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### *Nouvelle Théologie: A Return to Modernism?*

Gerard Loughlin

Réginald Marie Garrigou-Lagrange, writing in 1946, famously asked where *nouvelle théologie* was heading—‘La nouvelle théologie, où va-t-elle?’—and replied that it was returning to modernism—‘Elle revient au modernisme’.<sup>1</sup> At the time of asking, Garrigou-Lagrange (1877–1964) was already a pre-eminent, much published teacher of neo-scholastic theology at the Angelicum, the Dominican House of Studies in Rome. He was also a staunch defender of the faith against the encroachments of Modernism, obsessed with the threat it posed to the certainties he had found in the Catholic *magisterium*.<sup>2</sup> His answer to his own question was not a compliment but a damning judgment, intended to close rather than engage discussion.

It is more than tempting to follow Garrigou-Lagrange and read the story of *nouvelle théologie* as repeating that of Modernism. For both stories concern groups of theologians—a more coherent group in the case of *nouvelle théologie*—who wished to retrieve traditions of thought earlier than the neo-scholastic, in order to correct the rationalism of the latter and confront the growing challenges of modernity. Both groups—Modernists and *nouveaux théologiens*—looked to the tradition of Christian mysticism that finds the transcendent in the material and the immanent; the quotidian transformed. But in challenging the reigning theology of their day, they attracted the hostility of others, whose careers were invested in the certainties now being questioned. Both groups were named—and so formed—by the instruments of their destruction. In 1907, Pope Pius X subscribed his name to the Encyclical

<sup>1</sup> Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, ‘La Nouvelle Théologie, où va-t-elle?’ *Ang*, 23 (1946) 126–45 (143).

<sup>2</sup> See further Michael J. Kerlin, ‘Anti-Modernism and the Elective Affinity Between Politics and Philosophy’, in Darrell Jodock (ed.), *Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 308–36 (314). Kerlin offers a fascinating discussion of the elective affinities between Garrigou-Lagrange and Jacques Maritain, and their mutual abhorrence of Modernism and fascination with the proto-fascist *Action française*.

*Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, which declared ‘modernism’ the ‘synthesis of all heresies’, though the synthesis was entirely the work of the pope’s letter, itself almost certainly the work of Fr Joseph Lemius (1860–1923).<sup>3</sup> And in 1947, Garrigou-Lagrange named *nouvelle théologie* as such, the new theology that was in fact nothing but the old, returned to life through his naming of it, and by that designation destroyed.<sup>4</sup> The *nouvelle théologie* had been noted already by Pietro Parente in 1942,<sup>5</sup> but Garrigou-Lagrange’s attention was the more defining, and followed closely on the heels of addresses by Pope Pius XII to the Jesuits and Dominicans, in which he had condemned the ‘nova theologia’.<sup>6</sup> And then, in August 1950, came the ‘lightning bolt’ that was Pius’ *Humani Generis*,<sup>7</sup> aimed against ‘some false opinions threatening to undermine the foundations of Catholic doctrine’.

As with *Pascendi*, *Humani Generis* does not name its opponents, whose discussions it nevertheless aimed to close. Also as with *Pascendi*, the final concern of *Humani Generis* was that people should attend to what the church taught and, when all other justification was lacking, simply submit to its authority and assent to its teaching. The encyclical asserts its own status as that of the ordinary teaching authority of the church, which is to say of Christ himself.<sup>8</sup> Thus the encyclical permits the discussion of evolution ‘provided that all are prepared to submit to the judgment of the Church’,<sup>9</sup> which insists that whatever the case with bodies, souls are the immediate creation of God<sup>10</sup> and there is no question of polygenism.<sup>11</sup> But the real interest of the encyclical

<sup>3</sup> See Alec R. Vidler, *A Variety of Catholic Modernists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 17–18; and Gabriel Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence: A Study in Catholic Modernism and Integralism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), Appendix 1 (232–4).

<sup>4</sup> The article is dated 1946, but appeared in February 1947; Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie – New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (London: Continuum, 2010), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Pietro Parente, ‘Nouve tendenze teologiche’, *L’Osservatore Romano* (9–10 February 1942), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie – New Theology*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> De Lubac described *Humani Generis* as the ‘lightning bolt’ which ‘killed the project’ that he and others were developing, of a ‘theology less systematic than the manuals, but more saturated with tradition, integrating the valid elements in the results of modern exegesis, of patristics, liturgy, history, philosophical reflection’. Cited in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac*, trans. Joseph Fessio, SJ and Michael M. Waldstein (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991 [1976]), 10–11.

<sup>8</sup> Pius XII, *Humani Generis*. Encyclical Letter concerning some False Opinions Threatening to Undermine the Foundations of Catholic Doctrine (12th August 1950), AAS 42 (1950), 561–78, § 20. ET available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_12081950\\_humani-generis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis_en.html).

<sup>9</sup> Pius XII, *Humani Generis* § 36.

<sup>10</sup> Pius XII, *Humani Generis* § 36.

