Dawson makes a similar point when he suggests that "Christianity demands respect for the letter of the spirit, respect for the grammars of difference that constitute identity. Christians choose to identify themselves with one who has already identified himself with each person."[18] For Dawson, because Christians come to know themselves in relation to Jesus, it is of utmost importance that we allow Him the particularity and difference that comes with individuality. Should we ignore the letter and fashion Jesus' identity after our own, then we are thwarted in our attempt to discover ourselves in relation to Him.

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[16] I am referring here to the medieval allegory quoted in Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 85 and mentioned above on pages 80 and 209 in which a King is identified with the Donkey that carried Christ into Jerusalem.

[17] It may not be necessary to draw a sharp, either/or distinction here. Perhaps the average medieval king could have been represented accurately by the donkey at times and at other times by Pontius Pilate. However, it is well known that even some of the greatest Medieval theologians (Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas) approved of the Crusades, for example, and believed that God's work was being done through them. I would suggest that a better understanding of Jesus of Nazareth in his social/historical context would have engendered a great deal more caution among ancient thinkers in relation to the use of force by Christians who claimed to be doing God's work.

[18] Dawson, "Figural Reading," 194.

Accordingly, exegetical methods focused on understanding the literal sense have much to offer the Church as it strives to engage the world faithfully in the Spirit of Christ. The emergence of new interpretive approaches, such as literary, rhetorical, and social-scientific criticism, suggest that interest in the literal/historical sense will continue and may serve the Church in unforeseen, yet beneficial ways.[19] Indeed, de Lubac is confident that in the future "the Bible will be enjoyed and understood anew because a healthy spiritual exegesis will once more rise on the foundations of a tested science."[20]

De Lubac's work suggests a second hermeneutical principle: the Church must be clear about the ultimate "end" of biblical interpretation (and of the spiritual life in general), which is nothing less than the vision of God "face-to-face" (1 Cor. 13:12). The Triune God, whose face is revealed most clearly to human eyes in the person of Jesus Christ, is the ultimate meaning of all Christian Scripture. De Lubac gets carried away in contemplating this fact:

> Christ was the sole end of all biblical history and of all biblical reality. . . . In short, the spirit of the letter is Christ: *Spiritus ipsius literae, Christus*. The Gift of which Prophecy and the whole Law spoke prophetically is Christ. The New Testament is

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[19] Interestingly, de Lubac did not think that professional biblical scholars, trained in methods that focus on the literal and historical sense of the text, need to try and be all things at once. He believed that scholarly specialization can benefit the Church so long as there is a healthy exchange of gifts and ideas. He writes: "to sum up, learning and spirituality are not in the least incompatible. Normally, they must give each other a hand, and it is obviously desirable that they be combined in the same individual. But it is not ordained by God that the most learned will inevitably be the most believing, nor the most spiritual; nor that the century which sees the greatest progress realized in scientific exegesis will, by that fact alone, be the century with the best understanding of Holy Scripture. We need, then, both men of learning, who will make us read Scripture historically, and men of the spirit – who must be 'men of the Church' – to deepen our spiritual grasp of it. If the former deliver us from our ignorance, it is still only the latter who possess the gift of discernment which protects us from interpretations which are dangerous for the faith" (Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 157).

[20] Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 71.

Christ: *Novum Testamentum, qui est Christus*. The Gospel is Christ: *Evangelium, Christus est*. The Breath of our nostrils is Christ the Lord: *Spiritus ante faciem nostrum, Christus Dominus*. . . . Jesus Christ effects the unity of Scripture because he is its end and its fullness. Everything in Scripture is related to him. And he is its unique Object. We could even say that he is the totality of its exegesis. . . . He is the Head of the body of Scripture, just as he is the Head of the body of his Church. He is the Head of all sacred understanding, just as he is the Head of all the elect. He is the complete contents of Scripture, just as he contains it all in himself. . . . Just as he is the exegesis of Scripture, Jesus Christ is also its exegete. He is really its Logos, both in the active sense and in the passive sense. . . . It is he and he alone who explains it to us, and in explaining it to us he is himself explained.[21]

Thus, the "meaning" of scripture can never be equated with or limited to an objective given, since Jesus Christ is not an object. As mentioned above, de Lubac was critical of both "extrinsicism" and "historicism," because both of these interpretive tendencies treat the text as though its meaning may be grasped objectively and completely.

