The Suspended Middle. Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural

By John Milbank


John Milbank is one of the most prominent representatives, if not the outright founder, of the so-called Radical Orthodoxy movement. Inasmuch as this English based but strongly ecumenical theological movement aims at retrieving the Christian tradition for the purpose of doing contemporary theology with a critical posture towards its surrounding culture, they have considered it in its premodern phase as basking in a deifying, Neoplatonic light. Naturally, that is, when seen from a Neoplatonic perspective, Augustine and the Greek fathers have enjoyed their primary sympathy. But Radical Orthodoxy has developed a strong interest in Thomas Aquinas as well, typecast more as quintessentially Catholic than historically medieval it seems, even though on the surface Aquinas may be harder to reconcile with Neoplatonism. The way to do so could have gone the historical route as in recent studies by Fran O’Rourke by tracing the Dionysian element in Aquinas and to a certain extent the path of Dionysius and John of Damascus is indeed being followed, presented on p. 19 as the dominance of Augustinianism in Thomas blended with Procleanism, but Milbank, who appears to revel in performing theological acrobatics of the most difficult, if not convoluted kind, has decided in this book to walk us instead through the thought and works of Henri de Lubac. He finds the reason and occasion for this approach in De Lubac’s _Surnaturel_, published in 1946 and condemned in the Pius XII’s encyclical _Humani generis_ in 1950. The work has never been translated into English. Justifying De Lubac’s findings on the supernatural as true to the thought of Thomas, he engages in a reading of Aquinas and the medieval tradition that may not yet be fully Neoplatonic but that is certainly non-neo-Thomistic and as such, if we follow the compelling logic of Milbank’s double negation, less Aristotelian and more truly Thomistic. As a side-effect, calling de Lubac the greatest twentieth-century theologian proves another way for Milbank to criticize the primacy of Von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, which for Milbank is a divine gnostic drama (p. 14) and insufficiently rationally consistent.

As Milbank states on p. 53, De Lubac’s view of the supernatural which he wants to highlight in celebrating this author as the greatest twentieth-century
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theologian, has the following components: it is gift without contrast (on p. 91 called ‘exchange without reciprocity’), sees spirit and grace as inseparable, views the cosmos as such as oriented towards the supernatural, and links grace and art. While the latter point especially allows him to criticize Von Balthasar, the earlier points reflect De Lubac’s view of nature and grace as more integrated than allowed for in Cajetan’s reading of Aquinas as pura natura, from which the secular was derived (p. 22). The ‘suspended middle’ is actually a term used by Von Balthasar to describe De Lubac’s new approach in which philosophy always extends to theology and there is no theology without an inner philosophical structure (p. 11, n. 14), an approach to which Milbank also refers as non-ontology (p. 32), as it neither is in the sphere of natural theology nor in that of doctrine. It is in this sphere that the future of theology and of true, not secular humanism, lies for Radical Orthodoxy.

To argue all this carefully and fairly responsibly in the space of just over a 100 pages is in itself a remarkable feat and Milbank’s stated insight into De Lubac’s contribution certainly deserves our attention and credit. However, I have two criticisms. Whether De Lubac’s Surnaturel really ranks with Heidegger’s Being and Time and Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations remains to be seen, and more generally points to Milbank’s tendency to overstate his case. While that may be excused as a matter of temperament, where the book’s thesis really falls flat in lacking scholarly proof, revealing at the same time a more structural flaw in Radical Orthodoxy, is in giving us a subtraction narrative (as in the logic of double negation or the non-Cajetan Aquinas, but also in the non-Humani Generis ‘Surnaturel’) rather than conducting a constructive analysis in historical theology. Precisely at this point it seems a wide gulf separates De Lubac from Milbank, which can only be bridged when more careful historical study of the various theologians and periods mentioned – the importance of the early Middle Ages comes especially to mind as the period linking Augustine and Aquinas – will be seriously undertaken.