<sup>11</sup> Pius XII, *Humani Generis* §37. The encyclical insists on monogenism (from Adam) in order to preserve the transmission of original sin from one to all, even though such sin is nowhere mentioned in Genesis, which clearly assumes polygenism (Gen. 4.16); and this even though *HG* applauds the literal reading of the Bible over and against its symbolic interpretation (§ 23), which is needed to find the doctrine of monogenetic sin in the text.

is with those ideas already identified by Garrigou-Lagrange in his attack on the new theology.<sup>12</sup>

Garrigou-Lagrange took aim at Henri Bouillard and his argument that the truths of faith need to be expressed in current terms, in the language of the day. Maintaining Thomas Aquinas' Aristotelian vocabulary might prove more of a hindrance than a help. For Garrigou-Lagrange, unchangeable truths take unchangeable forms, and truth is always the relation of mind to reality, rather than of mind to life. The latter substitution was proposed by Maurice Blondel, another target of Garrigou-Lagrange's critique, which identifies Blondel's misconception as characteristically Modernist. De Lubac is also rebuked, and the danger presented by all three authors is the aping in thought of the world's supposed fluidity, a changeableness that threatens the unchangeable dogmas of the faith and the church which proclaims them. Thus the requirement in *Humani Generis*, to limit the allowed discussion of evolution, to maintain what is necessary for the unchanging doctrine of original sin, is also a concern of Garrigou-Lagrange's article, where he refers to Teilhard de Chardin.

The final example that shows where the new theology is heading is the proposal to change the language of transubstantiation so as to better render the mystery of Christ's presence at the Eucharist. To abandon Thomas' rendition of Aristotelian ontology is to abandon the doctrine of the real presence and embrace the 'position moderniste', which views Christ's arrival as a change in the subject rather than in the object of adoration: 'comporte toi à l'égard de l'Éucharistie comme à l'égard de l'humanité du Christ'.<sup>13</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange called for a return to Thomas, and Thomas as interpreted in the neo-scholastic tradition stemming from the nineteenth century.

The immediate effects of *Humani Generis* were as devastating as those of *Pascendi*, though the latter was part of a tripartite offensive. It had been preceded by *Lamentabili Sane Exitu* (17th July 1907), a compilation of condemned teachings, and was followed, a few years later, by the institution, on 1 September 1910, of an anti-Modernist oath that was to be taken by all priests and teachers of priests, and which remained in force until 1967.<sup>14</sup> It was this last which really achieved the work of the Encyclical, and helped to create a culture of paranoia and conformity, enabling any perceived theological deviancy to be denounced as Modernist—heresy *à la mode*. Mark Schoof likens the situation in the church to that of the Netherlands under Nazi occupation. 'People thought that enemies and traitors were lurking everywhere'; that

<sup>12</sup> It is not known who wrote the encyclical, but it is quite likely that Garrigou-Lagrange was one of the contributors. See further Joseph A. Komonchak's essay in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, *La nouvelle théologie*, 141.

<sup>14</sup> The oath was prescribed in the *motu proprio*, *Sacrorum Antistitum*, and is reprinted in Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mystery* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 223–5.

everywhere the fifth columnists of Modernism were hiding, needing to be rooted out before they destroyed the citadel.<sup>15</sup> It was in such a climate that the work of the new theology developed, attempting a rapprochement with modernity under the radar of the thought police.

Catholic theologians would rarely admit to continuity with the Modernists, lest the contagion of heresy be thought to infect their own work. Marie-Dominique Chenu was foolhardy enough to quote the Irish Modernist George Tyrrell (1861–1909) with approval in his book on the theology of Le Saulchoir, when he embraced a historicism that could only be read as Modernism by such as Garrigou-Lagrange.<sup>16</sup> The book was withdrawn from circulation in 1938, and placed on the Index of Prohibited Books in 1942,<sup>17</sup> where other works of *nouvelle théologie* were to join it.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, Chenu, Louis Charlier, and René Draguet were removed from their teaching posts. They were suspected of Modernism, of introducing change and contingency into the fixed certainties of Christian faith. Also suspect was Henri de Lubac and others working at or associated with the Jesuit faculty at Fourvière: Henri Bouillard and Jean Daniélou. Several of these, including de Lubac, lost their posts in the lead-up to *Humani Generis*, and the circulation of de Lubac's books—*De la connaissance de Dieu* (1941, 1948), *Corpus mysticum* (1944, 1949), and *Surnaturel* (1946)—was restricted. As in so much else, these erasures repeated those suffered by the Modernists, and were but the continuing effects of the purge begun in 1910.

Persecution always started, not with the burning, but with the banning of books. The French Modernist, Alfred Loisy (1857–1940), had five of his books prohibited in 1903, a sign of the distaste that would lead to his excommunication in 1908. He might have averted this fate through recanting, but chose not to. More tragic was Tyrrell's loss to the church. A convert to Catholicism (1879), he had become a Jesuit priest in 1891, and thereafter one of the Jesuit's most able and well-known teachers and writers. But he was effectively forced to leave the Order in 1905. He was excommunicated two years later, having published articles against *Pascendi*, and two years after that he was dead, most likely from Bright's disease.<sup>19</sup> Though he had devoted his life to the church and its faith, he could not abjure his writings, and so was refused a Catholic burial. Nevertheless, his old friend, Henri Brémond, said a few prayers at the

<sup>15</sup> Mark Schoof, OP, *Breakthrough: Beginnings of the New Catholic Theology*, introduced by E. Schillebeeckx OP, trans. N. D. Smith (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1970 [1968]), 45.

<sup>16</sup> Marie-Dominique Chenu. *Une école de théologie: Le Saulchoir* (Kain-lez-Tournai/Étiolles: Le Saulchoir/Casterman, 1937).

