New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12091

Comment: *Surnaturel*

The most animated and acrimonious controversy in Catholic theology last century was set off by the appearance in 1946 of the book *Surnaturel* by the French Jesuit Henri de Lubac (1896–1991). All these years later it is again the focus of argument.

De Lubac was to become a key figure in creating the intellectual climate that enabled the Second Vatican Council to deliver its most significant doctrinal statements, indeed he helped to draft some of them. In 1942 he co-founded 'Sources Chrétiennes', the series of patristic and medieval texts now running to over 500 volumes, that opened up Greek and Latin theologies to Catholic scholars (and others, including the Orthodox). His significance was acknowledged in 1983 when Pope John Paul II made him a cardinal. He was also the most articulate and authoritative exponent of the ideas of his colleague and life-long friend Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955).

That connection, little known to de Lubac's Dominican readers in England back then, would not have relieved their qualms. As they knew, the possibility of our natural desire for the supernatural had been discussed in relatively serene exchanges in the professional journals since 1930. This circled round the claim by Cajetan, the 16th century Dominican commentator, to the effect that the desire of which Thomas speaks is 'elicited', as opposed to innate, and already 'supernatural', since arising from knowledge of the Christian dispensation. Cajetan's commentary on the *Summa Theologiae* is printed alongside the text in the gorgeous Leonine edition (1882 onwards). Of course Dominicans were outraged by de Lubac's claim that Cajetan's interpretation of Thomas was misbegotten. In a quite pacific discussion the English Dominican, Antoninus Finili (1889–1971), Fribourg trained and very much a South Londoner despite the name, aligned de Lubac with Domingo de Soto, another 16th century Dominican commentator, who regarded the desire as natural in the sense of innate and pre-cognitional: we are orientated by nature to the beatific vision though obviously the means of receiving it are beyond our natural powers (see *Dominican Studies* October 1948: 314).

De Lubac's intervention in the debate was welcomed by Victor White (1902–1960), in a critical notice (*Dominican Studies* January 1949: 62–73). However, while the subtitle of *Surnaturel* is *Etudes historiques*, White's major criticism is that, on the contrary, de Lubac's 'conclusions' are 'not historical but purely theological'. He cannot be

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https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12091 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cleared of 'the charge of fallaciously drawing (or appearing to draw) theological conclusions from historical premisses'. While denying that God owes the beatific vision to us as our right, so de Lubac holds, God owes it to himself to impart it: 'This may be excellent Platonism (and it is noteworthy that at this point the author refers back to his beloved Cappadocians), but it is not St Thomas'. Indeed, according to White, de Lubac's account of our natural desire for God comes too close to affirming the actual existence of the beatific vision — whereas it is 'only in faith' that we learn that the desired gift is offered.

Victor White refuses to push criticism very far. Rather, he wants not to distract attention from de Lubac's negative account of post-Tridentine theological developments. He fully agrees with de Lubac's hostility to then prevalent conceptions of grace as 'superadded', as a heterogeneous superstructure, instead of the properly Thomist picture of grace as 'a quality of inherent holiness which embraces, if necessary heals, human nature, and raises man to a life which is supernatural'. Nevertheless, whatever de Lubac maintains, Thomas saw 'natural happiness' as more than a speculative hypothesis: it is not good enough to refer to the happiness enjoyed in the *limbo puerorum* as this 'cas embarrassant'.

Overwhelmingly, however, White's judgment of de Lubac's ' disturbing intrusion' is positive. 'Unsound' as he finds the account of Aquinas and his 16th century commentators, he endorses de Lubac's critique of a dualism of grace and nature that obscures our need of grace even to be natural: extending into a 'supernaturalism' that neglects natural rights and obligations, and a 'naturalism' that dismisses the whole Christian dispensation as irrelevant. He even compares de Lubac with Karl Barth. In short, Victor White's judgement was that, whatever its faults, de Lubac's 'disturbing' book rendered a real service in prompting theologians to 'radical re-examination of the very assumptions, purpose and methods of their thinking'. Quite a prescient judgment, one might think.

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