

Catholicism and Its Discontents: Revelation in an Ecumenical and Interreligious Context¹

THOMAS JOSEPH WHITE, O.P.

Dominican House of Studies

Washington, DC

AS HEGEL NOTED, the human mind aspires naturally to the universal, even through all the dialectical turns of history, aiming at it like a kind of star in the night. Human culture is composed of a diversity of tribal genealogies, incompatible legal customs, competing philosophical systems, and contrasting religious claims. And at the same time, the human race strives incessantly to find an all-encompassing truth, one that holds for all persons and for all time. In fact, only this aspiration accounts for the generation of such diverse monuments of culture that are themselves so contrasting. Only the universal can quench the living thirst of the mind.

This universal truth is evasive, however, and at times the conviction of having found such a thing is not only illusory, but even dangerous. The Enlightenment desire for a post-Christian political life of secular rationality began with a grand ambition for universal truth, but it also gave impetus to the tribalism of the Reign of Terror and the Napoleonic wars. With the advent of scientific positivism, this confident aspiration has taken a painfully reductionist turn, becoming incapable of articulating realistically the specifically human characteristics of freedom, political responsibility, artistic beauty, the search for the truth, or human religion. The two great universalist systems that have come from the Enlightenment have

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not fared particularly well. International Marxism gave rise to many embarrassing examples of despotic authoritarianism and violent nationalism. The rise of progressivist democratic liberalism has been more successful politically but has terminated in an obsession with the progress of economic consumerism and the advances of sexual freedom. Contemporary European and American societies seem unable to sustain any deep connection to traditional Western notions of human nature and the common good. Consequently, our modern, post-Enlightenment culture is united superficially by merely a common set of market conditions and psychological instincts. This makes for a very shallow form of culture, one in which the aspiration to a meaningful form of universalism is eclipsed. Or perhaps it is a culture in search of a yet higher form of ethical and metaphysical resolution. Is there a greater universalism yet to come?

The most important work of Catholic theology written in the twentieth century was Henri de Lubac's *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*. The book is made up of a series of associative meditations, like a collection of conceptual postcards, each one documenting in a succinct but spiritually profound way a major theme from the Catholic intellectual tradition. All of them have to do with universalism in Christ: the unity of the human race, the life of the one "Catholic" Church, the one Eucharistic communion in grace, the one eschatological destiny of all men. It is a masterpiece of intellectual erudition and sophisticated apologetics.

What de Lubac effectively sought to do in *Catholicism* was to preserve but also to rethink the conditions of modern Catholic triumphalism. Early modern Catholic ecclesiology was triumphalist and also dialectical and militant. In response to the Reformation: the Church is the true ecclesial body founded by Christ. There is no other. In response to the rise of Enlightenment critics: supernatural revelation alone provides the human beings with truth-knowledge of the most ultimate kind; there is no salvation outside the Church. In response to the anti-clerical political movements of nineteenth-century Europe: the Church is a political society that is perfect and that is self-governing in sovereign independence of the state. There is no competence of the secular state to govern our supernatural destiny and the life of the Church. De Lubac, of course, believes all these things. But he reconfigures them in such a way as to address the aspirations of modern secular political systems in an apologetic mode, speaking in a way that is inclusive and that addresses concerns of non-Catholics, affirming the modern quest for the universal: what you have failed to

accomplish, the Church in her grace and mystery is capable of doing. When Protestantism aspires to ecclesial unity by way of the ecumenical movement, then it aims implicitly toward the fullness of the means of salvation that is found in the Catholic Church alone. When secular humanism seeks a transcendent meaning to human history in which genuine ethical values are instantiated in human society over the course of time, it aims implicitly toward something that only the New Testament revelation can provide in an authentic way. When modern governments seek to safeguard and provide the grounds for authentic human unity, they aspire to what ultimately only the Church can give. A modern humanity that is often fragmented by ideology, but also by individual solitude, can find its deepest fulfillment only in that sacramental communion in Christ that the Church affords. The triumph of Catholicism is one that works from within, rather than against, the age. Catholicism alone is capable of fulfilling the tormenting desire for the universal, a desire that breaks the heart of an unstable and uncertain modern world.