De Lubac's study of the patristic and medieval exegetical tradition illustrates that the Fathers interpreted Scripture, not in search of objective knowledge as a final end, but in search of God. Although the complete revelation of God's face remains always a future hope, the early Church believed that spiritual exegesis enables a real, spiritual union with God through the struggle to interpret and engage reality with the mind and will of Christ. Spiritual exegesis fortified the early Church in a distinctively christological wisdom and virtue that enabled it to be a faithful witness to the reign of God on earth. The Church today should strive for nothing less.

This does not mean, however, that the Church should return to the fourfold method in an effort to read Christ and the Church back into every word of the Old Testament. To a large extent, the Church does not need to return to the fourfold method

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[21] Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 105.

because allegorical interpretation has already achieved its purposes.[22] Jesus of Nazareth

is already transformed into the Omnipresent Christ through allegorical interpretation

within the New Testament. Jesus himself initiates this transformation when, during the

Passover meal, he commands his disciples: "take, eat, this is my body" (Matt. 26:26).

The author of John's gospel follows Jesus' lead when he writes, "In the beginning was

the Word. . . . and the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:1-14), and Paul

expands the mystery when he describes the Church as the "body of Christ" (1 Cor.

12:27).[23]

As mentioned previously, the early Church did not invent allegorical

interpretation; it merely prolonged and formalized a tradition that had begun with the

authors of the Old Testament and blossomed in the imaginations of New Testament

writers. Allegorical interpretation does not need to be revived today because it continues

to flourish in the liturgy, in hymns, and especially in the sacraments of Baptism and

Eucharist. Moreover, spiritual interpretation will inevitably continue as sermons are

preached and persons are invited to "'create' themselves in finding a place within" the

biblical drama.[24] Whenever a sermon is preached on the prologue to John's gospel, the

Church is introduced to the mystery of the Omnipresent Christ, the "Word" who was with

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[22] "Spiritual exegesis accomplished an essential part of its task a long time ago. It has made its contribution to the expression of the Christian mystery and to the building of the Church. It would be impossible to restore it today in all its fullness. As long as there is no repudiation of the achievements of spiritual exegesis, no mortal damage has been done. It should however, be borne in mind that in the spiritual order it is an illusion to think that anything can be absolutely acquired, once and for all" (Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 64-65).

[23] These are just a few of the many allegorical interpretations that can be found in both the Old and New Testaments.

[24] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 32.

God in the beginning, came to dwell on earth among us, and now reigns as exalted Lord.

Throughout the Christian year, as pastors all over the world follow the lectionary and

struggle to lead their congregations through the preached Word, the light of the

omnipresent Christ is made to shine in a multitude of human situations. It is in these

situations especially that the church's engagement with culture begins. The church's

ongoing struggle to discover "what the text may become (and so of what it is)," is always

also "a discovery of the world."[25] The church's interpretation of scripture necessarily

mediates, to borrow a phrase from radical orthodoxy, the extension of a "Christianized

ontology."[26]

    For de Lubac, it is not that the church needs to find a new hermeneutic. Rather,

the church must simply resist the temptation to destroy or discard the rich, symbolic

interpretation of the Word that has already been gifted to us in Scripture and in the

Church's structured worship life. De Lubac warns against this temptation when he writes

that,

> Unlike the Christian ages . . . we are victims of totalitarian 'terrenness' and
> humanism. In their various ways, psychologists, sociologists, and metaphysicians
> conspire to impose such views upon us. To put it very briefly, our main temptation
> is to make of God a symbol for man, the objectified symbol of himself.[27]

The church must avoid historicist and extrinsicist approaches to biblical interpretation

because they seek, not the Triune God, but an idol fashioned after human likeness.[28] The

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[25] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 30-31.

