John Milbank

The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Renewed Split in Modern Catholic Theology. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014. Pp. xiii + 120. Pb, \$25.

Milbank, the Nottingham University leader of “radical orthodoxy,” refines the argument of his first edition in light of the controversy over the relation between nature and grace that “flared up” about the time of its publication in 2005 (ix). Then as now, Milbank makes no claim to interpret de Lubac (1896–1991) definitively. Instead, he focuses on the Jesuit cardinal’s argument about the single supernatural end of the human person, which attacked the Cajetan-inspired understanding of Thomas Aquinas long dominate in post-Reformation theology. Of the book’s nine chapters, 2, 3, and 6 lie at the heart of de Lubac’s contribution.

Chapter 2 lays out the argument of *Surnaturel* (Paris: Aubier, 1946). Along with John Henry Newman’s *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: J. Toovey, 1845), it arguably represents the most important work in Catholic theology since the Council of Trent. According to the Dominican Cardinal Cajetan, the natural desire of humanity for God means that we, beholding the phenomena of the created order, experience a will to know their cause. This willing, however, does not even remotely participate in the reality of the beatific vision; such a participation is given only in the order of grace, decidedly separate from a “pure nature.” Nonetheless, the natural desire does constitute an “obediential potency” of the created order to receive the grace that subsequently elevates and perfects it. De Lubac reads Aquinas differently, however, evincing the Neoplatonic metaphysics of participation structuring his thought in addition to his Aristotelian epistemology. Over-stressing the latter at the expense of the former leads to the errant view “that human nature could be adequately grasped as belonging to a natural cosmos” (19). On the contrary, as de Lubac affirms in another study, the human person cannot possess a purely natural end that the reception of grace would subsequently change (“Le mystère du surnaturel,” *Recherches de science religieuse* 36 [1949]). The reason is, to change this end would necessarily result in a substantial, not an accidental, alteration of the entire person. As a result, de Lubac insists that it is not nature that requires grace; it is grace that calls nature into being in order to receive it. As Milbank points out, this turning of the Cajetanian Aquinas inside out threatens to compromise both the gratuity of God in offering grace and the whole capacity of the created order to act for its own intrinsic ends, goals, and purposes. It would seem, then, that the philosophical basis of theology, the truth of revealed dogmas, and the ethics of the natural law all implode.

In chapter 3, Milbank defines this problem as the “suspended middle”; hence, the title of his book. In what sense, in other words, can nature and grace remain integral in their mutuality, if nature’s end is subsumed into that of grace? The Frenchman’s answer is that the natural desire for the object of grace represents the union between both orders; their reciprocity is negotiated within the person’s freedom. Max Seckler, a recent student of this issue in Aquinas, avers that the natural desire for God is “of grace without actually being grace” (*Instinkt und Glaubenswille nach Thomas von Aquin* [Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1961], 213.) If this aphorism adequately expresses de Lubac’s thought, it nonetheless raises more questions than it answers. In endeavoring to find these, Milbank develops in chapter 6 a contrast between de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar. His close reading reveals the equivocal-tending position of the Swiss-German. It “seems to edge de Lubac’s position slightly toward a Barthian ‘grace over-against nature,’” in which “nature is ‘totally locked up’ and yet ‘totally open to grace.’” (73–74). In Milbank’s opinion, Balthasar’s own approach to the suspended middle offers an alternative that understands created nature as “truly giving something to God” (84). It thus accords nature a more robust status than does de Lubac’s.

Despite his criticism of de Lubac, Milbank throughout defends the single end theory, addressing, for instance, the recent ripostes to it by Steven Long and Lawrence Feingold (Steven A. Long, *Natura Pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2010]; Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God according to St. Thomas and His Interpreters* [Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2010]). In *Analogies of Transcendence: An Essay on Nature, Grace, and Modernity* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016), I agree strongly with Milbank’s defense. On the one hand, a selective review of nature and grace in Aquinas reveals the ambiguous, even equivocal, position of the Angelic Doctor. This is felt particularly when the ethical good of natural virtue is contrasted with the meritorious good of the same virtues when graced. It is also felt in his relation between assisting or “prevenient” grace and sanctifying grace that alone justifies. Second, a selective review of the history of the “pure nature” theory, especially in the wake of the breakdown of the baroque synthesis, shows that it contributes to positivism, fideism, secularism, and atheism. It therefore offers little discernable hope for Christianity’s dialogue with modernity. By contrast, if we use Louis Dupré’s thesis in *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), the single end theory can energetically engage modernity.

There is no doubt, however, that the suspended middle remains a problematic legacy of de Lubac's genius. Because it has provided support for perhaps most of the problems in Catholicism since Vatican Council II, those favoring the pure nature theory rightly register animated concern. I argue that preserving a vigorous theology of nature within the single end theory depends on explicating the complex analogies that structure the relation between nature and grace. The metaphysics of analogy explains the unity-in-difference of the partners. A congenial account of it can be rendered by drawing on creative insights into Aquinas's view of instrumental causality developed by von Balthasar and Rahner. The resulting model is sufficiently broad and flexible to permit the human person to act according to distinctly natural ends, even while these are subsumed within our divinely gratuitous, single orientation to the beatific vision.

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