As we know, this inclusive triumphalism was to become thematic in the Second Vatican Council. The Church is introduced there in the opening chapter of *Lumen Gentium* as the “sacrament of the unity of the human race,” as the sign and instrument by which human beings are united in authentic communion with God and with one another. Paragraphs 14–16 are the paradigmatic example of the inclusive triumphalist perspective. There we see the axiom that there is no salvation outside the Church stated overtly, but also reconfigured positively: all salvation that occurs in human history is in some way either in the Church or related to her. There is a gradation of forms named that participate more or less imperfectly in the universal mission of Christ and the Church: the Eastern Orthodox churches, Protestant ecclesial communities, the Jewish people, Islamic monotheism, the great world religious traditions that are not always explicitly monotheistic, and even, among secularists, the moral conscience by which human beings are led to seek the true and the good.

This viewpoint is complemented coherently by documents like *Gaudium et Spes*, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, and *Nostra Aetate*. *Gaudium et Spes* §22 famously claims that only in Jesus Christ is the mystery of the human person fully unveiled to the human race. Yet grace and salvation are at least offered to all, such that each human being is invited in some way to be united to the Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. The wide variety of social doctrines contained in *Gaudium et Spes* should be understood in a Christological light that is at

once both triumphalist and inclusive: the grace of Christ inspires all to embrace the truths of the natural law that the Church rightly promotes as the principles of ethical unity and political universalism. *Unitatis Redintegratio* insists that the grace of Christ that is found in the Catholic Church in a perfection of intensity is at work also in the genuinely Catholic elements of tradition and sacramental life found in other ecclesial traditions. The Catholic Church can therefore rightly take the initiative in the ecumenical movement to seek forms of life and theology that promote universal Christian unity. *Nostra Aetate* speaks of the light of the Word of God shining “a ray of that truth that enlightens all men” upon the practitioners of other religious traditions, leading them toward the fullness of the truth of Christ. The Church’s interreligious dialogue can therefore be a means not only to mutual understanding among the religions but also to genuine evangelization and to the formation of a religious consciousness of humanity enlightened progressively by the grace of Christ.

This inclusive Catholic triumphalism has been the normative paradigm of mainstream Catholic theology for the past fifty years. One finds it present in both conservative and progressivist spheres. It animated the vibrant pontificate of St. John Paul II, in his anti-communist writings on human freedom in relationship to truth, in his theology of universal human dignity (in confrontation with the culture of death), and in his treatment of subtle questions of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. It is present in the pontificate of Pope Francis in the appeal to a Catholic vision of creation as the basis for authentic environmental ethics and in his appeal to the Church’s social doctrine as a privileged instrument for addressing international challenges of poverty and economic injustice. The modalities are diverse, but the inclusive universalism is apparent in either case.

And yet, one senses that this normative paradigm of modern Catholic theology, despite its genuine achievements and its real vibrancy, is in fact in crisis, or perhaps more accurately, is currently subject to an existentially threatening form of malaise. The reasons have to do with the changed conditions of modern society. Cardinal de Lubac and the Second Vatican Council gave us a vision of Catholicism as the spiritual gravamen or essential spiritual core of authentic human civilization. In at least some sense, this is incontrovertible, theologically speaking, because the grace of Christ heals and elevates human nature in a unique and most perfect way. But as an apologetic stance, this claim is made difficult today due to major changes that have

occurred since the time of the Second Vatican Council, changes that its documents did not foresee.

The most acute of these is the intensive secularization that has arisen in vast swaths of Europe, North America, and increasingly, South America. Allied with this is, subsequent to the fall of communism, the rise of utilitarian liberal government not based on traditional values, but on a social program consisting primarily in the delivery of utilities. Western governments have modified in the face of post-Christian culture by a kind of survivalist adaptationism. They exist not primarily to provide laws inclining citizens toward a universal conception of the good life, but to provide existential space for their citizens to each live out the postmodern project of value constructivism. The common denominator that government provides is the existence of utilities that permit this existential space: physical protection, health care, education principally in view of technology fabrication and participation in the work force, the management of markets and entertainments, and the support of sexual liberties. Allied with this new social configuration is the rise of a postmodern theory that typically rejects the Enlightenment ideal of universal rationality and affirms the inevitability of heteronomous conceptions of reality and social norms, depending on diverse cultural, ethnic, and gender identities. The concept that holds together the unity of the modern utilitarian state and the ideology of postmodern constructivist pluralism is that of "tolerance," a nebulous virtue (instrumental at best) that is meant to allow persons with incompatible worldviews to inhabit the common market space in a nonjudgmental, coexistent way.