<sup>17</sup> See further Fergus Kerr, 'Chenu's Little Book', *New Blackfriars*, 66/777 (1985), 108–112.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Louis Charlier's *Essai sur le problème théologique*, Bibliothèque Orientations: Section scientifique, 1 (Thuillies: Ramgal, 1938).

<sup>19</sup> For an account of Tyrrell's death see Nicholas Sagovsky, 'On God's Side': *A Life of George Tyrrell* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), ch. 15.

graveside. Brémond was duly censured and made to take the anti-Modernist oath.<sup>20</sup>

Other Modernists fared better. The Austro-Scottish Baron Friedrich von Hügel (1852–1925) was a layman, and so of no real interest to the ecclesial authorities, and had always been more circumspect in his own writings than he had often urged in those of his friends, like Tyrrell.<sup>21</sup> Edouard Le Roy and Lucien Laberthonnière (a priest) found their books prohibited. Tyrrell's close friend and indefatigable biographer, Maude Petre (1863–1942), was for a time forced to go outside of her diocese in order to receive the sacraments, but was otherwise left alone. The church's treatment of the Modernists was thus variable, ranging from the petty to the vindictive. But it was chilling, with no qualms about destroying those it deemed insubordinate; and it was effective.

In light of the repetitions between the stories of modernism and of the *nouvelle théologie*, one might take a hint from those from whom one would otherwise hesitate to learn lessons, and suppose a continuity of ambition and thought between the early and the mid-twentieth-century Modernists or neo-Modernists. But such is the taint of the term 'Modernism', that even today exponents of *nouvelle théologie*, including Protestant ones (who are presumably immune to the anxieties of Catholic culture), will seek to distance the *nouveaux théologiens* from their predecessors. Thus Hans Boersma, while he does not deny certain similarities between the two groups, argues for a fundamental difference between their agendas.<sup>22</sup>

Boersma allows for an 'overlap' between Modernism and *nouvelle théologie*, but denies that the former was a significant harbinger of the latter. Both shared a distaste for the aridities of neo-Thomism, and honoured the importance of experience for theology, but the Modernists did not espouse anything like the sacramental ontology that Boersma finds in *nouvelle théologie*. Indeed, Boersma asserts that the Modernists maintained the same 'gap between the natural and the supernatural' as otherwise held by their opponents.<sup>23</sup> With reference to Loisy and Tyrrell, Boersma insists that both 'scholars evinced the modern incapacity to reach beyond the natural horizons.' They focused on 'historical critical exegesis' and collapsed 'revelation into mystical experience'

<sup>20</sup> Maisie Ward, *The Wilfred Wards and the Transition*, 2 vols (London: Sheed & Ward, 1934–37), vol. 2: *Insurrection versus Resurrection*, 492–3.

<sup>21</sup> On von Hügel see further Michael de la Bedoyere, *The Life of Baron von Hügel* (London: Dent, 1951); and John J. Heaney, *The Modernist Crisis: Von Hügel* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968).

<sup>22</sup> Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 18. Though much of this essay takes issue with Boersma's reading of Modernism in relation to *nouvelle théologie*, it is nevertheless indebted—at almost every point—to his exhilarating study. I would also like to thank my colleague, Paul D. Murray, for his encouragement and assistance in the writing of this essay.

<sup>23</sup> Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 20.

rather than finding ‘divine truth’ in ‘doctrinal statements’, when the latter are treated sacramentally or analogically.<sup>24</sup>

Boersma notes the wide range of people, from throughout Europe, who were named or self-named as Modernist, but he deals with but two: Loisy and Tyrrell. This enables him to evoke a much more coherent movement than actually existed, and indeed he largely follows *Pascendi* in not challenging its claim that Modernism was a matter of ‘agnosticism, immanentism, and relativism’.<sup>25</sup> As perhaps befits his argument that *nouvelle théologie* worked to overcome divisions, most particularly that between nature and grace, Boersma charges Loisy and Tyrrell with failing to do so. Loisy, he says, divided history from theology, while Tyrrell divided theology from revelation, making the latter an interior enlightenment divorced from external expression, which never guides and forms but only articulates a preceding experience.

The charge against Loisy is more nearly correct than that against Tyrrell, for Loisy did separate history from theology, arguing that the scriptures needed to be considered apart from their later theological interpretations.<sup>26</sup> Loisy made his argument in the context of *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), which had asserted the inspired and error-free status of scripture.<sup>27</sup> The encyclical lambasted the ‘higher criticism’,<sup>28</sup> yet called upon it to defend the scripture’s innocence.<sup>29</sup> The book that brought Loisy to prominence was *L’Évangile et l’Église* (1902), described by Tyrrell as the ‘classical exposition of Catholic Modernism’.<sup>30</sup> And yet in this book, Loisy argued for the necessity of tradition, as alone delivering the full truth of the Christian faith, which is to be found in the interpretation of the scriptures as in the scriptures themselves. Thus, even as Loisy separated history from theology, he conjoined them, and thus led many—including the future Pope Pius X—to welcome his book.<sup>31</sup> But others noticed that Loisy’s position handed the faith over to the contingencies of ceaseless interpretation, for it denied the possibility of finding a definitive

<sup>24</sup> Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*. Encyclical Letter on the Doctrines of the Modernists (8th September 1907), AAS 40 (1907), 593–650. ET, *Encyclical Letter* (‘Pascendi Gregis’) of our most Holy Lord Pius X by Divine Providence Pope on the Doctrines of the Modernists (London: Burns & Oates, 1907) §39; cited in Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Alfred Loisy, *Études bibliques*, 3rd edn. (Paris: Picard, 1903). The first edition of *Études bibliques* had been published in 1894, the second in 1901.