[26] Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 2.

[27] Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 69-70.

[28] The various nineteenth and twentieth century "quests" for the historical Jesus
offer well-known examples of this temptation.

revival of spiritual exegesis should, above all else, take the form of an earnest quest for

the God Who reveals Himself yet can never be objectified. Although this quest begins

with an effort to understand Christ as he is portrayed in the literal sense of the biblical

narrative, it must also entail an attempt to interpret all reality through a distinctively

Christological, biblical hermeneutic. This will mean, as Rowan Williams has suggested,

a continual process of "re-telling" and "re-working" the biblical narrative in relation to a

seemingly infinite number of human situations.[29] It will mean that the Church always

looks to Jesus of Nazareth, as portrayed in the biblical drama, in order to discover itself

and find its way in the world.

It is in the quest to interpret reality through the christological lens of scripture that

God discloses Himself and becomes effectual in and through the Church. As the grace of

God enables the Church to identify itself with Christ, seeing the world as He sees it,

judging the world as He judges it, desiring for the world what He desires for it, and

suffering for the world as He suffered for it, then Christians come to "know" God in an

intimate, participatory way. According to de Lubac, "the beatific vision" which is the

ultimate end of biblical interpretation and human life in general, is not "the contemplation

of a spectacle, but an intimate participation in the vision the Son has of the Father in the

bosom of the Trinity."[30]

A Concluding Remark about Radical Orthodoxy

While Milbank's Christology and approach to scripture are problematic, there is

nothing necessarily objectionable about the radical orthodoxy project. The problem with

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[29] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 31.

[30] Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 228.

radical orthodoxy is that it does not do what Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward suggest that it does in their introduction to the initial volume. That is, radical orthodoxy's speculative deconstruction of secular social theory does not "extend a fully Christianized ontology." Radical orthodoxy's *Kulturkritik* does not supply the aesthetic idiom that the Church embodies. As Milbank seems to acknowledge in his most recent work on de Lubac, the "divine idiom" is christologically mediated through the spiritual exegesis of Scripture.[31] However, radical orthodoxy's speculative engagement with secular thought can play an important role and should be commended. Because secular social theorists "conspire to impose" their vision and way of life upon us, Christians must work diligently to expose the nihilism inherent in secular interpretations of reality. Although radical orthodoxy does not "re-narrate" Christ nor create, as a precursor to practice, the space that the Church embodies, it can endeavor to show that the space created by secular social theorists is a dangerous illusion.

Although radical orthodoxy intends a vigorous engagement with secular culture, it has thus far ignored the constitutive role played by spiritual exegesis in this engagement. However, the practice of spiritual exegesis, i.e., the transfiguration of Jesus of Nazareth into the omnipresent Christ, is itself a central dogma of the Christian faith and cannot be excluded from the Church's engagement with secular culture.[32]

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[31] Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 57.

[32] "Christian tradition recognizes two meanings of Scripture. The most general terminology for them is the 'literal meaning' and the 'spiritual meaning.' These two meanings are related to each other the way the Old and New Testaments are related. It would be more exact, indeed perfectly precise, to say that these meanings constitute, that they *are* the Old and the New Testaments." Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 85. The authority of the "spiritual meaning" is forever preserved in the canonization of the New Testament.

De Lubac once suggested that "all nature" 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."[1] There is an ancient tradition that suggests there are two books of revelation: the book of Scripture and the book of nature, and that each of these books is a text that, when read correctly, signifies God.[2] With the fall from grace humankind lost sight of God's presence signified in the book of nature. However, by the grace of God, the Word reveals the sacramental character of all reality once again.

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[1] Henri de Lubac, "Disappearance of the Sense of the Sacred," in *Theology in History* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1996), 231.

[2] For a recent investigation of this tradition, see Arie Johan Vanderjagt and Klaas van Berkel, *Book of Nature in Antiquity & the Middle Ages* (Leuven: Peeters 2005).

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