All of this takes us very far afield from the context in which de Lubac wrote *Catholicism*. In our new context, traditional religious practices become enemies of the postmodern project: the claim to absolute knowledge, the appeal to a form of universalism that should inform civilization that is not based on empirical indexes alone, the asceticism on human sexuality that religious traditions tend to promote (which are often seen as a direct threat to human freedom), the seemingly arbitrary privileging of tradition, the creation of hierarchies that depend upon gender or distinctively religious forms of moral behavior (like hierarchies based upon theological knowledge or the practice of celibacy). Already, all of this makes religion seem a threat to modern liberal society. When we add in the threat of Islamic extremist violence, the situation is only exacerbated, and quite acutely at that.

What is my point of all this rapidly sketched sociology? Basically

that Catholic theology today is offering the modern secular world a model of civilizational unity it no longer seeks. We need a new model for the proposal of divine revelation that recognizes our new circumstances. Communism was a real metaphysical alternative in the age of Vatican II, and it required a clear counter-alternative. Today we face a different cultural challenge and require a distinctive and different theological response.

Something that can help us, at least partially, is another important theological work of the twentieth century, Hans Urs von Balthasar's *The Theology of Karl Barth*. Devoted to a sympathetic exposition of Barth, it also contains a treatise on the relationship of nature and grace in Catholic theology as such, with particular attention given to the question of the natural human capacity to grasp universal truths regarding being, natural law, personhood, and the transcendent reality of God, as this capacity relates to both grace and sin. Does our fallen human condition darken our natural intellectual capacity for knowledge of God, human personhood, and the natural law? Does the grace of Christ inspire and stimulate the healing of these native capacities, employing them in the service of a deeper wisdom that is Christocentric in kind? Balthasar was influenced by Gottlieb Söhngen, the Munich theologian and teacher of Joseph Ratzinger who engaged with Karl Barth creatively over the question of natural, metaphysical knowledge of the existence of God (the so-called *analogia entis*). Where Barth claimed that such knowledge is, in reality, impossible or an obstacle to true knowledge by faith (the *analogia fidei*), Söhngen attempted to do justice to Barth's insight about the frailty of human knowledge of God by situating the question of natural knowledge of God within a uniquely Christological context. It is when and if the light of the incarnate Word shines upon the human mind that the native capacity for thinking metaphysically about God and humanity in light of God is revived and coordinated vitally with the revealed truth of Christ, interior, so to speak, to the act of faith itself. The *analogia entis* is discovered from within the *analogia fidei*.

Balthasar adopts this approach. It is significant because it suggests that we need a vital ecclesial intellectual life and a culture of grace in order to actuate our knowledge of basic metaphysical truths about God, the human person, and the natural law. One can disagree here with Barth's wholesale rejection of natural theology but agree with the *practical* claim regarding the inefficacy of appeal to the classical Western metaphysical and moral tradition in the face of a secular

culture. The implication here is that, if the Church seeks to generate and nourish a culture of the living knowledge of God and a proper human anthropology in the midst of a secular age, she must seek first and foremost to articulate a Christological vision of reality based on revelation. The Christological universalism of *Gaudium et Spes* §22 thus takes precedence. Apologetic efforts to build up unfulfilled desires toward Catholic fullness are no longer of central concern. What is central is the irreducible proclamation of an integrated Christian wisdom, at once dogmatic and metaphysical, systematic and practical, and rooted in tradition. Contemporary questions and controversies need to be illuminated by revelation before they can be brought into a Catholic system of thought, just as the secular world can recognize its need for revelation only if it is first confronted with the plenitude of Christian revelation. The revelation of Christ purifies, elevates, and unites. Consequently, Balthasar seeks to illuminate all human thought by appeal to the light of Christ, who draws the fragmented, disparate truths of humanity, both secular and religious, into one, a truth that is distinctly theological. Here we are no longer speaking of inclusive triumphalism, but of an alternative portrait of the whole—we might say, of the Church as a sacrament of truth, a sign and instrument of the light of wisdom that is so often lacking in the world of an unselfconsciously profane humanity that does not acknowledge the light of the Gospel.