<sup>27</sup> Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*. Encyclical Letter on the Study of Holy Scripture (18th November 1893), § 20. *Acta Leonis XIII* 13 (1893), 326–64 (342). ET available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/leo\\_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_18111893\\_providentissimus-deus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_18111893_providentissimus-deus_en.html).

<sup>28</sup> *Providentissimus Deus*, § 21.

<sup>29</sup> *Providentissimus Deus*, § 22.

<sup>30</sup> George Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1909), 92. Alfred Loisy, *L’Évangile et l’Église* (Paris: Picard, 1902).

<sup>31</sup> Bernard Reardon (ed.), *Roman Catholic Modernism* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1970), 32.

core that once stated was stated for all time. The book was condemned in 1903, and Loisy's defence, *Autour d'un petit livre* (1903) only made matters worse, for it found revelation, and not only faith, in the one who sees rather than in what is seen. 'La révélation se réalise dans l'homme, mais elle est l'œuvre de Dieu en lui, avec lui et par lui.'<sup>32</sup> Loisy's mistake was to make the faith dependent on faith.

But if there is some substance in the charge against Loisy, there is very little in that against Tyrrell. Boersma follows the Jesuit's contemporary critics in being too quickly dismissive, too uninterested in Tyrrell's concern to avoid some of the very things with which he was and is charged. If we take George Tyrrell and Friedrich von Hügel as our representative Modernists we will find a movement much more closely aligned with its successor than some defenders of the latter want to allow.

Modernism is too readily excised from Boersma's account of *nouvelle théologie*. He introduces the movement's nineteenth-century predecessors—Johann Adam Möhler, Maurice Blondel, Joseph Maréchal, Pierre Rousselot—but then jumps from them to the mid-twentieth century, mentioning Modernism only in passing, and then in order to deny its relationship to what came before or after. But even if the *nouvelle théologiens* were more directly influenced by Möhler and Blondel than by Tyrrell or von Hügel, the latter were not so dissimilar to their predecessors as to constitute a significant divergence from the tradition of thought that Boersma wants to trace from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Indeed, at each point where he marks a difference between the predecessors of the *nouveaux théologiens* and the Modernists, one can discern an overlooked continuity. One can come to these points by considering the charge that the Modernists were agnostic, immanentist, and relativist; for the same was said of the new theologians, but said by those who misunderstood.

## AGNOSTICISM AND ANALOGY

Hans Boersma cites the judgment of Alessandro Maggolini, that George Tyrrell 'could not admit that our statements about God have an authentically analogical character. In this way, *Pascendi's* charge of agnosticism does indeed apply to Tyrrell'.<sup>33</sup> But this judgment betrays a defective knowledge of either Tyrrell or Thomas, or of both, for not only did Tyrrell intend to uphold

<sup>32</sup> Alfred Loisy, *Autour d'un petit livre* (Paris: Picard, 1903), 197.

<sup>33</sup> Alessandro Maggolini, 'Magisterial Teaching on Experience in the Twentieth Century: From the Modernist Crisis to the Second Vatican Council', trans. Andrew Matt and Adrian Walker, *Communio* 23/2 (1996) 225–43 (235–6); cited in Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 21, n. 79.



analogy, as Maggiolini allows,<sup>34</sup> he did so by insisting that statements about God are true insofar as they are analogical, with their truth attested by the spiritual fruits of their deployment. For such truths are always practical and representative, inciting desire for the God they describe.

Tyrrell so favoured analogy that he held all knowledge to be in some sense analogical. Even when speaking of the world we have to use terms that are never fully adequate to what they signify.<sup>35</sup> He does admit that the analogical relationship between the terms drawn from the ‘natural world’ to describe the ‘spirit-world’ can never be precisely known, but must remain hidden, ‘just because we cannot compare its terms as we can those of thought and extension.’<sup>36</sup> But in this he was not saying other than that taught by Thomas Aquinas, who was his guide here as elsewhere. Indeed, as Fergus Kerr has argued, the dispute between, on the one hand, Modernists and neo-Modernists (Tyrrell or de Lubac), and, on the other hand, the neo-scholastics (Lemius or Garrigou-Lagrange), was a dispute about the interpretation of Thomas and the Thomist tradition.<sup>37</sup>

Tyrrell’s understanding of analogy was properly Thomistic, and presented as such. Having set out an account of how the truths of God’s mystery cannot be ‘conceived save under the forms of analogy’, he appended a more detailed exposition of Thomas’ teaching, for precisely the reason that some had mistaken his Thomistic apophaticism for agnosticism.<sup>38</sup> There is of course an argument as to the extent that Thomas’ brief remarks on analogy are open to an agnostic interpretation, an argument that is still alive in the twenty-first century.<sup>39</sup> But to the extent that one favours the readings of Victor White and Herbert McCabe rather than that of John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, one can say that Tyrrell was being faithful to the Angelic Doctor, and, moreover, to that proper reticence demanded by the distinction between creator and creature.<sup>40</sup> Far from being agnostic, as Maggiolini avers, Tyrrell was being appropriately apophatic.