The position that I have sketched out here rather hastily is evidently intended to provide a broad view of the theological stance of the *Communio* movement, which has had immense international influence in the Church. Thomists in general have been sympathetic to this project but have tended to find it problematic in at least one respect. In a world marked by the effects of original sin, and *a fortiori* in a post-Christian, secular culture, one can agree that human beings have a very difficult time grasping essential truths. Revelation illuminates and heals a debilitated human reason. So, a culture informed by grace is one in which metaphysical realism should flourish in principle, and a culture of ignorance or of indifference to the mystery of Christ is one in which metaphysical disorientation may readily follow. What Thomists tend to find more problematic with this schema is the insistence that natural reason can be exercised only in healthy conditions within the explicit domain of theological wisdom, only ever from within a process of theological reasoning and proclamation. The danger of Balthasar's proposals is that everything becomes theology, all the way down. All ontology is always, already Christological.

This approach is attractive because it is theologically totalitarian, but in reality, it gives too little place to the universal power of natural human reason, be it philosophical, scientific, or historical. A modern Church that reclaims the primacy of Christological truth and insists on the primacy of grace need not become a Church that appears turned in on itself, without sufficient practice of and engagement in the project of universal rationality. Here de Lubac is right: revelation should not be placed in opposition to fallen human reason. In the face of a secularism that is indifferent to Catholic inclusive triumphalism, the Church must avoid the risk of falling into the reactive extreme of an epistemological and cultural sectarianism.

What then should we do? Inclusive Catholic triumphalism is, in large part, an exhausted theological paradigm. We face new challenges. The Catholic Church in the twenty-first century cannot presume that the secular society stands in need of the existential answers offered by the Church of the Vatican II era. Nor can she resign herself benignly to underscoring those occasional causes of progressivist culture that have some affinity with Catholic social doctrine so as to become merely the domesticated court chaplain to the causes of secular humanism.

Balthasar and de Lubac are each helpful, under different aspects. With Balthasar, the Church should recognize that only the fullness of Catholic wisdom can heal a fallen human culture. With de Lubac, and against postmodernity, the Church must help restore to the human person a sense of the natural capacity for the universal. Our postmodern age needs both the radiant light of Christ's theological wisdom and encouragement to venture out in search of philosophical truth (something that restores the apologetic aim of de Lubac's project). Along with these two concerns, we must name a third: the imperative to practice spiritual charity toward all those who are fated to live disoriented lives in postmodern, secular culture. We can sketch out these three ideas briefly, construing them as tasks for contemporary theology.

The first task corresponds to Balthasar's Christological aim. Balthasar grasped rightly that, in an increasingly de-Christianized epoch, a central challenge for theology is to return to the core teachings of the Gospel as revealed in Scripture and Tradition so as to promote a profound understanding of divine revelation. Only then can we really gather the shards of truth found throughout human culture into the one light of Christ. In fact, the deepest threat to Catholic intellectual life today stems not from a lack of engagement

with the outside world, but from ignorance of our own tradition and widespread loss of authentic biblical and doctrinal thinking. Dogmatic illiteracy within the Church itself is the central contemporary intellectual challenge facing the Church. But if this is true, how is the return to dogma able to galvanize the aspiration to universalism, especially in an age in which religious behavior is typically perceived as a direct threat to secular society?

They say that, in Judo, the martial artist learns to use the weight of his opponent against him to bring him down. The pressing weight of secular culture bearing in upon the Church is in its skepticism. But this is also its weakness. Our own era is haunted by despair about the very question of a discernable meaning to human existence or a common purpose of human political life, a despair to which a response is needed that emphasizes the explanatory power of belief in the very mystery of God himself. Today, Catholic theology should focus on Trinitarian monotheism. Why? Because God is the ultimate truth, the principal source of explanation that gives human existence its greatest intelligibility.

Aquinas says that the two central truths of Christian revelation are the mystery of the Holy Trinity and that of the Incarnation. They are ultimate because they tell us who God is in himself and how he has become human so that we might participate by grace in the divine life itself. If the ultimate metaphysical explanation of reality is Trinitarian in character, then what that tells us is that, metaphysically speaking, personhood is primal to reality. In the beginning, there was the Trinitarian communion of persons. The universe is the gift of a personal transcendent source and is made for the communion of persons by grace. If this is the case, then what is most personal in human beings, the capacity to seek the truth and to make free deliberate decisions to love, is not something that merely evolved arbitrarily or an accidental feature of reality. On the contrary, personhood is central to reality and the human search for knowledge and love is always warranted because it takes on its most ultimate meaning in light of the communion of Trinitarian persons.

There is another feature of this universalism that should be acknowledged as well, without being opposed to the first. This is the rational warrant of monotheism. The world is best understood if it is explained metaphysically by recourse to a primary principle. The existence of a multiplicity of finite, contingent beings requires us to posit the existence of a necessary, transcendent being. The imperfect goodness, beauty, and truth of the universe serves as an indirect but

certain witness to the existence of the Creator who is infinitely good, perfect, and wise. In this sense, God is the natural lodestar of the human intellect, the most universal truth to which the human mind can aspire, because God is the cause of all else that is. Here we should realize that the explanatory power of Christian thinking about God includes this aspect of monotheistic realism as well. One side of the explanatory logic pertains to love, but the other side equally pertains to being, and love and being must be understood together. The God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is also simple, perfect, good, infinite, omnipotent, and eternal. With Söhngen, we can say that the knowledge of the Trinity as a communion of love (the *analogia fidei*) does not do away with knowledge of the divine being (the *analogia entis*), but rather makes use of it. In this way, Christian theology can rightly emphasize that what is most ultimate about being is love and that the love shared between the Trinitarian persons is at the very ground of created reality, as its transcendent source of being. The possession of personhood that each of us experiences is the opportunity to seek out this mystery, to discover that the one God who truly is is also a being of love.

The second task concerns the defense of the Enlightenment aspiration to universal rationality. De Lubac's era was haunted by the search for a collectivist movement that could unite humanity politically, and it was tempted by the promises of atheistic Communism, which functioned as a kind of secular eschatology. De Lubac's apologetic response was to propose Catholicism as the authentic answer to the human search for meaning and universal communion. Today, the challenge is different: to convince human beings that the search is itself even possible. This situation is more dire in one respect, but more promising in another. The Catholic Church incites suspicion because she promotes the notion that the human intellect is naturally made to seek universal explanatory meaning and metaphysical understanding of reality. However, it is also the case that the Church has few competitors presenting truly coherent alternative philosophical conceptions of reality. De Lubac is right: if the Church can legitimately resolve secular humanity's own internal problems for her, then that humanity is more likely to take the Church seriously as the answer to her own deepest questions. Consequently, the Church needs to make the *philosophical* argument in the public square today that the world is inherently intelligible (that our minds are naturally made for objective truth). She should simultaneously promote Catholicism as the religion of mystery *and* as the religion that seeks

to promote the authentic universality of human reason. The two are not only not opposed; they are deeply interrelated. A sound sense of rational objectivity opens the mind to the mystery of being, just as a deep sense of engagement with the revelation of Christ challenges the mind toward a more realistic approach to all of reality.

But where is the secular world confronted inevitably by such questions today? Where are the needs of public rationality most pressing in our own era? A few key issues readily come to mind. Contemporary culture agrees on the importance of the scientific revolution, not only in terms of the speculative depiction of modern cosmology but also in the practical domains of public health and the ever-developing technological industry. But what is the relationship of the natural sciences to larger questions of philosophical meaning? Considered in themselves, the natural sciences give us no real reason to support a culture of liberal freedoms and offer no transcendent purpose to human life. They are often perceived by religionists and secularists alike as antithetical to religious traditions. A key task, then, which twentieth-century Catholic theology largely ignored, is to show the fundamental compatibility of the modern natural sciences with a deeper philosophy of nature and a metaphysics of the human person, one that is ultimately religious in orientation. Here the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas is of noteworthy assistance, but so too are the philosophical reflections of secularist critics of naturalism, who are dissatisfied with the reductionism and over-simplification of contemporary materialism. Modern physics, evolutionary theory, and contemporary neuroscience invite us to pose deeper metaphysical questions about the meaning of human existence, and when rightly understood philosophically, they pose no real challenge to a religious interpretation of reality.