Tyrrell distinguishes between religious truth and its expression, as between a body and its clothing. But such clothing is said to be sacramental. The words

<sup>34</sup> Maggiolini, ‘Magisterial Teaching’, 235.

<sup>35</sup> Boersma finds this teaching in Pierre Rousselot (*Nouvelle Théologie*, 71). See further, Pierre Rousselot, *The Eyes of Faith*, trans. Joseph Donceel, SJ (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990 [1910]).

<sup>36</sup> George Tyrrell, *Lex Orandi or Prayer and Creed* (London: Longmans, Green, 1903), 58.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Kerr, *Twentieth Century Catholic Theologians, passim*.

<sup>38</sup> Tyrrell, *Lex Orandi*, 80–2.

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of this debate see Paul DeHart, ‘On Being Heard but Not Seen: Milbank and Lash on Aquinas, Analogy and Agnosticism’, *Modern Theology*, 26/2 (2010), 243–77.

<sup>40</sup> See further Victor White, OP, *God the Unknown: And Other Essays* (London: Harvill Press, 1956); Herbert McCabe, OP, ‘Appendix 4: Analogy’ in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), vol. 3, Knowing and Naming God, Ia. 12–13, 106–107; and John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001).

that express truth ‘belong to the world of sense and also to the world of spirit; to the apparent, the relative, the transitory; and also to the real, the absolute, the eternal.’<sup>41</sup> The sacramentality of religious truths is said to consist in their having a ‘literal and a spiritual value’, with the latter being more real than the former.<sup>42</sup> The words of the Creed are said to be like this, indicating both historical facts and spiritual realities.<sup>43</sup> This is not very far from what Boersma claims to be a distinguishing mark of *nouvelle théologie*, namely a concern with retrieving a ‘pre-modern spiritual interpretation’ of scripture, whereby ‘historical appearances’ conceal and disclose ‘eternal realities’.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, it is not the case that Modernists like Tyrrell or von Hügel downplayed doctrinal statements in favour of inner experience. They well understood how scripture, creeds, and liturgies foster and elicit the very experience they are said to express. There is for them an intimate, integral relationship between word and spirit. Tyrrell understood the creed as forming a spiritual sensibility, even as it expresses spiritual realities that might be otherwise expressed. ‘It is by living in the light of these beliefs, by regulating our conduct according to them that we can reproduce and foster the spirit of Christ within ourselves. They furnish us with an effectual guide to eternal life.’<sup>45</sup> And they do this because they show that life; ‘their practical value results from, and is founded in, their representative value.’<sup>46</sup>

#### IMMANENTISM AND THE SACRAMENTAL PRINCIPLE

George Tyrrell came to hold a modern, ecological understanding of human life, viewing our bodies as ‘woven’ into the woof and weft of the physical universe, ‘the very tissue of the world of appearances of which each particle exerts a ceaseless influence on every other’.<sup>47</sup> But such a view, however attractive to modern sensibilities, might be thought to betray that immanentism which so frightened the neo-scholastic: an immersion in nature so deep that the supernatural is reduced to the same level, and so rendered a *faux* transcendence.

The distinction and proper relationship between the natural and the supernatural—the world in itself and the world graced by God—was arguably at the heart of the *nouvelle théologie* project, and its achievement, as Boersma argues, was to have secured a happily sacramental understanding of the world. *Nouvelle théologie*, it is claimed, steers between the Scylla of neo-scholasticism, which overly separated nature and grace, and the Charybdis of modernism, which collapsed one into the other—Tyrrell’s very failing.

<sup>41</sup> Tyrrell, *Lex Orandi*, 3.      <sup>42</sup> Tyrrell, *Lex Orandi*, 4.      <sup>43</sup> Tyrrell, *Lex Orandi*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 21.      <sup>45</sup> Tyrrell, *Lex Orandi*, 57.

<sup>46</sup> Tyrrell, *Lex Orandi*, 57–8.      <sup>47</sup> Tyrrell, *Lex Orandi*, 68.

For the neo-Thomists it seemed necessary to maintain a sharp distinction between the natural and the supernatural, between the gift and the place of its reception. For if the natural could itself attain to that by which it was exceeded, then its perfecting was already its own possibility, and so in a sense already achieved. What need then of Christ's arrival and, more to the point, of the church through whom Christ arrives again in the sacraments that the church so jealously guards?

In some sense, *nouvelle théologie* wanted to return to a medieval world view, when the natural and the supernatural were conjoined, with everything—from worms to angels—having their place in a continuous hierarchy of being. This conception dissolved with modernity, when the natural became ever more autonomous, ever more a realm ruled by its own laws, that once known to a reason that has no need to evoke the supernatural, becomes ever more susceptible to manipulation and compliant to human devising. This is not to say that *nouvelle théologie* simply adopted a neo-Platonism in which all flowed from an absolute source. De Lubac, for one, warned against this, while also insisting on the gratuity of God's grace.<sup>48</sup>

Neo-Thomism had imagined a pure nature (*pura natura*) that was entirely autonomous with regard to the divine, and that had, in itself, no desire (*desiderium naturale*) for the divine, since it had no means to its attainment. This was a world in which no one had a sense of the world's mystery, of its inexplicable existence. Needless to say, this is not really our world, even if most of us most of the time take existence for granted. But having imagined such a world, neo-scholasticism contended that desire for the beatific vision, not to mention its attaining, must be understood as a gift of the divine charity, an entirely extrinsic bestowal.<sup>49</sup> Such a stress on the gratuity of grace is somewhat strange, since the nature to which it comes, is itself, as de Lubac noted, 'freely given'.<sup>50</sup>

De Lubac argued that the idea of a pure nature graced by a celestial desire was the gift of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theologians, spread abroad by de Lubac's fellow Jesuit, Francisco Suárez (1548–1617), but first really invented by the Dominican, Cajetan (1469–1534).<sup>51</sup> The idea of two orders, the natural and the supernatural, each with their own ends, made it possible to think a wholly human realm, to which the divine was alien, rather than its given fulfilment, and this in turn enabled the possibility of a pure secularity.<sup>52</sup> It was this that de Lubac feared and strove against.

<sup>48</sup> Henri de Lubac, SJ, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed, introduced by David L. Schindler (New York: Crossroad, 1998 [1965]), 236; cited in Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 90. Boersma suggests that de Lubac was arming himself against possible attack from the neo-Thomists.

<sup>49</sup> Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 91–2.

<sup>50</sup> De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 30.

<sup>51</sup> Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 94.

<sup>52</sup> Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 96–7. This, of course, is the great theme of John Milbank's study, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990): that theology invented the secular

For de Lubac, Thomas was to be read as positing a human nature that desires that which it cannot attain save for the graciousness of God, who gives to humanity the vision for which it yearns, and yearns for because made so by God.<sup>53</sup> This is ‘the paradox of the spiritual creature that is ordained beyond itself by the innermost reality of its nature to a goal that is unreachable for it and that can only be given as a gift of grace.’<sup>54</sup> Thus our desire for God is suspended between the natural and the supernatural, in the middle.<sup>55</sup> If this idea of a desire for the unobtainable that is yet given, as faith hopes, seems unduly paradoxical, then this was all to the good, since it pointed to the mystery of God, which de Lubac worked to maintain against the rationalisms of positive theology.<sup>56</sup>

These issues are not to be found in Tyrrell, or at least not in the terms of the mid-twentieth-century debate. But it is entirely wrong to charge him with maintaining a strict dualism between nature and grace, or of collapsing the latter into the former. On the contrary, Tyrrell sought the mediation of one through the other, in a fashion not dissimilar to that which Boersma applauds. This can be seen most clearly in Tyrrell’s book, *Lex Orandi* (1903), the first chapter of which is entitled ‘The Sacramental Principle’. Here we learn that the ‘religion of Incarnation’ is ‘sacramental in principle’.<sup>57</sup>

In *Lex Orandi*, Tyrrell distinguishes between the natural and the supernatural as between two worlds—‘one the shadow and the sacrament; the other, the substance and the signified reality.’<sup>58</sup> But just insofar as there is a gap between these two domains, he conceives it as crossed, for we are said to live in both of them simultaneously. Tyrrell sees the world as indwelt by God, and

by withdrawing the supernatural from the natural, by imagining an ungraced world, with no knowledge of its own gratuity. Of course the possibility might be said to lie in the making of the natural/supernatural distinction itself, which in these terms is largely a thirteenth-century scholastic development, and which Thomas Aquinas did much to advance. The distinction’s growing deployment had much to do with the need to distinguish miracles from marvels in the process of the interrogatory, which from 1233 onwards was the means by which saints, starting with St Dominic, were canonized. The need to evidence the supernatural furthered its ever-greater distinction from the natural, which had once seemed miraculous in itself (Augustine, *City of God*, 21.7). See Robert Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 9–14. For an insistent defence of *natura pura*, and one opposed to de Lubac and Milbank, see Steven A. Long, *Natura Pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010). For Long, humanity has an ‘end proportionate to nature’, as distinct from a ‘supernatural *finis ultimus*’ (29). The first is God as first cause of being, while the second is God as eternal beatitude. But both divinities must be the same God.

<sup>53</sup> Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 97–8.

<sup>54</sup> Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac*, 13.

<sup>55</sup> See John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>56</sup> Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 98–9.

<sup>57</sup> Tyrrell, *Lex Orandi*, 2.

<sup>58</sup> Tyrrell, *Lex Orandi*, 10.

this indwelling he understands as God's grace, when God's love and will indwells ours, and ours lives in God's. It is a matter of mutual ensphering and embrace. 'Under whatever metaphor, spatial or otherwise, we may represent will-union and indwelling, it is neither more nor less than mutual love'.<sup>59</sup>

If Maurice Blondel was careful to distinguish between immanence and immanentism, between a method and a dogma, Modernists are said to have not been careful enough.<sup>60</sup> Alfred Loisy was the chief offender. Yet for someone like Tyrrell, the immanent order is shot through with the transcendent, penetrated by the mystery that shows in its materiality. Similarly, von Hügel found revelation to be the mark of all experience insofar as attending to the world reveals its givenness.<sup>61</sup> But such revelation is only partial, a prelude to the '[s] elf-manifestation of Perfect Spirit', which not only comes to us, but in that arrival is the cause of our 'very capacity for apprehending It.' The movement of Spirit is always prior to our own, so there is never a moment in which human subjectivity has priority over divine disclosure, since any such priority is itself the Spirit's disclosing movement. Because Spirit, God, works in our midst and in our depths, we can and we do know Him; because God has been the first to condescend to us and to love us, can we arise and love Him in return.<sup>62</sup>