A second philosophical issue that is pressing has to do with the rationality of religious behavior within the context of modern democratic political culture. Contemporary secularism and Islamist extremism are inimically opposed on a host of issues, but they are united by a common conviction that democratic liberalism and traditional religious conviction are inherently incompatible. Here the teaching on religious freedom offered by *Dignitatis Humanae* appears deeply prophetic, but it also requires a much more extensive philosophical explanation and theological defense in engagement with secular self-understanding, as well as with that of Muslims. How is it that Catholicism can promote a notion of religious absolutism that defends the place of religious freedom to both anti-democratic reli-

gionists and anti-religionist secularists alike? What is needed today is a more religious concept of modern pluralistic democracy.

Also of importance for Christian philosophy today is the question of asceticism in public culture. If liberalism is essentially a philosophy of “naked public space” where individuals can explore their economic and sexual interests, then it also is a philosophy that perpetually generates an unsolvable problem or question regarding the right use of freedom. Yes, we are free, but how can we be happy? The traditional answer to this question, offered by Aristotle and Augustine, entails a structured use of our freedom based on the asceticism of our virtues so that our lives are shaped by rational decisions and ethical nobility. This message is not difficult to promote because liberal postmodern culture is spiritually fractured. It increasingly leaves people alone, unmarried, and subject to the whims of the market and the addictions of their sexuality. A philosophy of authentic freedom is what the world needs, and that can be championed especially by those who know Catholic philosophy well. If the Church promotes a philosophy that shows the profound harmony of scientific realism and the metaphysics of theism, of religious freedom and religious absolutism, and of the modern liberal search for happiness and the promise of Catholic asceticism, then she will provide a new form of rational “universalism” more authentically inclusive than anything else promoted in the public square.

A final issue pertains the role of spiritual charity in a cold world. De Lubac was rightly concerned about a fractured individualistic view of salvation occupying the Church’s thinking in a one-sided way. This has turned out, however, to be a prophetic insight regarding life outside the Church in our own age. Human beings in modern secular society are all seeking to save themselves, and their lives are marked very typically by trying solitude and extreme forms of individualism. The revelation of Christ appears in this context most effectively through the witness of the collective life of the Church, in the liturgy, in Christian marriage, and in the witness of authentic religious life. When lived integrally, this collective Catholicism recapitulates the two features mentioned above: belief in the mystery of the Holy Trinity as the ultimate truth about reality, acknowledged in a rational way in the midst of our complex modern world. Human beings in the world today know very little what to do with their bodies. The physical life of the human person is frequently commodified, sexually objectified, or analyzed materially through the tools of science. But none of this tells modern people what their bodies

are actually for or how to live a genuinely happy life in the body. It turns out, however, that our bodies are made for the worship of God and for genuine acts of spiritual love. When Catholics both live and teach this truth, they show what it means to be human and what it means for the Word to become flesh. The Church really does become a universal sign and instrument of enlightenment. The witness of fraternal charity is the ultimate form of triumphant inclusivism that is needed in every age. A Catholicism that lives the victory of the charity of Christ in the flesh is one that can vanquish every spiritual adversary and convert every doubtful heart.

Today, many of our non-Christian compatriots have abandoned the search for an overarching explanation of reality and seem even indifferent to the very question itself. But the human desire for truth is ineradicable on a basic level, and nature abhors a vacuum. The Catholic theology of revelation is as theoretically viable today as it ever was, and we can add that one rarely encounters any other intellectually satisfying explanation of the nature of religion or even the meaning of human existence. Consequently, this is the time for courage. In the First Book of Samuel, it is not David's army that overcomes both the army of the Philistines and the pride of Saul, but his confidence in the truth. For a Christian, the only real weapon is the truth lived in love. Truth taught and lived in charity alone has the power to save. That is the authentic universalism of Christ, the true light that is coming into the world. If we take up that arm, God will be with us: the one true Church, the Church militant, the Church triumphant—the Catholic Church.

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