AQ1

## RELATIVISM AND RESSOURCEMENT

When comparing the Modernists and the neo-Modernists, the *nouveaux théologiens*, it is important to remember that the latter, as a group, were more integrated and more professionalized. It should also be borne in mind that much that the Modernists wrote was intended for a general, educated readership. There were some, such as Loisy, who held academic posts and wrote academic treatises. But others, such as Tyrrell and von Hügel, were chiefly writing to be understood by educated Catholics, and not just professional readers of theology. This contrasts with the *nouveaux théologiens*, who wrote in university and seminary settings, for students of theology in the first instance. Tyrrell's theology was less technical, less consciously scientific than that of his successors, but it was no less robust or incisive; no less committed to the church and its faith.

However, it is less plausible to describe the Modernists as engaged in that process of *ressourcement* that was so integral to the project of *nouvelle*

<sup>59</sup> Tyrrell, *Lex Orandi*, 32.

<sup>60</sup> 'Unlike . . . George Tyrrell and Lucien Laberthonnière, Blondel remained convinced of the need for divine revelation coming from the outside.' Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 59.

<sup>61</sup> Baron Friedrich von Hügel, *Essays and Addresses on the Philosophy of Religion First Series* (London: Dent, 1928 [1921]), 56.

<sup>62</sup> Hügel, *Essays and Addresses*, 57.

*théologie* that the latter often goes by that name. Jean Daniélou penned the programmatic essay of *ressourcement*, which appeared in the year before Garrigou-Lagrange's critique of the new theology.<sup>63</sup> For Daniélou, *ressourcement* meant a return to the scriptures, to the Fathers, and to the liturgy, in order to retrieve a fuller, more contemplative understanding of the faith, one more securely focused on the mystery that gives life to faith and in which faith lives. Today most attention is given to the retrieval of the Fathers, figures such as Irenaeus, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa. *Nouvelle théologie* is rich with patristic insight. The same can hardly be said of Modernism. And yet, in its own way, it too was attempting a return and a retrieval. Though Modernism is thought to have too readily embraced the certain results of the 'higher criticism', with little regard for, if not actively denigrating, the rich tradition of allegorical interpretation, this is more of a caricature than an accurate reading. Even Loisy, the steeliest of biblical critics, argued for tradition as the site of theological reflection, while Daniélou recognized the need to integrate symbolic interpretation with scientific exegesis.<sup>64</sup>

But Modernism was most clearly engaged in *ressourcement* in its retrieval of medieval sources. As already indicated, much of Tyrrell's theology is based on his reading of Thomas against the Thomists, a reading that might almost be said to find its fulfilment in the work of people such as the Dominicans, Victor White and Herbert McCabe. Tyrrell fully accepted Thomas' distinction between first and secondary causation, the presence of the 'First Mover in every movement',<sup>65</sup> and so could never have held anything other than a sacramental view of the world. Moreover, he understood that such a view was fostered through the liturgies of the church, and did not doubt to find in them resources for theology. The same is true of von Hügel, whose crowning achievement was his study of St Catherine of Genoa, *The Mystical Element of Religion*.<sup>66</sup> Like Tyrrell, he looked to find transcendence in immanence, in the lives of Christian people, and so turned to the study of one to find what he believed true of all.

But it was the Modernists' interest in history, their appreciation of how context determines concept, and of how time alters both, that led to the charge of relativism: the recurring charge of the neo-scholastics against both the Modernists and the neo-Modernists. Here one has to understand that Rome was an embattled institution. It had increasingly lost political and social power throughout the nineteenth century and would continue to do so throughout

<sup>63</sup> Jean Daniélou, 'Les orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse', *Études*, 249 (1946), 5–21.

<sup>64</sup> Exponents of *nouvelle théologie* can sometimes too easily forget about 'scientific exegesis', even developing arguments that turn on just such forgetfulness.

<sup>65</sup> Tyrrell, *Lex Orandi*, 90.

<sup>66</sup> Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends*, 2 vols, 2nd edn. (London: Dent, 1961 [1923]). The first edition appeared in 1908.

the twentieth and twenty-first. It is instructive to note that Garrigou-Lagrange was inspired to pursue a religious rather than a medical career through reading Ernest Hello's *L'Homme* (1872). This work presented the fantasy of an adamantine church, fixed for all time against the world's flux.

[T]he Catholic Church not only has not changed, but is not able to change and will not change. In proclaiming the Catholic Church immutable, the human word repeats for it the promise made to it by the word of God. This word immutable engages the future.<sup>67</sup>

It was this promise of certainty that attracted Garrigou-Lagrange, a promise he was to fulfil through the tireless pursuit and rooting out of any and all deviations and relativisms. If he relaxed, the promise would fail.

Thus both Modernists and the *nouveaux théologiens* were suspect as soon as they distinguished, as both did, between the truths of faith and the expressions of those truths. When Henri Bouillard distinguished between 'affirmations' and 'representations' of those affirmations, he was likened to Loisy and Tyrrell, the arch-relativists. Bouillard insisted that there were 'invariants'—'defined dogma, that is to say, propositions canonized by the Church, but also everything that is contained explicitly or implicitly in Scripture and the Tradition'—but also held that these invariants are expressed in 'contingent concepts'.<sup>68</sup> History teaches no less, but Garrigou-Lagrange was not wrong to then wonder how the invariants could ever be known in themselves. He solved the problem by turning the variants into invariants, but Modernism realized that something more subtle was needed. Boersma argues that Bouillard's distinction between invariants (affirmations) and contingencies (representations) shows that he was 'no Modernist'.<sup>69</sup> But in fact it shows just the opposite.

Boersma claims that 'Modernism regarded historical or contingent statements as merely the relative expressions of one's ultimately ineffable subjective experience. This implied that for Modernism there were no eternal or absolute truths in which our statements might participate in some fashion.'<sup>70</sup> But Modernists such as Tyrrell or von Hügel never doubted that there were 'eternal and absolute' truths. They devoted their lives to living into and out of such truths, and helping others to do so. They merely recognized, with the mystical tradition, that there was more failure than success in our representations of the truth. To put it another way, they recognized the distinction between propositions and statements, and that propositions are only shown in the *judgment* that different statements express the same proposition.

<sup>67</sup> Ernest Hello, *L'Homme* (Paris: Librairie Academique, 1897 [1872]), 269; cited in Kerlin, 'Anti-Modernism', 310.

<sup>68</sup> Henri Bouillard, *Conversion et grace chez S. Thomas d'Aquin: Étude historique*, Théologie 1 (Paris: Aubier, 1944), 221; cited in Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 102 n. 67.

<sup>69</sup> Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 102 n. 67.

<sup>70</sup> Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 108.

Eternal and absolute truths are known in the *recognition* of a community, and this is not to look inward, to some supposed psychological resource, to ‘one’s ultimately ineffable subjective experience’, nor upward, to some plane of reality just out of sight. It is to look *between*, to the relationships that constitute the *communitas* of the community, the commonality of shared agreement and disagreement, of dispute in conversation, and of reconciliation in worship. Thus the invariant affirmation is always finally elusive, and in this a lure to further exploration, to continued conversation and contemplation. All such would have ceased long ago if matters were as imagined by neo-scholasticism.

### OU VALE MODERNISME? IL REVIENT AU MYSTERE

Was Garrigou-Lagrange correct when he said that the new theology was but a return to the old heresy? The answer has to be yes and no. No, insofar as *nouvelle théologie* existed in a different modernity to that of the beginning of the twentieth century, a modernity that had, by 1946, suffered two ‘world’ wars; and no insofar as *nouvelle théologie* had learned to read further back and more deeply into the tradition than had been possible for the Modernists. And, above all, no, because the Modernism to which *nouvelle théologie* might have returned was but a chimera of the neo-Thomists. But yes, insofar as, reluctantly accepting the name of Modernist, Tyrrell declared for a Modernism whose ‘dominant interest’ is tradition.<sup>71</sup> And yes, insofar as Modernism, too, looked to find a theology that was not that of neo-scholastic rationalism, but one that answered, as Tyrrell and others saw it, to the yearning of the human heart, to a desire for God, that for him was elicited, nurtured, and fulfilled through the sacraments and sacrament of the church. And this notwithstanding ‘the “beggarly elements” through which the Spirit is communicated.’<sup>72</sup> For despite everything, the ‘Church is not merely a society or school, but a mystery and sacrament; like the humanity of Christ of which it is an extension.’<sup>73</sup>

If *nouvelle théologie* was a return to mystery, then it was also a return to Modernism.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads*, 2.

<sup>72</sup> Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads*, 276.

<sup>73</sup> Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads*, 275. Compare de Lubac: ‘The Church is a mystery: that is to say that she is also a sacrament. She is “the total locus of the Christian sacraments”, and she is herself the great sacrament that contains and vitalizes all the others. In this world she is the sacrament of Christ, as Christ himself, in his humanity, is for us the sacrament of God.’ Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, trans. Michael Mason (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999 [1956]), 202; cited in Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 255.

<sup>74</sup> For more on Modernism see Gerard Loughlin, ‘Catholic Modernism’, in David Fergusson (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 486–508.



**Author Query:**

AQ1. Correct term used here?

Those two books, "Nouvelle Theologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery, 2009," and the popular "Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry," 2011, came from the probing mind of Hans Boersma, to consolidate "the turn to the Catholic Great Tradition" in the mid-20th century, initiated by Henri de Lubac in 1940. They all saw clearly that the first step was a rediscovery of the genuine ancient tradition, of the Catholic Church as "A return to the Church Fathers." The return to the Great Tradition of the Church Fathers, who maintained Neo-Platonism as a way of conceiving Christianity. They were concerned about the biblical truth that has dominated Christian thinking in years past, while equally troubled by the incoming tide of postmodern skepticism. Nouvelle Th ologie - New Theology book. Read 3 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. As the title suggests: Nouvelle Th ologie/New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II Mettepenningen attempts to situate the nouvelle th ologie movement between the modernist crisis under Pius X-XIIth and the Second Vatican Council. It is exhaustively documented, very heavy on the facts and bibliographic detail, but light on the detailed theological exposition one would have anticipated (for that I'd recommend Hans Boersma's "Nouvelle Theologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery" (Oxford UP, 2013).